Insider's Account of Pollution in U.S.S.R.

The Soviets have already reached a state of diminishing returns in terms of the environmental price that is being paid for heedless industrialization and exploitation of their natural resources. That is the general message of a book, allegedly written by an official in a Soviet ministry, which is to be published in this country in September.

The book, *The Destruction of Nature in the Soviet Union*, was written in 1977. The manuscript was smuggled to Germany, where it was published in Russian and smuggled back as a Sámizdat work. Portions of a German edition have been published in the German magazine *Der Spiegel*. Now an English edition is being prepared by M. E. Sharpe, publishers in White Plains, New York.

The book is a rambling, somewhat fragmentary litany of air and water pollution, land desecration, and destruction of wildlife throughout the U.S.S.R. According to Marshall Goldman of the Harvard Russian Institute, who wrote the book's introduction, it is the first comprehensive account to appear from within the Soviet Union. Although the publishers do not know the identity of the author (he uses the pseudonym Boris Komarov), Goldman and others have little doubt about its authenticity as it is clearly written by someone with access to classified internal documents.

The author appears to be unrelievedly pessimistic about the future of the Soviet environment. He says that of the two-thirds of the country that is habitable, 10 percent—an area the size of Western Europe—has already been laid waste by logging, mining, and industry and the resultant erosion, desertification, and poisoning of land and water. He believes that rapacious exploitation of the riches in Siberia—"our country in reserve"—could turn that area into a frozen wasteland within 20 years.

Komarov dwells at some length on the circumstances that coincide with the birth of environmental concern (such as it is) in the Soviet Union—that is, the construction of two huge pulp and paper combines on the shores of Lake Baikal in the late 1960's. Baikal, "that radiant orb of Siberia," is one of the largest and deepest freshwater lakes in the world. It is, or was, extremely pure and is home to hundreds of species that are found nowhere else. Komarov writes that construction on the lake generated an extraordinary wave of public and scientific concern but that the government went ahead with the plans despite strong warnings from the Soviet Academy of Sciences. The plants were originally intended to build durable cord for heavy bomber tires but they are no longer used for that purpose. Instead, the surrounding forest and watershed is being destroyed and the lake polluted for the sake of producing a small proportion of the country's cord, yeast to feed pigs, heavy packaging paper, and turpentine. The plants' pollution treatment facilities have been heavily touted as "evidence of socialism's concern for the environment," but, writes Komarov, their biological effect is negligible.

Elsewhere in the book the author presents such items as the following:

- Near superphosphate plants, after the snow melts, the entire winter's dust cloaks plants and lichen so as to block photosynthesis in the absence of heavy rains. And in one Ural city a special brigade has to clean away dirt and soot to prevent roofs from collapsing.
- Birth defects (presumably stemming from environmental poisons) are going up 6 to 7 percent a year; they now affect 7 to 8 percent of the population and at the current rate will affect 15 percent by 1990.
- Although the U.S.S.R. produces one-tenth as many automobiles as the United States, it has more than two-thirds as much air pollution from autos as this country, and that will double by 1990. Air pollution from all sources has almost reached the U.S. level—"for each unit of goods the socialist economy produces it produces twice as many air pollutants" as the United States.
- More mineral fertilizers are produced in the U.S.S.R. than in any other country, and more is leached from the soil to pollute waterways—an average of 80 percent in the Soviet Union compared with 36 percent in the United States.
- The Sea of Azov, once the most productive body of water in the world, in 1977 yielded a catch 1/90 of what it was in the postwar period. Although its salinity prevents eutrophication, it is in other respects comparable with the "notorious Lake Erie."

Komarov relates that much of the damage is caused by activities in the name of "strategic interests." That is why, for example, there is PCB pollution in waterways despite the official contention that PCB's are not involved in manufacturing (they are used for insulation in military equipment). Much cotton and pulp goes to the manufacture of explosives—"One might say that the successes of African and Asian national liberation movements, fighting with Soviet weapons, have been paid for with the destruction of many square miles of Siberian taiga [forest]."

Komarov does not say much about governmental structures that are presumably responsible for environmental protection. A Hydrometeorological Service was established in 1972 to carry out the Soviet-American environmental exchange agreement signed that year, but final say on matters environmental is had by Gosplan, the central planning agency. The Soviet Union does have strict emission standards for many pollutants, but there is virtually no enforcement of the laws.

It is clear that Komarov believes the Soviet system, with its emphasis on growth and productivity, is antithetical to environmentalism. He says fundamental attitudes about man's relationship to nature were cultivated in the Stalinist era, when there were grandiose plans to "harness nature . . . the more such projects contradicted the laws of nature, the more highly they were regarded." He believes that only a dramatic change in public opinion will change the course of things, but the government has tightened censorship on environmental information since the fuss at Lake Baikal, and he estimates that 85 percent of the public has no way of gaining access to information about pollution.

The tendency of American experts is to think that assessments of Soviet affairs by the likes of Komarov are overly bleak. Goldman thinks there has developed more sensitivity to environmental concerns in recent years, as witnessed by the fact that the air in Moscow is cleaner than it used to be and fish have returned to the Moscow River. However, another Soviet specialist who has read the manuscript says, "even if it's only 50 percent true it's almost a disaster scene."—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

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