
Ukraine

Water shortages compound food crisis

by Irene Beaudry

Next to the food shortages, the most serious problem facing a large section of the Soviet population is the fall of fresh water supplies. This problem surfaced in the Ukraine and the Turkic Republics of Central Asia long before the latest hot weather and drought-like conditions.

"Water shortages—the worst problem which for decades has not been solved in the Donbas . . . people need water, for this is one of the foremost vital necessities. In other words, where is all the 'new thinking' that is to reconstruct this?" The problem was posed in a letter written to *Radyanska Ukraina* by two workers from the Donetsk industrial basin, the steel, coal, and heavy industry "Ruhr" of the Ukraine.

The most acute problem is in the Ukraine, the most industrialized republic of the Soviet Union. Academician B.E. Paton, the president of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, declared in an article written for *Izvestia* July 31 that the "water reserves" in the Ukraine were "so miserly" that, if calculated for each inhabitant, it would show that "this region is in one of the worst positions among the other Soviet Republics." The problem has been aggravated by the brutal way in which *obsolete* heavy industry (metallurgy, heavy chemicals, coal, etc.) has been operating, in an overworked fashion, and with total disregard for the natural environment, and in this case, dumping untreated toxins and wastes into the rivers.

Despite being a major agricultural producer, the Ukrainian S.S.R. has several natural disadvantages. According Dr. David Marples, the author of an article in the July 24 issue of the U.S.-based *Ukrainian Weekly*, "the amount of fresh water per head of population in the Republic is 19 times less than the Soviet average. Also, two-thirds of Ukrainian territory lacks the necessary conditions for stable agricultural production. Over the past 20 years, droughts have occurred in eight of them. As a result there have been alarming fluctuations in the gross output of grain from a high of 50.6 million hectares annually to a low of around 35 million hectares."

Danube-Dniepr canal project debate

Consequently, writes Marples, the Ukrainian S.S.R. formed an important component of the ambitious irrigation schemes that were devised in 1966, but first expanded during

the brief tenure of General Secretary Konstantin Chernenko. In November 1984, it was decreed at a Ukrainian party plenum that the irrigated area of the Republic be raised from 2.3 to 4.0 million hectares by the year 2000, while drained territory was to increase from 2.9 million to 4 million hectares. Part of the expansion was to come from the construction of a huge canal linking the Danube with the Dniepr River. The final plan for this canal was to be completed by 1990.

Since then, nothing has happened, as a raging debate has broken out over the best way to increase the Ukraine's clean fresh water resources.

The debate around the irrigation project intensified in 1987, in light of the growing fresh water shortages. In the summer of 1987, a campaign for *glasnost* was launched, for public discussion of the proposed Danube-Dniepr Canal. V. Moskarenko, a scientist with the Odessa branch of the Institute of Economics, Academy of Sciences, Ukrainian S.S.R., wrote to the *Robitnycha Hazeta* that on Ukrainian territory, 380,000 hectares of agricultural land in Kherson Oblast had already been salinized by the current irrigation schemes, and that the mouth of the Dniester had been destroyed.

He wrote: "One could go on. In south Ukraine, where there are already over 2 million hectares of irrigated land, there is not one ecologically irreproachable system. And in these conditions we intend to go ahead with the water management complex Danube-Dniepr?"

G. Kostak, a biologist from Volyn Oblast in Western Ukraine, commented that the planners of the Danube-Dniepr complex are "dilettantes" when it comes to ecology. He had visited 11 Ukrainian oblasts and had seen several rivers in their death throes, he said. "Would it not be better," he asked, "to 'rescue' these small rivers rather than draw up new, grandiose plans?"

Now, the leading Ukrainian Academician B. Paton has come out against this scheme, sounding just like Western "post-industrial" ideologues, arguing against the very concept of great projects on behalf of "small is beautiful" schemes. The crux of his argument is that heavy industry should make way for the new "technological revolution." He claims, "nature can no longer take that intensified industrial load," which is "based on the old traditional methods and thinking." Paton said that while the Siberian irrigation project has ceased to be an issue, the Danube-Dniepr irrigation project (rejected last spring by the Ukrainian Politburo in favor of more "intensive" use of existing water irrigation schemes), was once again brought up at the 19th Party Conference in June.

According to Paton, the project is "irrational" because it involves the encroachment on the life of the entire Black Sea—blocking the Dniepr-Bug estuary. He said that scientists from the Ukraine and the U.S.S.R. have announced that the project would incur "serious consequences"—ecologically and economically, by polluting, through the Danube, "the waters of the most productive and fertile lands in southern Ukraine."