New Approaches to Old Problems

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3474

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The economies of the sovereign republics of the former Soviet empire affect the global biosphere to a major extent, given their very size and the extremely high concentration of the world's natural resources found there. The destruction of the environment in this vast portion of the biosphere is of concern to the entire world community.

The current environmental crisis affecting the former empire has several causes. The immense land mass incorporates uniquely fragile ecosystems which have a limited capability of recovery. Dangerous technologies are poorly managed. The extent of the territory and the great wealth and diversity of natural resources located there for many years supported the Soviet attitude that environmental protection was unnecessary. Indeed, the nature of the Soviet political and economic systems contributed dramatically to the current state of the environment. The high priority given to fulfillment of five-year-plan production targets, combined with wasteful consumption and extensive exports of natural resources, are responsible for the extremely high level of air pollution, acid rain, land erosion, and destruction of natural water reservoirs.

The subordination of economic policies to the communist party monopoly resulted in the well-known Soviet phenomenon of "gigantomania." The system gave birth to projects pursued under a veil of bureaucratic anonymity and failed to assign personal responsibilities for grave mistakes incorporated into project design. It was not until the beginning of the 1980s that state economic plans included parameters for environmental protection. However, responsibility for environmental regulation has been divided between different agencies. The result is that Soviet man-made disasters, like
Chernobyl, the Aral Sea, Baikal, and others, are among the world’s gravest ecological tragedies of the 20th century.

For almost three-quarters of a century the public was deliberately misinformed about the environmental situation. The ecological situation was considered a matter of national security and classified top secret. In 1989 factual information on the state of the environment was published for the first time by the state committee for environmental protection (Goskompriroda) that had been created the previous year.

Although extremely frank by Soviet standards, this report, as well as other official publications at the time, failed to provide complete information. Many prominent Soviet experts emphasize that no one—including N. Vorontsov, the chairman of Goskompriroda—possesses all the data on environmental damage.

In the government’s annual report on economic development for 1990 the chapter devoted to the state of the environment indicated that damage to the environment continues: air is still being polluted, discharge of sewage and chemicals into major rivers has even increased, and there have been a number of new environmental accidents.

Lack of progress on environmental issues has led to an increase in the number of disaster areas and the size of the territory that they encompass. The majority of Soviet experts generally consider the following eight regions to be the most severely damaged: the Volga Basin; the Kalmyk ASSR; the Kursk and Belgorodsk Oblasts in Central Russia; Poles’e in Belorussia and the Ukraine; the Aral Sea region; northwestern Siberia; the Kuzbass; and the Urals industrial centers.

In total, these regions constitute about twenty percent of the huge area of the USSR. According to estimates made by the USSR Academy of Sciences, the economic loss from environmental damage amounts to 50-70 billion rubles per year, or approximately ten percent of GDP. (1) To repair the damage caused by the Chernobyl disaster, the
1991 USSR budget allocated 10 billion rubles, as well as 700 million rubles for the recovery of the Aral Sea region.

A dramatic change in the ecological conscience of Soviet society gives hope that, in the future, public organizations may play an important role improving the environmental situation. Since 1988, ecological organizations of various types have been mushrooming, attracting a growing number of participants.

The growth of social and political activity has resulted in the elimination of official restrictions on topics open to public discussion and protest. A new political and social climate now permits challenges to a formerly "taboo" sector—the Soviet military.

The recent victory won by the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement in Kazakhstan regarding the nuclear weapon test site in Semipalatinsk Oblast has greatly encouraged many other ecological associations in different parts of the country. This movement was created in 1989, being so named out of respect for the similar movement in the U.S. According to the scientist Boris Gusev, "The 500,000 Soviets living near the testing site show a 40 percent higher incidence of cancer and a 50 percent higher incidence of leukemia than in other regions of the Soviet Union."(2)

After more than two years of demonstrations, protests, appeals, and meetings of special committees, on August 29, 1991 Kazakh President N. Nazarbaev signed a decree permanently closing down the nuclear weapon testing facility in Semipalatinsk Oblast.

Public outrage at the environmental hazard caused by the Soviet military is growing in other regions as well. The Nenetsky Okrug Soviet in the Arkhangelsk Oblast has appealed to both the USSR and RSFSR Supreme Soviets over the Novaya Zemlya Test Range, which served as the primary Soviet test facility from 1958 to 1963. A new movement, Novaya Zemlya-Nevada, together with USSR Goskompriroda, supported this protest.(3) The Nentsy are a small nationality of reindeer breeders, hunters and
fishermen, who in the 1950s with the beginning of military construction were resettled on the mainland away from their homeland.(4)

A tremendous effect was produced by two Central Television Vremya programs shown on September 12 and October 16, 1991, discussing the Chelyabinsk-65 nuclear accident in 1957. The program called this area "Ural-Chernobyl" and provided the figure of 437,000 people who had been exposed to radiation. The level of radiation in this region is 2-2.5 times higher than in the Chernobyl region.

The TV commentator announced with great doubt in her voice that all five reactors had been shut down just a few days prior to the program. Thus more than thirty years after the event, the people of the Soviet Union learned about one of the most serious accidents in the history of nuclear power.

It is noteworthy that environmental groups, as one of the first forms of free association, generally preceded the emergence of the democratic and national fronts in the Soviet republics. Protests against ecological disasters such as Chernobyl and the death of the Aral Sea grew into popular national movements.

For Ukrainians, the ecological association "Green World" was a form of public protest against the Soviet system, the failure of which was symbolized by Chernobyl. As a result of the radicalization of environmentalist movements and of changes in the political climate, "Green" parties became official participants in the parliamentary struggle. Thus "Green World" gave birth to the "Green Party of the Ukraine" in March 1990.

In the RSFSR as well, ecological movements and groups are in the process of acquiring essential political action skills. Since 1989 the Movement for the Creation of the Green Party has been very active, aware of the limitations of ecological victories without political changes. In May 1991 over three hundred different ecological groups, associations, and clubs in the RSFSR finally formed the Green Party.(5)
However potentially powerful, "Green" parties are challenged by economic issues as well as by the activity of other strong political parties. Even under conditions of political independence, the Ukraine, like many other republics, remains under pressure to continue environmentally risky activities for reasons of economic necessity. According to the Ukrainian Prime Minister, V. Fokin, the republic can meet only 30 percent of its energy needs. Under pressure from the Green Party and the public, the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet has approved a moratorium on the development of nuclear power, and voted to close down all three remaining working reactors at the Chernobyl plant. As a result, energy shortages are expected by 1994.(6)

Limits on democratic activity as well as the overcentralization of authority in the past have permitted environmental degradation in the smaller national republics. In many cases, the ecological movements are linked with the idea of national liberation and the struggle against the old imperialistic policies of the central government. Nationalist movements are convinced that the indigenous populations would not have destroyed the tundra in their homelands and the Kazakh people would not have permitted the drying out of the Aral Sea, had they controlled their own resources.

However, recently there have been indications that the ecological parties and organizations are losing influence. As has been pointed out, "devaluation of authority does not guarantee that sound environmental policies will follow."(7) Ironically, the success of political pluralism and national independence might put environmental organizations into disarray.(8) Environmental issues, once a main concern of democratic movements, will be in competition with popular demands for job security and improvement in living standards, which have been deteriorating rapidly.

There is the danger that in a newly born market economy environmentalists will make little progress against rising fears of unemployment, which by some estimates on average in the USSR may rise as high as 40 percent. Moreover, many republican environmental problems are shared with neighboring republics, crossing what are now
international borders. The contamination of land as a result of the Chernobyl tragedy affects three republics—the RSFSR, Belorussia, and the Ukraine (see Table 1).

The continuation of ecological cooperation will be extremely important for the future of these republics. However, the "Temporary Interrepublican Ecological Agreement" that was discussed in January(9) still has not been signed, because in the opinion of republican representatives it contradicted the declarations of sovereignty made by the republics. It is not clear to what extent the "Economic Agreement" initially signed by eight republics in October 1991 ultimately will include environmental provisions.

In trying to solve old problems, political and social reforms in the Soviet Union have created new problems. Without an effective system of ecological education, coupled with international assistance on a wide range of social and economic issues related to environmental protection, the newly independent republics will be unable to avert an ecological catastrophe. The entire international community will benefit greatly if one-sixth of the world's landmass wins this battle.

**Table 1. Level of Cesium Deposits and Cesium-137 Contamination Following Chernobyl (December 1990)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Cesium Deposits and Cesium-137 Contamination</th>
<th>1-5 cu/km²</th>
<th>5 - 15 cu/km²</th>
<th>15 - 40 cu/km²</th>
<th>40 cu/km²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RSFSR (km²)</td>
<td>39,280</td>
<td>5,450</td>
<td>2,130</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belorussia (km²)</td>
<td>29,920</td>
<td>10,170</td>
<td>4,210</td>
<td>2,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine (km²)</td>
<td>34,000</td>
<td>1,990</td>
<td>820</td>
<td>640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>103,200</strong></td>
<td><strong>17,610</strong></td>
<td><strong>7,160</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,050</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Pravda, April 26, 1991

**Notes:**

3 FBIS-SOV-90-139, July 19, 1990, p.64
8 Izvestia, May 5, 1990. The change in attitude is illustrated by the fate of the "Azot" Industrial Association at Ionava in Lithuania. There had been a strong protest by the "Greens" against the environmental damage caused by this plant. But in March 1990 during the economic blockade ordered by Gorbachev, the popular attitude was that "Azot" must continue operation.