



Photos of Soviet children taken by Dr. Eric Chivian of physicians' research team.

Nuclear war through the eyes of Soviet children

By Judy Foreman
Globe Staff

Soviet children apparently are taught that no civil defense is viable in the event of nuclear war, a team of three American psychiatrists will announce today in New York.

In that skepticism about the efficacy of bomb shelters in a nuclear age, Soviet children are not unlike their American counterparts who have also been considered interesting because some American strategists have claimed that the Soviets are promoting civil defense as an effective means of protection in the event of a nuclear attack and that the Soviet Union is preparing its population to survive such an attack.

Almost none of the 50 young Soviet teenagers interviewed on videotape in July in the Soviet Union, or the 300 more who answered written questionnaires about nuclear war, expressed the belief that they or their families would survive a nuclear war.

Furthermore, the team of interviewers from International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War found, to its surprise, that Soviet children are not only extremely well informed about nuclear war but that they learn about nuclear war at about age 7, much earlier than their American counterparts, who typically become cognizant of the nuclear threat at about 10 to 12 years of age.

Soviet children also were found to appear more optimistic than American children that nuclear war will not occur, while American teenagers appeared angrier and more frustrated with the adults they blame for the nuclear threat.

In the children's words

"If American rockets can reach us in half an hour," says a solemn-faced Katya, 14, in the 20-minute videotape to be released to news organizations today, "there won't be time to defend ourselves."

"Nyet," adds her friend Larisa. "You couldn't live underground in bomb shelters. You'd have to start life all over again [after a nuclear attack]. Besides, you couldn't survive a nuclear war because the nuclear radioactivity lasts so long."

"If a nuclear war happens," says 14-year-old Alla of Minsk, "there will be atomic particles for hundreds of kilometers around; the planet would be a wasteland, and everything would be diseased."

Under the auspices of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, an association of prominent physicians in the United States, the Soviet Union and other countries, the American team was headed by Harvard psychiatrist Eric Chivian. It included psychiatrists John E. Mack and Jeremy P. Waletzky, of Harvard Medical School and George Washington University respectively, Susanna Chivian, secretary of the Brookline-based Institute for Defense and Disarmament

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—Eric Chivian



Studies, and Cynthia L. Lazaroff, interpreter.

"The Soviet kids seem to have a great deal of detailed and accurate knowledge about the effects of nuclear weapons," said Dr. Chivian earlier this week, "and this is important because of reports that this has been kept from Soviet children. They find out about nuclear weapons from television, especially the 'International Panorama' show, from the nightly news show 'Vremya,' which means 'Time,' and from their schools. By the third and fourth grade, there seems to be a defined curriculum."

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Plans for showing

The videotaping project may prove interesting in the ongoing propaganda war between the superpowers, particularly if, as the physicians organization plans, the final videotaped product in which American children's comments and Soviet children's comments are spliced together is shown in both the United States and Soviet Union, as well as in about 30 other countries.

Sovietologist Marshall Goldman of Wellesley College and Harvard's Russian Research Institute commented, "I don't think this [videotaping project] can hurt anything. The more interchange there is, the better. It's the Russians who require some perspective of how the rest of the world sees what they are doing, and this is one way to broaden this. I think we have to be sophisticated enough to know that the Russians have their missiles already in place in Europe and therefore it is their missiles that are more threatening than ours so far."

The videotape opens with a scenic shot of children playing in one of the two Pioneer camps — like scout camps — visited by the American team. The more elite camp, for 2800 children on the Black Sea, was attended by children chosen on the basis of merit; the smaller, less selective camp was 40 miles outside of Moscow.

"To make sure the kids were not pre-selected or prepared, we asked the kids' councils in both camps to select the kids to be interviewed. They basically selected their friends, though we were also allowed to interview any kids we chose, and we did this, too, both individually and in groups. In the big camp, we selected one subcamp [for videotaping] the night before we did it, and the kids who answered the questionnaire [who were not taped] were not even told anything about the subject beforehand," said Dr. Chivian.

The actual videotaping was done by a Soviet crew, but all the tapes were brought back to the United States for editing.

Several years ago, Dr. Chivian and Brookline teacher Roberta Snow began videotaping interviews with children discussing nuclear war, a project that has led to continuing taping and surveying across the country.

Views from two countries

The Soviet children's greater optimism that nuclear war will be averted may result, the psychiatrists in the physicians' organization say, from the fact that most of the Soviet children interviewed were involved in groups that make banners and write letters to President Ronald Reagan expressing their fears about nuclear war.

"They are also told," Dr. Chivian said, "that their government has a 'No First Use' policy — but my suspicion is that most of their optimism comes from their activities. Nonetheless, they are still very worried about it. They have fears of abandonment, like younger American children."

American teenagers, on the other hand, were found to question authorities more and display more open anger at the adults who have brought the world to the brink of nuclear holocaust.

But precisely because Soviet children appear somewhat more trusting of authority, Dr. Chivian says, it can be more readily assumed that their beliefs — in the futility of civil defense, for example — are a mirror of what they have been told by authorities.

"We hadn't really thought about this beforehand," said Dr. Chivian, "but we think we have got a unique window into what is actually being said about nuclear weapons in the Soviet Union."

Dr. Mack said that the paradoxical stance of the Soviet children — both anxious about nuclear war yet also more hopeful than American children — that people of good will wouldn't let it happen — probably comes from the collectivist, state-controlled society itself, from the sense that "we are all in this together."

In individualistic America, where there is no nationwide curriculum about nuclear war, the children seem more discouraged, with some saying they feel nuclear war is inevitable.

When asked by their American interviewers, "Do you think there will be a nuclear war in your lifetime?" a Soviet girl said, "It's a horrible thought."

Another said, "The consequences would be terrible. But the Soviet Union is struggling for peace. War will never happen because the Soviet Union and the Americans will understand there shouldn't be war; they are struggling for peace."

A teenaged boy named Valery said, "One person could push the button, and that would be it. Rockets would be launched at us, and we'd fire back."

He was quickly answered by a friend: "I think everything will be smoothed out, though if people really want it, there will be war. But all peoples of the world are against war, so it seems war will not happen."

But Kira, 14, of Minsk, worried, "If an American computer or our own computer makes a mistake, there will be war."

Though they had trouble with the overt question of how the prospect of nuclear war made them feel, one Soviet child said, "I feel pain. People would suffer and die."

Another, 15-year old Oleg, said, "I didn't sleep for several nights after I saw a film about how nuclear war might break out."

A very serious looking girl said, "I can imagine how the bomb would fall on my village and I cover myself with blankets, because I am afraid."

And when asked if they had any messages for American children, one child said forthrightly: "I don't want them to believe the bad things they hear about Soviet children. The American people are exactly like us. They don't want war, either."

"This film could be a beginning."