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Scientific/Political



Medicine and Health in the Soviet Union.

IV. Effect on health of the Soviet medical system

1. Compared with Europe, the general state of health of the population is bad. Very little interest is taken in people who are too old to work, and there is nothing cheaper in the Soviet Union than the human life. But the medical profession is not responsible for the unsatisfactory health situation which exists, particularly where children are concerned. Many factors play a part; bad monotonous food, harsh climatic conditions, bad living conditions, lack of hygiene, and excessive physical demands. The death of the weak or old, or of persons who are unfit for work, is regarded as a kindness and not a tragedy in the majority of families, whose financial burden thus becomes lighter. The only advantage arising out of this situation is that the natural selection and rejection of the unfit exists to a much higher degree than it does among Europeans. This process of the survival of the fittest produces a hard tough race possessed of immense powers of resistance. The people know nothing more than the primitive struggle for existence, to which they have grown accustomed, and are in consequence, just as hard with themselves as they are with each other. They are so far unaffected by western civilisation, and like the young soldiers, who are comparatively well fed, clothed and housed, are unassuming in the extreme. From the biological standpoint, it is clear that their speed, concentration, and will to work is much inferior to that of the peoples of the western world of strong competition. It is understandable that this also has its effect on health in the Soviet Union. Prisoners of course, are in a worse plight, because they are worked to the point of physical exhaustion.
2. The number of pathological births is much lower than it is in highly civilised countries, because the Slav woman has a greater ability to bear children. There are comparatively few surgically assisted births, and the use of injections for stopping labour pains is rare. Against this, there is a high proportion of cases of inflammatory illness caused by gynaecological inflammation

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after birth. This is partly due to the lack of hygiene, but more so to the fact that normal life between men and women has long ceased, and they live in a much more primitive way than is the custom, or even possible, in Europe. The number of extra-uterus pregnancies is consequently high, and compared with European hospitals, a surprising number of women suffering from internal hemorrhage enter hospital for operations. The primary cause is the chronic inflammatory process, but whether this is a natural or unnatural process is another question. It cannot be said that any joy is attached to the birth of children, and very few large families are to be seen among the younger generation. Neither the health authorities nor the doctors have been able to alter this. It is too much to expect of a woman who is forced to do the same work as a man to look after a home and bring up a family at the same time. Large families which exist appear to belong to the older generation. Children are looked upon as a burden, because both parents are forced to go out to work, and unless they are lucky enough to have an aged grandmother to look after them, parents have to leave the children to fend for themselves. The wonderful homes for children which are shown to foreign visitors to the Soviet Union only exist in or near the large towns. The size of the country places the main body of the population out of reach of children's and babies' homes. A high proportion of the manually employed women are not suited to have children, in spite of their great powers of resistance. The majority of them appear to be physically exhausted by the time they reach the age 25-30, when they are about 15 years older in appearance. The only women who can care for themselves properly are those living in or on the peripheries of the large towns. It is understandable that the number of abortions is not inconsiderable, although they are illegal and the penalties are heavy. Doctors carry out abortions because of the financial advantages, the average charge being between 200 and 250 Roubles, payable in cash in advance. It is difficult for the people to rake this sum together, but they manage it somehow, and about a dozen cases attended Dr. Hoffmann's hospital every week for treatment after having had miscarriages. Abortions seldom lead to criminal proceedings being taken

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SE [Redacted] officially published figures which claim that births exceed deaths by two million every year in the Soviet Union are not correct.

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against the doctor, because there is no prosecutor available. The general public has no interest in such cases, but only in those with a strong political flavour.

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3. Small children of school age are in much greater danger from the health point of view than are similarly aged European children. They are fed and cared for by an aged female, and when the family is not lucky enough to possess such a person, the children are left to the care of older children, and simply grow up on the streets. Feeding is consequently bad and irregular, and is done by anyone who happens to be at home. No control is exercised over the question of diet, and the children's teeth are bad, in many cases being already spoiled in the gums. They get their second sets of teeth much later in life than do the children in Europe. The "English disease" is widespread, and in the last year or two has been treated with vitamin D and codliver oil, both of which have been made available by the government. The number of gland diseases and exudative diatheses<sup>h is</sup> is very high, but cases of children outgrowing their strength are not as prevalent as they are in Europe. Because the children seldom have the opportunity of mixing with adults, their standard of intelligence is low. There is a great shortage of doctors who specialize in children's diseases, and in any case, the effect of their efforts is small because it is purposeless for them to order that the children should be fed better. The food is not there. In some areas a litre of milk costs about 4 Roubles, which means that the monthly milk bill of a family with two children would be around 240 Roubles. As this rules out a proper supply of milk, the children are under average weight, and are pale, when compared with European children. Nevertheless, the death rate among young children is not high, and with the exception of the usual children's mild complaints there appears to be very little infectious disease, or latent infectious disease caused by abnormal reaction of the lymph system.\* The way Soviet children are reared is tragic; when parents themselves have not been properly brought up they cannot possibly know how to bring up children in the right way. The result is that the doctor who is treating children is faced with insoluble

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\* [redacted] generations of continual natural rejection of the weaker have produced a positive ability to resist diseases, which has been practically lost in Europe.

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difficulties. With all the good will in the world, he cannot be expected to educate the mother in the proper care of her offspring if there are no beds for them, and the means to keep them clean are lacking. Doctors become resigned, order something or another, and go their way. There are cases where the parents make a special effort in their primitive way, but when this happens, the doctor finds himself up against a lack of cooperation caused by an unreasoning partiality. In spite of all these drawbacks, there is a positive side, and that is, the strength and toughness of the children's organisms which allow them to put up great resistance to the difficult climatic conditions and the effects of their social surroundings.

4. Children live under these conditions until they reach school leaving age, and food is definitely bad and insufficient. The number of hungry children is high, and consequently, so is the number of young criminals. Doctors can do little to help, and even in country areas, hunger drives the children to steal. When they are caught, they appear before juvenile courts which invariably sentence them to a spell in a youth camp, where they are better off than they were at home.\* These critical social conditions are rather outside the scope of what is intended to be a paper dealing directly with the medical side of the health situation, but they have to be included here because they help to give some idea of the difficulties the health service is up against. A regular health control is enforced in the schools, but is confined to finding out if anything is wrong, and what it is. It is not able to give relief because the means for doing so are not made available to it. The youth newspaper "Komsomolskaya Pravda" last year claimed that the youth organisation is fighting against the bad social and moral conditions of family life, as well as against the unbelievably bad living conditions. Reproaches were levelled against the health services and doctors, who were accused of having failed in their duty. The correctness of this attitude is questionable, but an improvement in the health situation affecting children is hardly likely under the existing regime. The

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\*  Many of the children concerned wanted to remain in the camp where they had little or no hunger, and could carry on with their schooling or trade. Some of them tearfully complained that if they were sent home they would only have to start stealing again if they wished to remain alive. Parents were not in favour of children being released to them because it meant another mouth to feed and another body to clothe.

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situation is worsened by an attitude of mind which is incomprehensible to the European. On the basis of the communist thesis about the right of self-determination, the people, and also youth from an immature age, enjoy a certain freedom of choice when they are not mentally equipped to make such a choice. For example, a child has the right to object to any measures which its parents impose for its own good. The child can also refuse medical treatment when it does not like it. In the event of a divorce, and there are large numbers daily, a child of 7 has the right to decide with which parent it will live. It is not uncommon for children aged 12 and upwards to be taken away from school and put to work for a period. In one large area, when the winter was starting and the crops were still out in the fields, all schools were closed and children over the age of 12 were sent to the *Kolkhosya* to gather in the harvest. They were lodged in barns, boys and girls slept together, there were no proper feeding arrangements and the children had to wear their own clothing. The results of all this were indescribable, and the majority went down ill with the intense cold, and a wave of influenza broke out.

5. The health situation so far as adults are concerned is not quite so bad because they are better qualified to take care of themselves. The State health organisation, in one form or another, is available more or less everywhere, but because there is a justifiable lack of confidence in it adults seek medical treatment privately as far as they can. Their overriding consideration is to avoid work which requires great physical effort, and this is readily understandable in the case of women, who have equal rights and therefore have to do the same manual work as men. To avoid work therefore, their only course is to be declared unfit by a doctor, and this happens time and time again, thus opening wide the way to bribery and corruption. The misery of the people has also caused them to seek solace in drugs, a mania for which is strongly developed in the adults. In this respect there is not a great deal of difference between an excessive use of alcohol, and the taking of hashish or opium. What is important however, is that in recent years, women have started to drink large quantities of vodka, which must have a bad effect on what family life there is, as well as on the children, and the next generation. The fight which communist youth wages against alcohol seems to have little effect, and the State authorities are equally unsuccessful, both against

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drink and drugs. Opium is prepared in a very primitive fashion. The poppy head is slit open, and the juice is injected into the body. The seeds of the poppy are boiled, and the resultant strong concentration is drunk. The result is a state of intense excitement followed by coma. Black tea also is drunk in this concentrated form (50 gr. tea to one cup of water) and brings on euphoric and excitationstadium, which in the most serious forms causes the sufferer to run amok. The consequent progressive weakness of the complaint leads to continuous relapses. The damage to health is widespread and irreversible. There are a number of other illnesses and complaints for which the Soviet authorities have not found an answer, and are not likely to do so in the future. To these belong:

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- (a) Deficiency illness caused by the monotonous food; "avitaminosen" (Scurvy, rickets, beri-beri, pellagra or rough skin). These complaints can only be overcome with natural and decent feeding which is beyond the powers of the Soviet Union. The only food available in near sufficient quantities is all of a meal basis, and fresh feedstuffs are in very short supply. The substitution of vitamin preparations for fresh fare is now in hand, but is not yet available in sufficient quantities. Also, as every doctor knows, vitamin preparations are never a complete substitute for the real thing.
- (b) Yellow jaundice. Neither in the camps, nor among the civilian population are they able to completely overcome the constant wave of jaundice.
- (c) High blood pressure (genuine hypertonic). The grounds for this complaint have to be sought in the lack of variety in the food, in the restless and nervous way of life, in the excessive use of alcohol and nicotine, both by males and females, in an increasing degree, as well as in the abnormal climatic demands. A large proportion of disability, even among the comparatively young, is due to this complaint, which is also responsible for a large number of deaths. The high blood pressure can be traced back to the central nerve system, and to a great extent terminates in the sleep therapeutics explained in PAWLOV's doctrine.

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6. The number of abnormal psychological reactions are necessarily higher than in Europe. If the assumption that hysteria in a pathological form brings on egocentrism is acceptable, then the way in which the people react must also be described as hysterical, a condition for which the social surroundings must carry the blame. To what extent the endogen which has developed through many generations is responsible, in which case the effect of narcotics has played a not inconsiderable part, remains an open question. Psychological complaints are a daily occurrence which cannot be mastered with the facilities available, because the root cause of the complaints cannot be overcome. Nevertheless, the number of cases of genuine insanity do not appear to be greater than they are in Europe. These medical considerations may help to explain why the Soviet people may not be trusted. They react completely different<sup>ly</sup> to the people of the western world, and just as their attitude to their doctors suggests, have no feeling of honesty or sincerity. Because the egocentrism is just as strongly developed as the endogen and exogen factors already described, all the counter measures taken by the medical authorities are useless.

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