

# To Help “Stop the Bleeding”

By Lynda L. Maillet

## Books in Brief: Current Issues

In *Ecological Disaster*, Murray Feshbach adds to his work on the disastrous environmental situation in the former Soviet Union. This most recent book builds on the foundation he and his co-author, Alfred Friendly, Jr., laid in their 1992 work *Ecocide in the USSR* (see *E/W Letter*, no. 1 1993, p.3). In *Ecological Disaster*, Mr. Feshbach not only describes again the horrific conditions in the region, but goes on to provide a strategy for the West to help ameliorate the environmental situation in the ex-USSR. He emphasizes the need for a central group to coordinate aid efforts and highlights concerns that must be addressed by the Russian and other governments. In contrast to *Ecocide*, which tended to be more anecdotal, the arguments in *Ecological Disaster* are carefully supported with scientific studies and empirical evidence—making it more useful to those in the West who must justify the provision of aid.

One of the myriad factors contributing to the continued deterioration of the region's environment is lack of oversight—no one government agency is responsible for enforcing those

safety and environmental regulations that do exist. The problem is especially acute in the nuclear power industry, which has a number of

organizations responsible for safety. In addition, the military resists oversight of their facilities by non-military organizations. Safety and other regulations are hard to enforce uniformly in Russia because so many polluted sites, including whole industrial cities, are or were under military control and knowledge of them was often withheld even from other civilian authorities. “Secret” dumping or contamination sites are being discovered regularly by Russian officials. However, there have been several “breakthroughs”: local officials and Western observers now have much more information about once “secret” cities and any environmental damage that may have been caused by nuclear weapons production in these cities.

Another factor slowing remediation is a lack of information. There are still plenty of

gaps in environmental and health data from the region. The statistics on toxic waste, including hazardous waste, are inadequate, and air and water pollution figures are skewed—probably 30 to 50% lower than actual figures, says Mr. Feshbach. Officials still conceal information that could be embarrassing or costly.

Of no small concern is the problem of Russian indebtedness, both the government deficit and the unpaid bills of enterprises and military bases. Many cannot pay for the energy they use, never mind finding funds to maintain and upgrade their facilities. These problems exist throughout the economy, but for the nuclear industry this is a potential catastrophe, Mr. Feshbach argues. Even if the nuclear power plants were closed, it would cost fantastic sums and take years to implement shut downs—not to mention the continuing maintenance costs that would be required to keep the shut reactors safe.

The agencies which are supposed to enforce the environmental regulations are seriously underfunded and understaffed. Local officials frequently take bribes to ignore illegal dumping, poaching, or overcutting of trees. These stories are not new, but they are a constant theme in any analysis of the region's environmental problems and they show the seriousness of the obstacles which must be overcome.

### *The new nuclear threat*

In the book, Mr. Feshbach focuses on nuclear (radioactive) and toxic wastes and discusses sea dumping, “permanent” submersion of nuclear submarines and other vessels, and the contamination of the Barents and other seas. Sea dumping poses some threat of contamination now but represents a real danger in the future as barrels of waste and submarines rust away on the ocean floor.

Radioactive waste is stored with ineffective safeguards throughout Russia, and this has caused widespread radioactive contamination. The waste comes from the medical and pharmaceutical industries and the nuclear industry as well as from military bases. There are also radioactive waste sites in other former Soviet republics, even those without local nuclear industries. Waste is being buried, but little care is taken to follow proper disposal procedures.

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For example, trucks used to move waste from dumps to disposal sites are not cleaned after they pick up their haul; contaminated soil picked up by the vehicles is spread throughout surrounding districts.

As Stephen Handelman did in *Comrade Criminal* (see *E/W Letter*, no. 3, 1995, p. 1), Mr. Feshbach gives a chilling portrait of the lack of control over nuclear materials and of

the populace has been declining; mortality has increased, life expectancy fallen and disease is on the rise. There are shortages of medicines and vitamins, deficiencies in basic diagnostic equipment, and immunization programs are not close to being adequate, so that the effects of pollution cannot be effectively battled.

Seas, lakes, and rivers are also all badly polluted; dumped radioactive waste, pesticide runoff, and other contaminants are found in the majority of fresh water sources throughout the former Soviet Union. In one region in Uzbekistan, new mothers are told not to nurse their babies since virtually all of them have dangerous levels of pesticides in their milk.

More continues to be learned about the horrid environmental situation in the FSU, including new revelations about contamination from chemical and biological weapons developed in formerly secret cities and kept in inadequate storage facilities. One such place, the Biological Warfare Center on Vozrozhdeniye Island in the Aral Sea, may have caused the deaths of thousands of fish in the 1970s and hundreds of thousands of antelope in the 1980s. (The book's appendix provides a list of fifty of these formerly secret cities. Mr. Feshbach argues that international access should be granted to these cities so that the environmental damage can be assessed and the region's population informed.) Other causes of pollution are frequent accidents and spills in industry and transport. For example, the rocket fuel (heptyl) used in strategic missiles is highly toxic and decomposes into even more dangerous chemicals; it has contaminated the air and

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Reviewed in this article:

Murray Feshbach

*Ecological Disaster: Cleaning Up the Hidden Legacy Of the Soviet Regime* [A Twentieth Century Fund Report]

(New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1995), 155pp.

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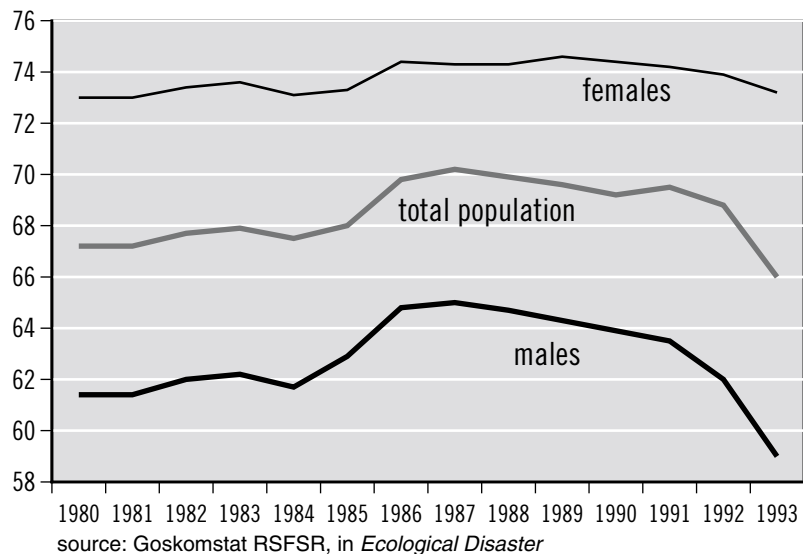
how easy it is to steal nuclear materials or smuggle them out of the country. Although large-scale illegal trading is not now taking place, the situation could easily change, according to Mr. Feshbach; the opportunity and motivation are certainly there.

Nuclear power safety problems of the type that led to the Chernobyl' disaster in 1986 are also of grave concern. There are eleven reactors built in Russia and six others elsewhere that are similar to those at Chernobyl'. Many believe these plants should all be shut down, including the Russian Ministry of the Environment. The economic cost of such a move has made such suggestions quite controversial.

#### *Arguments for clean up*

The grave environmental problems have had severe consequences for the population of the former Soviet Union (FSU). The health of

### Life Expectancy at Birth in Russia, 1980-1993



water around numerous missile and fuel storage facilities and in Russia's huge missile testing areas, causing threats to exposed military personnel and health problems in nearby populated areas.

#### *Prescription for the future*

Mr. Feshbach mentions some current Western programs that target particular problems, but he decries the lack of an overall scheme to address the continuing degradation of the region's environment. He does discuss the current problems with clean up and pollution control, and he provides a prescription for Western governments to follow if they wish to help the situation. Mr. Feshbach delves into the dilemmas facing both Russia and Western donor countries as they confront this mess. Governments cannot just throw money at the problem, even if there were piles of money available to throw. Difficult choices need to be made. The trade-off between shutting major polluters and throwing people out of work (not to mention disrupting the supply of industrial inputs) on the one hand, and allowing the pollution to continue destroying the environment and the health of the populace on the other, is still a very thorny issue in the former Soviet Union.

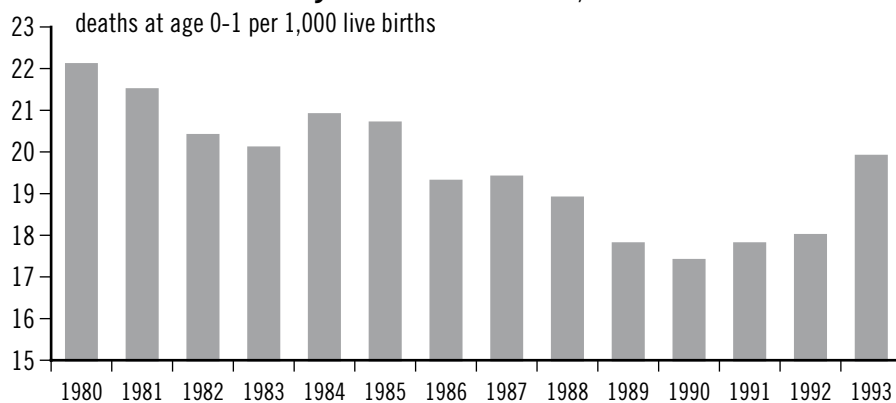
Mr. Feshbach presses the need for the West and Russia to make a coordinated effort at environmental clean up in the FSU. His concept, based on a model developed to provide aid to Indonesia in the late 1960s, would entail setting up a single mechanism to coordinate aid strategies. The program would require annual consultations among recipient and donor countries and international financial organizations, like the World Bank. The consultations would cover progress reviews of aid

projects, establishment of future priorities, and pledging funds for the next cycle of aid. The key is coordination of complementary aid projects to target priorities, rather than having different programs working at cross purposes. This kind of program is both worthwhile and important, especially at a time when the countries of the region are restructuring their economies and environmental clean up has taken a back seat to economic prosperity. Mr. Feshbach argues that aid and investment policy should, at the very least, not add to pollution problems and could instead focus on the prevention of loss (for instance, repairing oil pipeline leaks) and the removal of gross inefficiencies. These policies would be beneficial both economically and environmentally.

Many experts have pointed out major design flaws in Chernobyl'-style reactors which they believe makes them dangerous to operate. On his priority list, Mr. Feshbach suggests replacing these nuclear power plants with gas turbine co-generators rather than simply shutting them down. Sources of energy need to be replaced in order for any solution to be economically viable. This would also prevent another Chernobyl'-like catastrophe. Relatively small things, like being more efficient with energy use by replacing out-moded devices, can go a long way towards reducing pollution levels as well. He also believes that saving the Arctic and Baltic Seas, which have been threatened by chemical and radioactive dumping, should be high on the list of priorities.

The crux of Mr. Feshbach's argument in *Ecological Disaster* is that the crucial importance of tackling environmental problems stems from their effect on the health of the populace. Data he provides shows the situation to be very

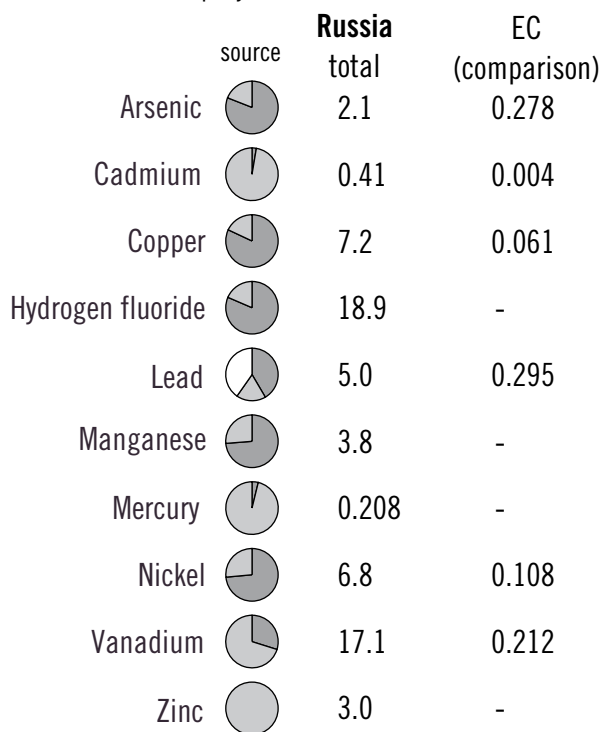
### Infant mortality rate in Russia, 1980-1993



source: *Ecological Disaster*

## Russia: Total release of metals into the atmosphere, 1992

thousands of tons per year



industry
  power stations
  motor vehicles

source: *Ecological Disaster*

grave indeed. Because of this, he provides outlines of a number of fairly simple programs with estimated costs that would go far in addressing some of these dire health-related problems. These programs include an immunization initiative, aid for rural clinics, and regional medical and diagnostic training centers. Similarly, he lists a few proposals that would aid the collection of environmental data and provide the public with information. These include establishing federal and regional analysis centers and organizing educational programs.

Mr. Feshbach's book is a call to action, but he provides sufficient evidence to back up his frightening claims and predictions. The former Soviet Union is facing a myriad of problems, most of which the new independent countries cannot begin to afford to rectify alone. As Mr. Feshbach points out, Western countries are in the best position to provide the aid, equipment, and training necessary to overcome the health and environmental problems of the region. It is also politically expedient to do so; as the situation deteriorates further, the populace may lose patience with democracy if their lives are at stake. ◇

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