

# US expert outlines social and environmental disaster in Russia

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29 October 1999

An American expert on Russian social and environmental trends, Murray Feshbach, appeared before the press on October 22 with an alarming statement on the situation in Russia. Feshbach, a professor at Washington's Georgetown University, is the author of *Environmental and Health Atlas of Russia* (1995) and *Ecological Disaster: Cleaning up the Hidden Legacy of the Soviet Regime* (1995).

At the Washington press conference, Feshbach warned that Russia's population could shrink by a third by the year 2050, i.e., from the current level of 146 million to between 80 million and 100 million. According to Russian figures, by the year 2016 the population is expected to decline by 9 million to 17 million.

Such a fall would have considerable economic and social consequences and could undermine Russian stability, already shaken by recent events. One geographically huge region of Russia, Siberia, presently has a total population of 24 million. The area, rich in raw materials, is coveted by a number of imperialist powers, west and east. Bordering Siberia to the east is China with its explosively growing population, at present 1.25 billion.

According to Feshbach, the major reason for the catastrophic decline in population is the sharp rise in diseases such as tuberculosis and AIDS as well as infertility and a variety of other sexual disorders. Although Russian statistics are incomplete or inaccurate, Feshbach reported that there were about 450,000 new cases of syphilis in the last year, compared to some 8,000 new cases recorded in the United States, with its population of 260 million.

The spread of AIDS has assumed proportions approaching the situation in Africa. The Russian Central Bureau of Epidemiology predicted that by 2002

there would be 2 million cases of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, in the country. In Moscow new cases increased by a factor of 12 in the first half of this year, as compared to the same period of 1998. Feshbach said, "The numbers are increasing super-geometrically." They would, he said, start to seriously impact mortality rates in about a decade.

With regard to tuberculosis the figures are equally alarming. Official Russian figures showed 108,000 new cases of tuberculosis last year, with the World Health Organisation estimating 150,000. In comparison, there were about 18,000 new cases in the United States in 1997, of which only a few ended in death. In 1997 there were 24,777 recorded deaths from TB in Russia.

In an August 1999 report the US Centers for Disease Control wrote: "The incidence of tuberculosis in the Russian Federation has increased steadily from 34 per 100,000 population in 1991 to 78 per 100,000 in 1998." Feshbach referred to the well-publicized fears of an increase in multi-drug-resistant TB, saying there were 20,000 cases in Russian prisons and 10,000 outside. Multi-drug-resistant TB arises when treatment is prematurely interrupted and the patient declares he or she has no more symptoms. The weakened TB strain then develops resistance against the residues of medicine in the body until the disease is ready to break out again in an even more virulent form.

World Health Organization officials have warned of a spillover into Western Europe if the TB epidemic in Russia is not checked.

In regard to his particular sphere of his interest, environmental pollution, Feshbach said that other factors affecting the Russian population include the release of chemicals and heavy metals into the water supply and the air, resulting in genetic and other diseases that are particularly dangerous for children and

pregnant women.

A high consumption of alcohol and tobacco, as well as a low-vitamin diet, has also contributed to the rise in mortality rates. Feshbach pointed to continuing bad harvests, poverty, and chaos in the food distribution system as factors in the poor diet of many Russians. He also noted that in the 1990s Russia's suicide rate surpassed that of Hungary and Japan, to become the highest in the world.



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