

U N I V E R S I T Y

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What Russian children are thinking about nuke weapons

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In July, three American psychiatrists, Eric Chivian, Jeffrey W. Metzky and I, traveled to the U.S.S.R. to learn what Soviet children are thinking about nuclear weapons and nuclear war. We had been told in American news reports that the government withholds information about nuclear war from Soviet children. We discovered to our surprise that Russian children were very well informed about the effects of nuclear weapons and frightened about nuclear war.

This study, the first of its kind, extends investigation begun in 1978 of the attitudes of American children and adolescents on this subject. Permission to interview and film Soviet children became possible because of the trust which has developed between American and Soviet physicians and has led to the creation of IPPNW — International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War — an organization which includes 30 countries and 60,000 physicians worldwide. Our invitation from the State Ministry of Television and Radio was arranged by Evgeny Chazov, the Soviet co-president of IPPNW.

The psychiatrists visited two camps, "Gagarin," near Moscow, and "Orlyonok" on the Black Sea. We conducted 50 videotaped interviews of Soviet girls and boys, ages 10 to 15, and administered questionnaires to nearly 300 additional children.

We had concerns before the trip about how free of Soviet control the research would be. We were pleased to be allowed to bring our own trans-

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lators and to discover that we could choose the children we wished to interview without supervision by adults in the camps. The children were not prepared in advance for our visit. We were given all of the unedited videotapes to take back to the United States. No copies were made by the Soviet television crew that did the filming.

By the time they are 8-years-old, Soviet children have been exposed to detailed information about the effects of nuclear explosions. Through classroom instruction and the news media — especially television — they obtained detailed, accurate information about the effects of blast, fire and radiation on living things and the physical environment. These children were very aware of how a nuclear war might start and of the dangers of accidents. One boy said, "A computer makes a mistake and that's it."

Soviet children, if these boys and girls turn out to be typical, think very often about the danger of nuclear war and talk about it with their parents. Instruction about nuclear realities occurs more sporadically in our schools, and such subjects are more likely to be avoided in family discussions.

The Soviet children seemed better able than American young people to imagine the consequences of nuclear war, which several attributed to the millions of deaths their country had suffered in World War II, in which they personally had lost relatives. Some of the children expressed their painful feelings vividly.

A 13-year-old girl said, "We feel a great despair." A 15-year-old boy said, "Our existence is hanging on a thread." An 11-year-old girl imagines a bomb falling on her village. "Sometimes at night," she said, "I cover myself with the blanket because I'm afraid." Another 11-year-old girl said, "If war starts, we might all be without parents" — a frequent fear of young children in the United States as well.

We frequently hear of extensive Soviet civil defense programs. Yet, none of the children interviewed, and very few of those who completed the questionnaire thought they and their families would survive a nuclear war. In the minds of these Soviet children the world after a nuclear war will be a devastated and polluted wasteland, with most of the survivors awaiting death from radiation, sickness, infection and starvation. As after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with which they are familiar, radiation effects, they think, would be passed on "from generation to generation." "Even if people lived," 13-year-old boy said, the consequences might last "for thousands and millions of years and the race won't survive."

In the light of the intensity of fear the Soviet children expressed, it is perhaps surprising that they are generally more hopeful than American children that nuclear war can be prevented. We found this difficult to explain and suspect that it is the result of taking part in state-sponsored peace activities, such as collecting petitions, writing cards to the

United States and attending meetings, which creates a general feeling of working toward a common goal.

Many of our interviewees asked that we convey warm messages of solidarity and friendship to American children. An 11-year-old girl said, "Let them not think that the Soviet people wish them ill." A 13-year-old girl said, "It's very important that all the children of the world become friends."

What knowledge did we gain from this preliminary investigation?

We learned that Soviet children, like American young people, are frightened about the nuclear threat. We learned that far from teaching their young people that nuclear war can be fought and won, these children have been taught that there can be no meaningful survival after a nuclear war. We learned that it is possible to build upon trustful personal relationships between American and Soviet colleagues outside the political sphere to overcome stereotyping and to counter the effects of misinformation.

It remains to be seen whether the suspicion, fear and ideological polarization which have brought the world to the edge of catastrophe can be overcome as well by building working relationships of trust in the international political domain.

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