

The Right to Know in a Troubled and Victimized Society

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It is not popular now to cite works of Lenin in our country [the former Soviet Union]. It is understandable: new documents shed light on the "double standard" politics of this famous leader. His letters with orders "to shoot more intelligentsia" shocked everybody when they were recently released. But, I suggest, there is something childish in the current refusal to analyze Lenin's works seriously in the context of new historical knowledge and experience. In this trend of our society to eliminate anything connected with the past and to name everything anew, I see a danger. Whoever does not respect history and analyze it honestly does not deserve a decent future. I was very impressed when I saw on a public building in Washington, D.C., the inscription: "Investigate the Past."

In one of his articles, Lenin wrote: "The working people are able to be a creative power only when they have absolutely full information about all the processes of life, about all actions of government and various social groups. Only in this case are people capable of taking important decisions consciously." The dramatic, and even tragic, distance between these words and real life (a distance that exists not only in our country) is obvious. But why should the leader of the state, who already at that time had imposed censorship on the press, proclaim the principle of the public's right to know? I think he had no alternative. Furthermore, the Communist Party had always announced that it carried forward the ideas of the French Revolution.

Now we at last live in times when the "working

people know." not everything, of course, but plenty of important information, including information about environmental pollution. The first thing that helped this expansion of public information was the new process of elections. To become a deputy, you now must struggle for the minds of the voters, win their interest and respect. Many candidates now include issues of the environment in their programs. Only after heated debate, for example, were citizens of the Moscow area where I live informed that some local plants emit in the night substances that may cause allergy. You may now publish any information about pollution. In only one issue of *Izvestia* (March 24, 1992) there were three separate items on environmental issues:

1. All the dairy and meat products in Moscow are to be sold only after sanitary inspection. There are many cases when products turned out to be contaminated with bacteria. The epidemiologic situation in the city is not good.
2. The French company La Générale des Eaux will repair water pipes in St. Petersburg and supply fresh drinking water.
3. At 2:37 a.m., there was an accident at Leningrad Atomic Power Station. There was a leak of inert gases from block 3. The level of radiation in the station zone is 16 microroentgen per hour. The state of alarm has been cancelled.

Before glasnost, not one of these items would have been published. Until recently the press was discouraged from writing about negative events in Moscow and Leningrad. Official information for journalists was scarce and often not correct. Even if a journalist had information from other sources and could prove this information was correct, it was extremely diffi-

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cult to get his or her article published.

The Russian press is currently investigating the situation in Sverdlovsk in 1979, when a strange epidemic of anthrax took the lives of 64 people. The goal of the investigation is to discover whether the epidemic arose from ingestion of contaminated meat or from accidental exposure to a biological weapon. As a journalist, I am proud that now it is possible to conduct this inquiry independently and publicly, though as a patriot of my country, I am very distressed at what the results may turn out to be.

In *Izvestia* (April 24, 1992), the article "Forty Secret Protocols of Kremlin Leaders" was published, revealing for the first time the documents of official secret meetings held in the immediate aftermath of the accident at Chernobyl. During the first week after the accident, there was no information in the mass media about the real magnitude of the disaster. As we now know, a special group of Politburo officials began meeting on April 29. The group worked daily until the middle of May. On May 7, the Secretary General of the Communist Party, M. Gorbachev, took part in the secret proceedings. All the documents of this group were held under close security.

The author of the article in *Izvestia*, journalist Alla Yaroshinskaya, obtained access to these documents because, as a Deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R., she was a member of the parliamentary commission appointed to investigate the accident. But to get copies of these documents was impossible, as long as the Communist Party existed. Only when it ceased to exist did the commission get all the documents.

The most striking information from these documents that are no longer secret is that on May 8, 1986, the Health Ministry of the U.S.S.R. established new thresholds for radiation safety that were 10 times higher than those previously established on the basis of scientific evidence. This particular document also said: "In special situations, it is possible to establish limits 50 times higher." Because of these illegitimate new high standards that were not based on scientific data, many people were not evacuated in time or provided proper treatment.

Another major deception of the Health Ministry revealed in these documents is related to the safety of food products. Journalists were told that if radioactive meat is frozen for a long time, it loses its radioactivity and can then be eaten. In addition, these documents reveal that large quantities of radioactive meat were sent to various cities and diluted in the produc-

tion of meat products: one part of radioactively contaminated meat per nine parts of good meat. Moreover, there were suspicions though no evidence that people drank radioactively contaminated milk. The Attorney General of the U.S.S.R. began prosecutions of these violations of sanitary norms. But since the collapse of the U.S.S.R., there has been no information about how this prosecution has proceeded.

The exact number of people who were suffering from radiation and who were hospitalized as a result has been kept secret. In the secret Politburo records, the statement of the First Deputy Minister of Health, O. Shepin, was cited: "On May 6 at 9 a.m., 3,454 persons are hospitalized; 2,600 persons are receiving treatment, among them 471 children." At the same time the public statements (the "truth for simple people") said: "The diagnosis of acute radiation illness is confirmed for only 187 persons (all from the staff of the nuclear power plant); 24 of whom have died, two immediately after the disaster." The public statement then continued: "The diagnosis of radiation illness was not confirmed in the hospitalized population, including the children."

Politburo secret documents less than a week later stated (Protocol 12, May 12, 1986): "10,198 persons are hospitalized for diagnosis and treatment; among them are 345 persons possibly with radiation illness, among them 35 children."

To one of these secret official meetings the editors-in-chief of the main national newspapers were invited. They were instructed to "pay major attention to the measures that are taken by the Party and the Government to mitigate Chernobyl's consequences and to write more about how people are working to carry out these initiatives."

When these facts are now published, it is clear, for example, why a senior medical official, who was in charge of mitigating the medical consequences of the disaster, was so annoyed when journalists asked about the real number of people with radiation illness. During one conference, at which I was present, this official responded to this question by saying "Thirty-one persons died after Chernobyl. In the great railway catastrophe in Bashkiria many more people died, but nobody now mentions them. Why on earth do you continue not to trust us?" Subsequent events show that people actually did have reasons not to trust the official information. I do not want here to claim that this official alone is guilty; he is a part of a big machine that produced deceptions. Some of our radiobiologists and doctors from Belarus and Ukraine

refused to abide by the official "new" standards for safe radiation exposure thresholds. They also refused to suppress their diagnoses of radiation illness. Some doctors wrote letters to our newspapers, which were published. An article I wrote for *Izvestia* discussed how radiobiologists disagreed strongly with the notion of a senior official that a lifetime dose of 35 RBE was within acceptable limits. This cumulative dose was estimated for healthy people working at the nuclear power plants, not for children, old people, and pregnant women. The radiobiologists also stated that after a high dose of radiation exposure, a new low one may trigger the onset of radiation illness, which is why it was so important to measure the real doses received by the population, and then to let them go to other places to live, to evacuate and take care of them. It was very difficult to publish this article, but it was finally printed (*Izvestia*, November 11, 1989).

Doctors who were courageous enough to tell the truth said that they were not allowed to write down a diagnosis of radiation illness. This is not the first time in the history of our country that the truth about radiation exposure has been suppressed. Soon after Chernobyl, a new sensational story was released to society about huge atomic catastrophes in the Urals in the 1950s and 1960s. *Izvestia* published a large article about it in the winter of 1991. About 100 kilometers from Chelyabinsk, a big nuclear weapons production complex was built in 1948. Radioactive waste was discharged in to the local river, the Techa, without prior treatment or decontamination procedures. In this way, approximately 3 million curies of radiation were released into the Techa over the course of several years.

In 1957, in another nuclear plant in the area, not far from the city of Kyshtym, the second catastrophe occurred. There radioactive waste was stored in big tanks. The summer of 1957 was hot in the Urals; the tanks overheated; and the wastes exploded, releasing 20 million curies into the environment. About 2 million curies from this accident entered the atmosphere and forced the creation of the East Urals Radioactive Zone. Only after this large disaster did authorities decide to evacuate the populations of 39 villages that were located on the shores of the Techa River and other people from the zone. But the people from the Techa River area had already been exposed to serious levels of radiation dating back to 1948.

The teams of people who tried to mitigate the consequences of the radioactive contamination of the

Techa area were also exposed to radiation because adequate safety measures were not taken.

The third disaster in the Urals occurred in 1967. Radioactive wastes were released into a small lake. In that year there was a major heat wave and the shores of the lake, and even its bottom in many places, became dry. The radioactive soil in the dried-up lake bed was lifted by the wind and spread across a radius of several tens of kilometers.

Medical scientists at the Chelyabinsk Department of Biophysics Institute now say that although the highest dose received by the populations in the Chernobyl area was 40 rem, people living along the shores of the Techa River received over the course of several years nearly 400 rem to their red bone marrow. In the area of Kyshtym, the cumulative dose is estimated to be 80 rem.

Nobody informed the people during the late 1940s through the mid 1950s about these catastrophes. So (although it is not a great consolation) it can be said that government politics in Chernobyl did not have a colonial perspective as some leaders of nationalists movements within the former U.S.S.R. have been saying. The first people who were victimized by radiation exposure were the Russian populations in the Urals. Contamination of the Techa River created a new disease entity: chronic radiation illness. It is true that the personnel of all nuclear power plants were also at risk. But these people knew at least to some extent what these risks were and took some measures of protection.

For two years, from 1948 to 1950, the population of the Techa area did not know that they should not drink water from the river, go fishing and swimming, or eat berries and mushrooms from the forest. They received no information and no adequate medical help. The physicians in the area were not allowed to make a diagnosis of radiation illness. In addition, they were required to sign documents stating that they would reveal no information regarding radiation related illness. After the accident in 1957, signs were posted in many areas of the Urals warning: "no fishing," "no swimming," "don't pick berries and mushrooms." Still, the population of the Techa River area was denied the right to know the basis for these instructions. Sixteen thousand persons were exposed to serious levels of radiation. An increase in the number of cases of leukemias and other cancers followed these exposures, and some people were found to have multiple cancers.

It has been said that democracy is a bad political

structure, but the problem is that all other forms are much worse. We are now witnessing in our society a new breed of politicians, very often of a nationalist nature, who manipulate information about the environment for careerist, nationalist goals. A physician in Minsk, in the department of pediatric hematology, told me an interesting story. A month before my visit there was an election campaign in Belarus. The deputies to the city soviets were to be elected. Every day in front of the hospital meetings were organized, where people spoke about the children—the victims of Chernobyl—and appealed for help for them and for their families. But then the campaign was over. This physician received a telephone call from an oncologist colleague in Shitomir, Ukraine. There had also been many meetings in front of her cancer clinic. “Now with the election over, it is so still here,” her colleague said. “Nobody comes any more and asks what we need.” “Just imagine,” my physician friend answered, “it is the same here.”

Nevertheless, even if some misuse the right to know for their own personal or political gain, it is still their right to know. It is fair to say that in this new situation all people who use or rely on data or information about the environment should be educated, taught specifically how to interpret the issues, and if possible, not be biased politically. Here I would like to cite a passage from the *Economist* (February 15, 1992)

Many greens...appear to believe that the only acceptable amount of pollution is zero or —which looks more sensible, but is almost as daft—that all pollution above some arbitrarily low threshold must be stopped. This cannot be right...the notion that such a balance should in principle be struck—and that, as a result, the “right” level of pollution is

greater than zero and varies according to circumstances—ought to be uncontroversial. Without that idea, intelligent discussion of environmental policy is impossible.

The sad reality of our current social life is that many factories and plants are closed not because of high levels of pollution. In Yerevan, Armenia, after many demonstrations, a big chemical plant was closed. International experts were invited to investigate the situation. The independent experts affirmed that the level of pollution was acceptable, and the plant was reopened. There had been so many articles earlier in the newspapers against the operation of this chemical plant that none of the newspapers could then explain the change in approach with any adequate understanding. This is a new situation, where our press plays populist games, and it will not in the long run help us to know the real truth, to develop economic production, and feed the hungry people. And it is not only the press in the former Soviet Union that is at times guilty of playing populist games.

The problem of environmental information, the right to know and to be able to act to protect your own health and life, will never lose its significance. In the conflicts over data and interpretation, strong passions and misuse of information are inevitable to some degree. The more civilized the society, the more possible it is to avoid the extremes of this process. For the principle of the right to know to work effectively, many features of our public, professional, and economic lives must function well. We need sound regulation of economic production, informed understanding on the part of politicians and health professionals, technically excellent and comprehensive scientific investigation, and an educated public. ■