

# Children in Russia Fear Nuclear War

Soviet children harbor a deeper fear of nuclear warfare and the threat it poses to their own survival than previously assumed, according to a group of psychiatrists who recently conducted a series of unprecedented interviews in the Soviet Union.

"We frequently hear that the Soviet Union believes that nuclear war can be fought and won, and that the Soviet government keeps the population ignorant of the realities of nuclear war so it can pursue its global aims," said Dr. John Mack, Professor of Psychiatry at the Medical School and one of the investigators in the study.

But a questionnaire distributed to 300 children aged nine to 17 at the Pioneer Camp Orlyonok, a summer camp on the Black Sea, as well as videotaped interviews with 50 children there and at Gargarin (a camp for children of airline employees) revealed that Soviet youngsters are well-informed and very concerned about the consequences of a nuclear exchange, he said.

"We found that at a very early age—about eight years old—kids said they had a vivid idea of what nuclear war would be like. We were surprised at how much detail they got from school, television, and discussions with their parents on the effects of a nuclear explosion."

The Soviet youths appear to imagine the blast, fire, radiation, and other consequences of nuclear warfare even more vividly than their American counterparts, he continued. One 15-year-old boy who was interviewed said, "Our existence is hanging on a thread." An 11-year-old girl who imagined a bomb falling on her village confided, "Sometimes at night, I cover myself with the blanket because I'm afraid."

## "Flies in the Teeth"

In addition, he said, less than three percent of the children surveyed believed that they or their families would survive in the event of a nuclear exchange—an attitude that "flies in the teeth" of reports of major civil defense efforts in the Soviet Union.

"If the government is providing information on civil defense," he said in an interview, "it's not believed by Soviet children."

The study was sponsored by the Research Program for the Study of Human Continuity in the Medical School's Department of Psychiatry, and by the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), a nonprofit group whose Soviet membership helped arrange for the interviews to take place.

Mack, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, has been studying the psychological effects of the threat of nuclear holocaust on adolescents in the Boston area since 1978. He conducted the current study with Dr. Eric Chivian of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a cofounder of IPPNW, who has interviewed students across the U.S., and Dr. Jeremy P. Waletzky of George Washington University Medical School.

For the written survey, they adapted a questionnaire used by other researchers in studying 900 students at six California high schools. The average age of the American students was 16 years, compared to an average age of 12.7 years for the Soviet students.

According to findings presented at a press conference in New York Thursday morning, 98 percent of the Soviet children said they were "worried" or "very worried" about nuclear war, compared to 58 percent of the U.S. children.

The Soviet group also was more pessimistic about the chances of survival in the event of nuclear war. Only three percent believed they and their family would survive, compared to 16 percent of a group of the U.S. subjects matched for age. Only six percent of the Soviet children said that the two nations would survive such a war, compared to 22 percent of the American children.

One surprising finding in the study, said Mack, was that Soviet children appear more hopeful than American children that nuclear war can be averted. Fifty-four percent said they did not think a nuclear war between the U.S. and the USSR would occur during their lifetime, compared to 16 percent of the U.S. sample.

A possible, though speculative explanation, continued the psychiatrist, is that Soviet youths have more outlets—such as class discussions and writing letters to American children—to work constructively for peace.