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The End of the Nation? Russia Chooses Death Over Life

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Reports out of Russia indicate that the recent military clash with Georgia may have represented something more like desperation than opportunism. Murray Feshbach of *The Washington Post* reports that, all things considered, Russia is actually close to a national collapse.

“Predictions that Russia will again become powerful, rich and influential ignore some simply devastating problems at home that block any march to power,” Feshbach reports. “Sure, Russia’s army could take tiny Georgia. But Putin’s military is still in tatters, armed with rusting weaponry and staffed with indifferent recruits. Meanwhile, a declining population is robbing the military of a new generation of soldiers. Russia’s economy is almost totally dependent on the price of oil. And, worst of all, it’s facing a public health crisis that verges on the catastrophic.”



The health crisis turns out to be a barometer of sorts — and a warning of a far greater disaster that looms. Russia is falling into the rank of nations with the lowest life expectancy and highest rates of early death. No one appears concerned enough to do anything.

As Feshbach reports:

Recent decades, most notably since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, have seen an appalling deterioration in the health of the Russian population, anchoring Russia not in the forefront of developed countries but among the most backward of nations.

This is a tragedy of huge proportions — but not a particularly surprising one, at least to me. I followed population, health and environmental issues in the Soviet Union for decades, and more recently, I have reported on diseases such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic ravaging the Russian population. I’ve visited Russia more than 50 times over the years, so I can say from firsthand experience that this national calamity isn’t happening suddenly. It’s happening inexorably.

According to U.N. figures, the average life expectancy for a Russian man is 59 years — putting the country at about 166th place in the world longevity sweepstakes, one notch above Gambia. For women, the picture is somewhat rosier: They can expect to live, on average, 73 years, barely beating out the Moldovans. But there are still some 126 countries where they could expect to live longer. And the gap between expected longevity for men and for women — 14 years — is the largest in the developed world.

The recent military incursion into Georgia, brutal as it was, may represent a futile attempt to show force while Russia still has force. The number of young men of military age in the population is crashing — as is the number of young women who could give birth to future soldiers.

In order to understand this, consider this shocking headline from the *St. Petersburg Times* [Russia]: “Experts — 64 Percent of Russian Pregnancies End in Abortion.”

As the paper reports:

The low birth rate remains one of the key reasons behind Russia's ongoing demographic crisis. According to official statistics, every fourth teenage girl in Russia has some form of gynecological ailment or reproductive health disorder.

Each year in Russia, more than 64 percent of all pregnancies end in abortion, while in Western European countries the level is below 25 percent. By comparison, there are 10 to 15 abortions per 100 pregnancies in the U.K. and 5 or 6 per 100 in the Netherlands.

One in ten women who undergo an abortion in Russia is below 18 years of age, doctors say. Gynecological disease rates for teenage girls in 15-17 age group, have jumped by an alarming 30 percent in the last five years.

In a twist only Fyodor Dostoevsky might understand, Russian authorities, alarmed by the population collapse, declared 2008 as the 'Year of the Family.' Government campaigns to encourage bearing children were launched, but with no apparent impact. In a stunning disconnect, the government still offers free abortions.

What country can live with aborting 64 percent of its babies? How can such a nation survive? It has brought death into its own wombs. The babies who are born are the lucky few. The vast majority never see life outside the womb.

In recent days *The Los Angeles Times* has reported that a small pro-life movement has begun in Russia, but without much influence as of yet:

A fledgling antiabortion movement is beginning to stir in Russia. Driven by a growing discussion of abortion as a moral issue and, most of all, by a government worried about demographics, doctors and politicians are quietly struggling to lower what is believed to be one of the world's highest abortion rates.."

"The attitude has changed," abortion practitioner Alexander Medvedev said. "Even in community clinics, doctors are trying to dissuade patients from abortion. Now teenagers come to see us with already two or three abortions, and it's horrible.

The report indicates that some medical authorities and social observers are truly concerned, and exceptions for late-term abortions are harder to obtain. Nevertheless, the sheer number of abortions defies comprehension and appears unlikely to fall. A reluctance to define the issue in moral terms means that authorities try to argue from the grounds of public health and population needs. But once the moral ground is abandoned, so is the hope of any recovery.

Lincoln Steffens, an American apologist for the Bolshevik Revolution and the early Soviet regime, once infamously declared of the Soviets: "I have been over to the future, and it works!" Well, the current crisis in Russia may well be a warning of the future collapse of civilization. Once a nation takes the Culture of Death into its heart, what rescue is possible?

The more familiar form of the quotation from Lincoln Steffens ("I have seen the future and it works!") was not made known until after his death and may be a misquotation supplied by his widow.

