



A Letter From Chelyabinsk—April, 1998

The End of Glasnost or the Beginning of a Civil Society?

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On January 23, 1998, President Boris Yeltsin promulgated a decree, an “ukase” in Russian, allowing almost all government ministries to classify any information, at their discretion, as sensitive, and therefore hidden from outside scrutiny. In all likelihood this decree was issued in response to pressure from the “power” ministries—defense, interior affairs, atomic energy (“Minatom”)—and for a variety of reasons: to reassert their desire to make decisions without the annoyance of press or public interference; to remove from scrutiny information that could lead to embarrassment or the accusation of criminality; and even for personal gain, since those with clearance to know and to use secret information are eligible for higher (though absurdly low by western standards) pay. Whatever the motives and pressures behind it, this cutting back on the free flow of information is ominous especially as it makes prosecution for “spying” more readily available as an element of the bureaucratic repertoire.

The arbitrary sequestering of government information is bound to have an effect on the case brought by the State Security

Bureau (the FSB, successor agency to the KGB) against Alexander Nikitin, an ex-naval officer accused of espionage, whose crime consisted of compiling from open and unclassified sources information on nuclear pollution and mismanagement in the European Arctic. Nikitin’s troubles are fairly well known in the West; those of Grigori Pasko are not. Pasko, a journalist for a naval newspaper and a second rank captain in the Russian navy, has published several articles on the nuclear waste generated by the Russian Pacific fleet. Recently, returning from an invited trip to Japan during which he spoke about this problem, he was arrested at the Vladivostock airport for espionage. He languishes in jail and will not be eligible for Russian civilian judicial procedures since he is a military journalist.

Chilling Dissent by Ukase

Data on ecological mismanagement or on the dire state of health care in Russia look like particularly attractive targets for classification as “sensitive information.” Yeltsin’s “ukase” is meant to chill dissent; it is succeeding to an unknown extent and some activists are very wary about chancing actions that might subject them to harassment by the authorities.

The legal basis for ending glasnost is thus in place. The large and predictably opulent new FSB building now under construction in Chelyabinsk, a major industrial and nuclear city in the southern Urals, is all the more striking in a society in which most ordinary workers, who are dependent on the government for their salaries, frequently go

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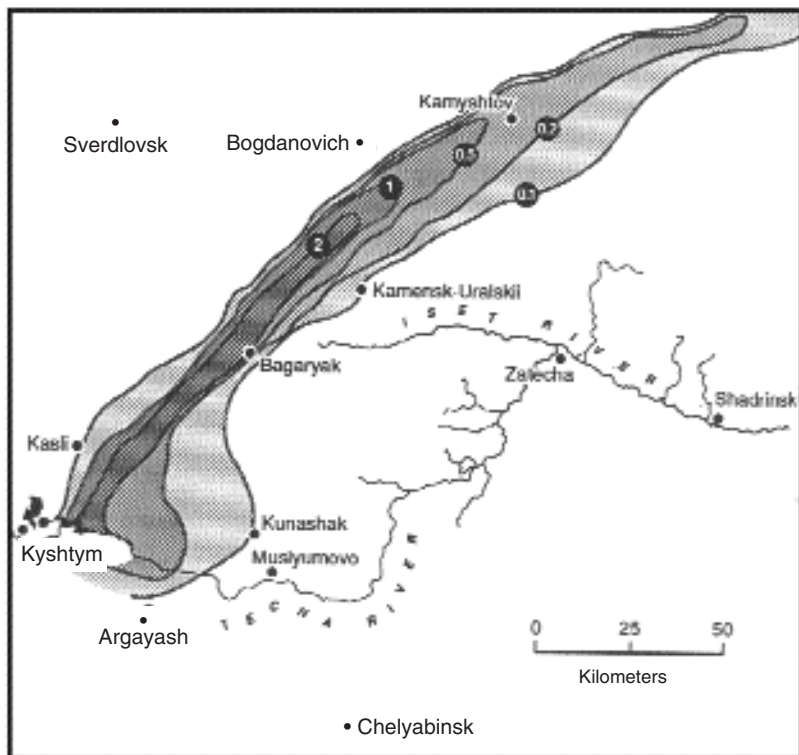


Figure 1. Shaded areas indicate levels of strontium-90 (0.1 to 2 curies per square kilometer) as a result of fallout from the 1957 explosion at Chelyabinsk-65 (the "Kyshtym disaster"). Source: Makhijani A, Hu H, Yih K. *Nuclear Wastelands: A Global Guide to Nuclear Weapons Production and its Health and Environmental Effects*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 1995.

unpaid, to say nothing of getting the raises they need to keep up with inflation. [Editor's note: This article was written before the ruble was devalued by the Russian government in August 1998.]

The Closed City of Ozyorsk

At the same time, remarkable and positive things are happening here. I came as a member of the external Scientific Review Group (SRG) appointed to advise the US Department of Energy in a series of joint US-Russian studies of the health impact of exposure to massive amounts of radiation generated by Mayak ("beacon") Industrial Association (MIA). This was the Soviet Union's first plutonium production complex, comparable to the US Hanford facility in Washington state.

The vast industrial site and its accompanying residential city, 70 kilometers from Chelyabinsk, did not appear on the map during Soviet times, when communications were channeled through an innocuous postal code (Chelyabinsk-65), which suggested a bland new developer's suburb at the edge of the city. The residential city has been renamed Ozyorsk ("Lake town"—ironic since large amounts of raw nuclear waste were dumped into local lakes and streams). The site remains fiercely guarded: one enters only after a lengthy approval process, and the visitor's papers are carefully scrutinized at multiple check points, especially at the site perimeter. The residents of Ozyorsk have

voted to keep it a closed city and only those who have jobs at the complex are allowed to move there.

Ozyorsk remains a privileged place to live, but is not immune to the exigencies of post-Soviet life. The number of jobs has fallen precipitously and pay raises are rare in the face of ever-increasing inflation. The streets used to be cleaner, and the buildings once wore fresher coats of paint. Those in charge are very guarded about discussing the troubles of the MIA, but many people were willing to share their stories with a stranger. "Ukase" or no "ukase," it has become harder to stuff the genie of relatively open communication back into an authoritarian bottle.

With only a little probing one finds that one of Mayak's central schemes for economic survival, RT-1, Russia's first reprocessing facility for spent nuclear fuel, has been losing business since the break-up the Soviet empire and that, in any case, its natural clients in the former eastern bloc are as short of hard currency as are the Russians. Several dispassionate analyses of the economic prospects of the Russian nuclear cities are very pessimistic about their long term viability. Indeed, the director of a nuclear weapons development facility near Chelyabinsk committed suicide a few years ago: the economic bleakness of his future and of the workers and facilities under his direction is assumed to be the cause.

We were told we were only the second group of foreigners to visit MIA's central research labs. There was only enough time to get a fleeting glimpse of the research on the ecology of the site that is one of the lab's major responsibilities. We did see sophisticated computer models of how radioactive wastes stored in one of the local lakes is breaking through into the water table. We were unable to inquire about the implications for health and agriculture.

Secrecy and Denial

I had arrived a few days before our committee meeting, and was able to meet several people who had been exposed to radiation generated by Mayak. One was a large man in his late fifties, obviously once quite robust, but now chronically ill and profoundly disillusioned. As a teenager, he was employed by the complex as a laborer. A nuclear waste storage tank, not unlike many at Hanford, exploded in 1957. (The "Kyshtym disaster" was named after a local town because, after all, Mayak did not officially exist. The aftermath of this explosion, now known as the "East Urals Radioactive Trace," is one of the radiation sources, originally kept secret, then denied, which now may become the subject of SRG study.)

Our informant and a group of other boys had been doing some work in the nearby woods; after the frightening explosion their supervisors disappeared and they found the nuclear complex's gates locked to them. They soon ran out of food, and were ignorant of the need for protection from the radiation. After a week of foraging, they were able to break through the perimeter fence, whereupon the authorities confiscated their clothes, repeatedly washed them, and then swore them to lifelong secrecy. Our informant no longer believed his oath was binding; he was a sick man, which he quite understandably attributed to his earlier exposure to high doses of ionizing radiation, and he felt that after his years of loyalty both the society and the facility had abandoned him.

A Futile Focus on Compensation?

We also met people who had been exposed to the very large amounts of radioactive waste that were dumped untreated by the MIA in its early years into local river systems and lakes. While there have been several very serious breakdowns in radiation safety since the early 1950s, by far the largest amounts of pollution were during this early period, when the central and overriding task was to produce plutonium to catch up with the US in thermonuclear weapons development.

Understandably, the local population is preoccupied with obtaining compensation for past exposure to radiation either on the job or because they lived near the nuclear complex. The legal system in Russia can be even more arbitrary and irrational, in these matters, than that in the US. A law was passed in 1992 to compensate radiation victims. Then, when Mayak was sued, the courts ruled that the law could not be applied retroactively, and that only exposure since its passage was compensable. This has led local antinuclear activists to search for examples of recent radiation exposure rather than trying to complete the historical record of past exposure. This focus may be futile: almost all of the complex's reactors are now shut and, in any case, current technology is far less polluting than that of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Nonetheless, we owe a profound debt of gratitude to our Russian activist colleagues: they have few resources; they are very vulnerable to retaliation by the authorities; and without them it would be far more likely that Russia could revert to a closed and authoritarian way of doing business.

Whether the current research on radiation exposure and human health assessed by the SRG (the results of which assessment are not yet available for publication) is going to be successful remains an open question.

Some profound impediments must be overcome, however, to produce credible results. These include:

- fragmentary documentation from the early period of greatest exposure;
- the consequences of working in what had been a culture of total secrecy;
- the conflicting world views of different groups among our Russian collaborators;
- the very real economic constraints to doing an appropriately thorough job;
- and, last and hardly least, little evidence of effective collaboration among many of the participants, including various US government agencies.

The result of this unwillingness and/or inability to coordinate among the interested parties has the potential to cause replication, inefficiency, and incompleteness. Unless corrected, it may undermine our chances to understand this unique and important, albeit tragic, experience.

A New Openness to Scientific Exchange

I have learned over and over that "secret science" is an oxymoron. Without openness, challenge, and the free exchange of ideas, mistakes and prejudices become institutionalized. Our Russian colleagues are, overwhelmingly, highly intelligent and dedicated scientists. But they and their work were totally shielded from outside influence until only 10 years ago: they attended no international conferences, they produced no publications; they engaged in no dialogue. Many (though by no means all) of the older scientists are therefore defensive on a series of fronts. They assert that what they did was not from selfish or immoral, but from patriotic motives (which is almost surely true) and that they are just as smart as (or smarter than) their colleagues in the West—which is also true. Their vast practical experience, however, is often not matched by the underlying breadth and flexibility that follows from the Western model of doctoral training and a culture of open scientific interchange and challenge. It is therefore all the more exciting to observe the emergence of

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new cohorts of scientists who are clearly beginning to practice “normal” science: publishing, talking, travelling, and polishing their skills. They appear less political than their predecessors and seem to identify with the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of science, defined not by mindless nationalism, but by high and universal professional standards. It will be to our benefit—and to that of the world—to foster their development.

Our counterpart Russian review group was meeting face to face for the first time. Clearly, someone had found it more convenient (and cheaper) to make decisions without a functioning peer review process. Some of the formalities of peer review, such as attempting to avoid conflict of interest, seemed new to at least some of our Russian colleagues: one older reviewer attacked the work of a younger Russian presenter. I found his vehemence embarrassing, since the work being presented was highly competent. We were later told that the reviewer was a direct competitor with the presenter for the contract to do this piece of the project work.

Overcoming Bureaucratic Obstacles

Our group of scientists had to deal with the irrationalities and rigidities of US bureaucracies as well. It is important that we not feel in some way superior to our long suffering Russian colleagues. One central project, the effects of radiation on illness other than cancer among the Mayak work force, is being funded by the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), which has decided to review and manage this work independently of the SRG, a decision that is destructive for many reasons. The SRG remains responsible for the activities of the radiation dose-reconstruction that is the basis for the NRC project, but is not being told how the dose reconstruction is to be applied. More important, the NRC is not a dispassionate and impartial group of outside experts. As an agency that has as one of its goals the promotion of nuclear power, the NRC has an interest in what levels of radiation are determined to be permissible; for its purposes, higher levels may appear to be better. NRC control over

this project may taint the results in the eyes of the scientific community and the public. Thus, we have our own struggle to remain focussed and coherent in a world often very much in opposition to these goals.

Democratic institutions and the health and well being of this generation, our grandchildren, and our grandchildren’s grandchildren, whether in Russia, in the US, or elsewhere, depend directly and immediately on the open exchange of ideas and data, as well as on the availability of the resources and conditions needed to optimize these processes. Bureaucracies, East or West, will always seek control over sensitive information and data and they will always be uncomfortable with openness. Citizens and scientists familiar with the facts clearly threaten current power arrangements. Information can supply the motivation for change and justice and can provide clues about how to achieve these goals. Yeltsin’s “ukase” and American bureaucratic turf wars are both bad and retrogressive. The emergence of credible and open science should be acknowledged and supported in both of our countries. A civil future hangs in the balance.



SEEN IN THE NEWS

In an editorial on August 22, 1998, *The New York Times* criticized the Russian government for prosecuting Aleksandr Nikitin, the former nuclear safety inspector who openly warned of the dangers of “haphazard disposal” of nuclear waste from submarines and reactor cores in the Arctic.

Nikitin’s] trial, the *Times* said, underscores “the risks that environmental activists face in a Russia whose security service and justice system can still be twisted against dissidents, Soviet-style....

“The attack on Mr. Nikitin has paralyzed Russia’s few environmental groups, which fear that the use of even public sources about sensitive issues or affiliations with Western groups could open them to treason charges.”