

Environmental Pollution, Infertility and Divorce in Azerbaijan

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Recent statistics indicate that in 1986, 347 of every 1,000 new marriages in the USSR ended in divorce. In some areas of the country, the figure was as high as 50 per cent.¹ While compared with the average for the USSR as a whole the number of divorces in Azerbaijan is quite low, the number of broken families in that republic has almost doubled over the period 1960 - 1986.²

In the European republics of the USSR, the most frequently cited cause for divorce is alcoholism. In Azerbaijan, however, the primary reason for divorce is that a marriage is childless. The chairman of the Muslim Religious Board for the Transcaucasus, Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pasha-Zade, has stated that childlessness is the main factor behind the rise in the divorce rate in Azerbaijan.³

As elsewhere in the USSR, demographic and health problems in Azerbaijan are inextricably linked with economic and ecological factors. Azerbaijan SSR Minister of Health Talyat Kasumov disclosed in an article published last year that more pesticides are used per hectare of land in Azerbaijan than in any other republic. Whereas the average for the USSR as a whole ranges from 2 - 5 kilos, in the cotton and vegetable-producing areas of Azerbaijan the total is 40 kilos, and in the grape producing regions - 183 kilos. Azerbaijan, moreover, continues to use the pesticide DDT, which was officially banned by the World Health Organization in 1970.⁴

That environmental pollution, in particular the use of highly toxic agricultural chemicals, together with inadequate medical care, are among the causes of the inordinately high infant mortality rates in the cotton-producing republics of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan has been extensively documented.⁵ While the infant mortality rate for Azerbaijan -- likewise a cotton-producing republic -- is lower than for the two republics cited above (30.5 deaths per thousand live births in 1986, as compared with 58.2 for Turkmenistan and 46.2 in Uzbekistan⁶), at a meeting of the Azerbaijan Party-economic aktiv in September, 1987, the then first secretary of the Azerbaijan CP, Kyamran Bagirov, disclosed that infant mortality in Azerbaijan peaks during the cotton-sowing and harvesting season. Bagirov attributed this trend to the absence of even the most elementary medical facilities in many villages and to pregnant women being constrained to take part in the cotton harvest, rather than to pollution resulting from the use of dangerous chemicals such as the cotton defoliant Butifos which, although technically banned, was apparently still being used at that time.⁷

New information suggests that, in addition to contributing to infant deaths, the use of pollutant chemicals is having a serious effect on the health of the population: 24 per cent of young married women between the ages of 20 - 34 in Azerbaijan were found to be sterile.⁸ The prominent Azerbaijani poet B. Vahab-Zade has likewise drawn a clear link between the use in agriculture of such chemicals as Butifos and saltpeter (potassium nitrate) and the incidence in rural areas of Azerbaijan of infertility, congenital defects and hepatitis.⁹ A further factor which cannot but adversely affect the health of women of childbearing age living in the rural areas of the republic is the woefully inadequate network of medical facilities. Azerbaijan CP first secretary Abdul-Rakhman Vezirov disclosed last June, for example, that only one in five rural Raions in Azerbaijan has a maternity hospital.¹⁰

It is likewise possible that the substantial decrease in the number of large families in Azerbaijan (from 296,000 in 1970 to 118,400 in 1987), reflecting the decline in the birthrate over that period, may in part be due to infertility resulting from environmental pollution.¹¹ Although the potential health dangers of the use of agricultural chemicals are widely discussed in the Azerbaijani press, however, no statistics are available to indicate the precise dimensions of the problem.

A further threat to public health is the sale in city bazaars of agricultural produce containing levels of nitrates in excess of the permitted maximum. In 1987, as a result of official controls, 1,731 tons of vegetables, 1169 tons of onions, 202 tons of potatoes, 198 tons of cabbage, 30 tons of melons, 11 tons of tomatoes and 600 tons of carrots were removed from sale for this reason in Baku alone. In spite of this, there were instances when fruit and vegetables containing more than four times the maximum permitted level of nitrates were passed for sale at city markets.¹²

Azerbaijan SSR Minister of Health Kasumov acknowledges that the level of chemical pollution in Azerbaijan is in the first instance the result of pressure from the central ministries in Moscow to increase the area of land under cotton and the annual yields of this culture to the maximum limit. He further details measures that have been taken to rectify the situation, such as the introduction of biological pesticides and stricter controls of agricultural produce destined for human consumption.¹³ While such steps are to be welcomed, it should be borne in mind that in many cases the damage wrought by arbitrary use of toxic chemicals is already irreparable: a future ban on the use of Butifos and DDT in Azerbaijan can be of little consolation to a 20 year old village girl divorced by her husband for her inability to bear children.

FOOTNOTES

1. Azerbaijan Gencleri, January 14, 1989.
2. Kommunist, January 22, 1989.
3. Kommunist, November 20, 1988.
4. Trud, August 25, 1988.
5. See, for example, Annette Bohr: RL 352/88, "Infant Mortality in Central Asia," August 4, 1988.
6. See Aaron Trehub: RL 438/97, "New Figures on Infant Mortality in the USSR," October 29, 1987.
7. Bakinsky Rabochii, September 30, 1987. On the Butifos controversy, see Ann Sheehy: RL 157/87, "Highly Toxic Defoliant Finally Banned?" April 23, 1987.
8. Kommunist, January 22, 1989.
9. Edebijet ve Inceneset, October 23, 1987.
10. Bakinsky Rabochii, June 14, 1988.
11. Kommunist, December 18, 1988.
12. Kommunist, September 22, 1988.
13. Trud, August 25, 1988.