

Soviet health: as bad as the Third World

by Aglaja Beyes

"If we had preserved the level of infant mortality of the year 1960, we would not have lost 17-18 million people." This statement, which appeared in the Soviet magazine *Nash Sovremennik* (No. 7, 1987), indicates the full extent of the public health disaster in the Soviet Union today.

The Soviet regime is beginning to understand the economic damage brought about by the neglect of public health. The Soviet Union now occupies 32nd place in average life expectancy worldwide and 50th place in infant mortality, "behind Mauritania and Barbados," as Soviet Health Minister Yevgeni Chazov admitted.

The rapid spread of diseases which under normal sanitary and hygienic conditions either do not occur, or are easily controllable, results in the Soviet Union losing billions of rubles per year. In his speech before the All-Union Conference of the Soviet Communist Party on June 30, 1988, Chazov calculated "100 million rubles per day in losses" resulting from workers becoming ill and causing the loss of "tens of billions of rubles" per year as a result of the premature death of working-age people. This is certainly detrimental to *perestroika*, the program for restructuring the Soviet economy on behalf of the military sector.

In early June 1988, alarming reports surfaced in the Soviet press about the outbreak of *typhoid fever* in Georgia, one of the three Transcaucasian Republics. *Pravda* reported June 14 on the widespread shock in the Soviet population when they learned "that a disease which has not appeared since the czarist era, has reappeared today in the Soviet Union." The reason, says *Pravda*, is to be found in the catastrophic hygienic and sanitary conditions, especially in the breakdown of fresh-water supplies and the dismal conditions in the food-processing sector, such as the dairy industry. While the situation is bad enough in the Russian republic, it is appalling in the less developed, southern, mostly Muslim, republics.

A routine check showed that in the Turkmenistan S.S.R., 24% of the communal fresh-water systems and 44% of the fresh-water systems of institutions such as hospitals and schools were contaminated with bacteria. No wonder this

republic ranks the highest in infant mortality: 52.8 per 1,000 in 1986, compared to 19.5 per 1,000 in the Russian Republic. (For comparison: in the United States, the number is 12.5 per 1,000, in Japan 7.4 per 1,000.)

Another epidemic which was already declared to have been eradicated in the Soviet Union, and is now resurfacing en masse is *tuberculosis*. In Kazakhstan alone, "60,000 people are sick with tuberculosis," according to Chazov.

Yet another disease typical of poverty-stricken regions, *dysentery*, erupted during the summer of this year in the region of Kaliningrad (Kaliningrad was formerly Koenigsberg, the Baltic port and capital of German East Prussia; it was annexed by Moscow in 1945 and incorporated into the Russian Republic). But above all, *intestinal diseases* have become a major national health problem. "Half a million people come down with intestinal diseases every year," stated Chazov. "From 1980-85, the number of those who *died* from this disease has almost doubled. More than 90% of them are children, mostly below the age of one" (*Pravda*, June 14, 1988).

Every second newborn is ill

More than anything else, the mass death of infants and small children rocking the Soviet Union is due to a most brutal labor system, squeezing the population to the bone. The Moscow paper *Semya (Family)* recently reported on a symposium with the title, "Of What Are the Children Dying?" (No. 17, 1988). The medical superintendent of pediatrics for the Health Ministry of the Russian Republic, Mrs. L.S. Baleva, stated: "Only 20% of women give birth without complications during pregnancy and delivery. Only half of the newborn are healthy. The reason is above all to be found in the heavy occupation of women in production and daily life."

In the same article, Deputy Soviet Health Minister A. A. Baranov gives examples of the hazardous occupations of pregnant women: In the chemical industry and agriculture, the rate of premature births is between three and five times higher than the national average. And again, the worst situation is to be found in the southern republics. In the Central Asian Republic of Kirghizia, 53% of newborn babies are born with hypotrophy (underdevelopment) as a result of their mothers' work on tobacco farms. And in Uzbekistan, a study showed that of 145,600 women, 118,400 performed jobs which were hazardous to their health. This begs the question: Are there women who do *not* perform dangerous jobs?

On July 11, A.Kh. Vezirov, the first secretary of the Azerbaijan Communist Party central committee, reported that Chazov had written him a long letter about the Republic of Azerbaijan's infant mortality rates, and pointed out that "many of our women do not even have the chance to give birth in a hospital or maternity home."

Almost unbelievable is the revelation of Mrs. Baleva: "86.5% of the babies born to mothers below the age of 16 do not survive, and 14% of those born to mothers aged 18-19."