

AIDS fear behind Soviet war on drugs?

by Luba George

In an important ideological turnaround, the Soviet Union is now admitting it has a massive drug addiction problem. For decades, drug addiction was officially described as a "disease of capitalism"; the few cases the Soviet authorities were ready to admit were explained away as "unfortunates" who had been given morphine derivatives as painkillers under medical supervision, and afterwards failed to report to their doctors that they still had a craving for the drug. Last June the veil was dropped when the communist youth paper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* suddenly confessed that a major addiction problem exists and that Soviet society "must get rid of old taboos."

The June 8 article proved to be but the beginning of a deluge of sensational disclosures—both in the Soviet media and in reported speeches of high-ranking party officials.

- *Komsomolskaya Pravda* of June 8 disclosed the existence of "illegal drug dealings" as well as identifying "illegal crops of poppy fields in the Kuibyshev [middle Russia] region on the Volga, 1,000 km north of the Caspian Sea. . . . As soon as the poppy fields of the southern Soviet Union come to flower, they are overrun by 'tourists'—addicts from Orenburg, Orel, Krasnodar, and even as far away as the Baltic Republics (2,000 km away)—collecting the poppy heads. They come in groups in trucks, cars, motorcycles."

- For the first time a Politburo member, Boris Yeltsin, admitted in a speech that in the city of Moscow alone there are 3,700 drug addicts registered. (In 1984 leading Soviet narcologist Eduard Babayan claimed that there were "only 2,500 drug addicts in the entire U.S.S.R.")

- The Soviet Union's chief state prosecutor, Alexander Rekunkov warned that in the Soviet Union, "Drug addiction cases are by no means rare" (*Zhurnalists*, Moscow No. 5/1986), and added: "Reservations in handling them have led to understating the danger and to a false evaluation of the serious consequences."

- *New Times* (Nov. 3, 1986) Prof. Nikolai Ivanets, chairman of the Soviet "Drug Addiction" Commission, spoke about the "alarming" drug-abuse problem in the U.S.S.R. and the need to "block all channels for the distribution of drugs and to conduct a well-planned campaign explaining the need to combat this evil."

With the recent seizure in the Netherlands of the Soviet

ship *Captain Thomson*, which turned out to be the "biggest dope seizure in history"—destined to the West—more and more dope-producing areas have been disclosed. In Central Asia: vast poppy-fields in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tadzhikistan, and Uzbekistan. In the European U.S.S.R., the vast poppy-fields lie south, in Georgia and southern Russia, from Krasnodar to Stavropol, the old fiefdom of Mikhail Gorbachov.

Gorbachov's 'glasnost' campaign

All these disclosures are occurring under the instructions of Gorbachov's *glasnost* (openness) campaign which demands that the negative and corrupt side of Soviet society be brought into public light. The question is nonetheless posed: Why is the Soviet leadership so insistent on stressing specifically the drug addiction problem in its *glasnost* campaign?

The answer, according to well-informed Kremlin watchers, is contained in one word: AIDS. *Glasnost* on drug addiction is directly related to parallel Soviet media and policy shifts on the AIDS question. Moscow no longer denies it has an AIDS problem, and in all Soviet coverage on AIDS, the high AIDS rate among intravenous drug users in the West has always been heavily stressed. On June 25, the director of the Moscow Institute of Virology Viktor Zhdanov told the international conference on AIDS in Paris that the U.S.S.R. was starting systematic screening of blood donors and trying to discover which groups had a high risk of catching the disease.

The Russian first lady, Raisa Gorbachova's, favorite writer-friend, Chingiz Aitmatov, has—with an obvious go-ahead from the top—spearheaded the Soviet anti-drug campaign with his new novel introducing for the first time the theme *anasha* (hashish). Until Aitmatov's novel, *anasha*, was on the list of themes banned by Soviet censorship. Aitmatov (from Kirghizia) was recently elected to the executive bureau of the U.S.S.R. Union of Writers. He sits, with Raisa Gorbachova, on the founding committee of the new Soviet Culture Foundation.

In his new novel *Plakha* (Executioner's Block), publication of which started in the June issue of the journal *Novy Mir* which prints a run of 427,000 copies, Aitmatov takes the reader into the "no-go" area—the world of "*anasha* people," where, for the first time ever, the Soviet Union's huge, complex, ramified system of trade in *anasha* (and opium) is portrayed in astounding detail, with no thought for "alleged considerations of our society's prestige." He describes in detail the hemp-*anasha*-growing in the Muyunkium and Chu Steppes of Kazahstan; the "Kazan station," where "a turbid concentration of evil" makes its nest. This, he writes, is the all-Union transshipment point for *anasha*, the hub for the distribution of the Kirghiz drug to all corners of the country, "from Arkhangelsk to Kamchatka." There are social portraits of the *anasha* people—dealers, pushers, and addicts, their methods, and their jargon.