



The election of People's Deputy of the USSR Nikolai VORONTSOV to the post of Chairman of the USSR State Committee on Nature Conservation was unexpected to many. For this fifty-five year old non-Party scientist, staff member of the Nikolai Koltsov Institute of Biology of Development for the USSR Academy of Sciences, is so unlike other stereotyped "chairborne" leaders. But when looked at from a common sense viewpoint and considered as a man to represent the cause, Vorontsov is an appropriate choice. He is a specialist, widely known in the country and abroad for his works on biology, zoology and genetics. He is also a man of action, a participant in many major expeditions to different regions of the country. Back in the fifties he was among the initiators of a youth movement for

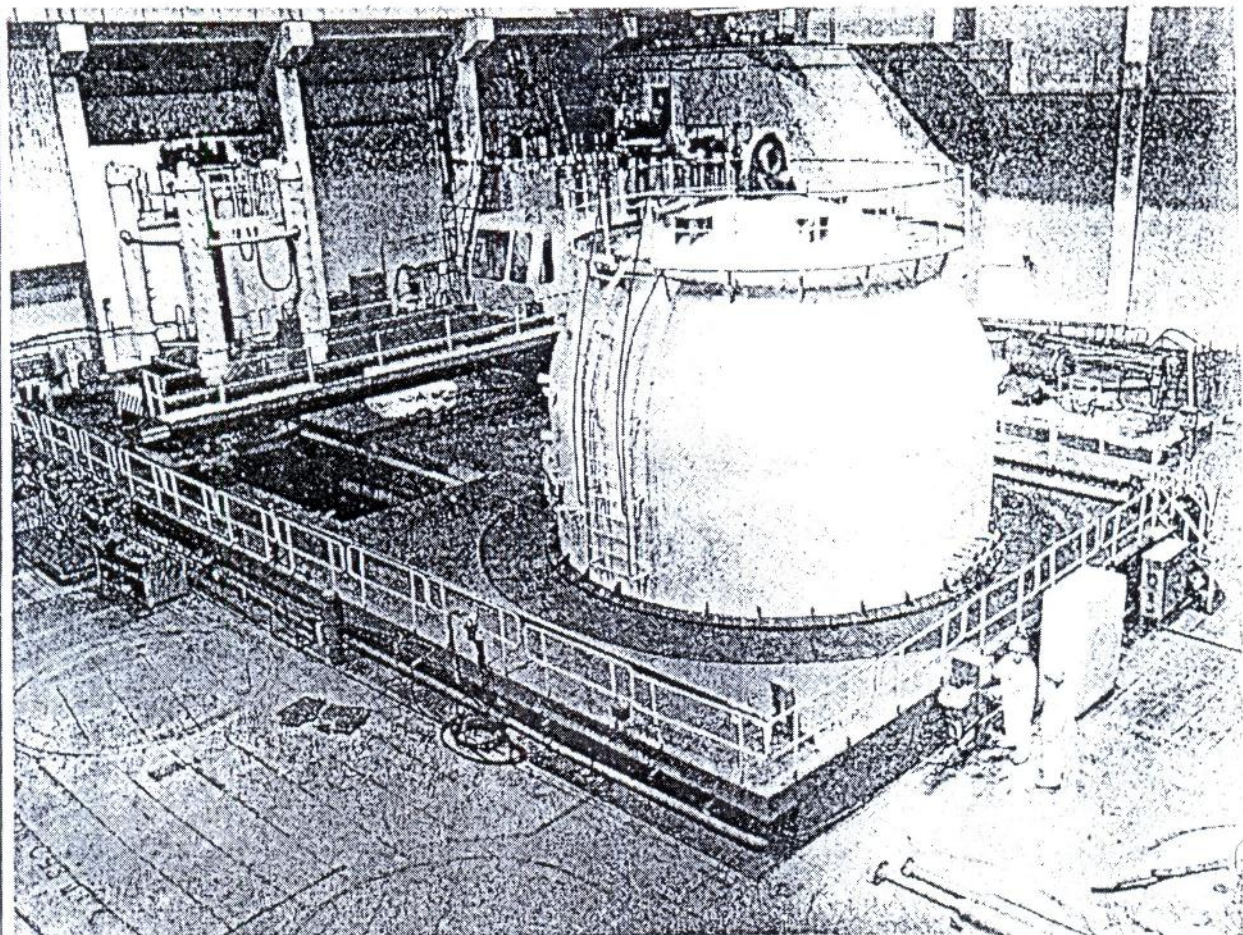
Ecological Diktat in an Epoch of Democratization

nature conservation originating in Leningrad. And anyone can easily satisfy himself that Nikolai Vorontsov has never gone back upon his positions by reading the following interview he gave to a Sovetskaya Kultura correspondent Artur GASPARYAN.

Scarcely ten years ago we understood an ecological problem as being one related to a concrete geographical object (a dying forest, a dried-up lake or river). Today the emphasis has shifted towards the life of man himself. We are beginning to realize that we all are falling victim to technological terror. And we are also to blame for this. How has it come about that mankind has turned into a self-devouring monster?

For a long time we lived spell-bound by the slogan of the stagnation epoch: "Everything for man, in the name of man, for the good of man". What was the meaning of the word "everything"? All resources, perhaps? And what does "the good of man" mean? Does it relate to all human beings today or to our children and grandchildren as well?

We must understand our place in the biosphere. Do we realize that almost all mineral resources we expend today are products of bygone biospheres? It stands to reason that man transforms the biosphere; he replaces natural communities by agricultural ones, etc.



Following the Chernobyl disaster which affected vast areas in the Ukraine and Byelorussia, atomic power-engineering demands particular attention from the standpoint of ecological security.

The scholars and builders are faced today with the task of making all atomic stations in the country meet the modern requirements of safety, as is the case with Novo-Voronezhskaya atomic station shown in our photo.

(which already exists) but also a system of incentives for encouraging enterprises to save resources.¹

Another question that requires special attention today is the priority to be given to the rights of the local population and first of all of numerically small peoples to so-called inexhaustible nature mana-

gement. They should be confident that the land on which they had been raised and on which they work will not be taken away from them and destroyed. Today, for instance, the area of reindeer pastures in the Yamal Peninsula (Western Siberia—Ed.) has been shrinking catastrophically. With the "help" of the oil industry six million hectares have been destroyed in the past few years. The damage done amounted to six billion roubles (at a very conservative estimate). If we calculate recultivation costs the said sum would increase to 90 billion roubles! Such are the results of departmental savagery.

But losses cannot be measured in roubles alone...

The losses are of a much profounder character. In the span of

¹ On the nature conservation work of the Procurator's Office of the USSR see the interview with A. Sukharev "Why Doesn't the Procurator Step In?" in STP No. 1, 1990—Ed.



The Institute for the comprehensive utilization of mineral resources also deals with land reclamation. Photo: a reclaimed field near the Lebedinsky quarry (Kursk Region).

But everything has limits. If mankind wants to survive it should use living nature wisely.

As for the technological, or rather technocratic, terror, there are many reasons for it. The ideology that originated at the outset of this century whereby man's progress was linked with the amount of energy generated, coal mined and technological advancement played a major role. This ideology naturally

spread to our country and was especially influential in the years of the first Soviet five-year plans and industrialization. We continued to think that progress meant man's ruthless encroachment on nature whilst the West was reaping the evil fruits of such thoughtlessness. In the mid-fifties they in the West initiated an active movement favouring the harmonization of man's relations with the environment.

In this country technocratic thinking is still alive. And only if we get rid of it and realize man's place in natural processes will more or less normal life become possible without hereditary diseases, without a growing incidence of oncological diseases, without nervous and cardiovascular disorders caused by stress in cities, etc.

But, for all the conservatism of our ecological thinking, one cannot fail to notice how greatly interest in the problems of nature conservation has increased recently in our country both at state level and at the level of public movements.

What, in your view, is more important today for the solution of ecological problems, an increase in the relevant legislative acts and their toughening up or the advancement of culture and not only ecological culture but culture in the broadest sense?

It is hard to say which is more important. We certainly need culture. First of all, because it determines man's attitude to life irrespective of the law. A man of culture does not violate laws because he has a system of inner values. But thought should also be given to legal regulation. For laws, if they are good, are of immense educational value. Laws that would make it unprofitable to pollute the environment would undoubtedly be beneficial. I do not merely mean a system of fines and penalties

decades we have been losing nature's species diversity: scores of plants, animals and microorganisms are vanishing. We have been losing the diversity of landscapes. This is due to the thoughtless drainage of boglands and the cutting down of shrubbery in the Non-Black Earth Zone, and of forest shelter-belts in Moldavia. And all that is being supplanted by a vast system of monoculture farming which can only be sustained by chemical fertilizers.

Ecological ignorance is closely tied in with ethnographic ignorance. In the '20s and '30s a draconian campaign to thrust a settled way of life on the peoples that had been nomads and hunters since time immemorial swept the country. Consequently many of them were threatened with extinction. The plight of the numerically small peoples of the North whose combined population is now a mere 150 thousand is particularly alarming.²

Over the years we have been losing our national diversity. According to official statistics in 1926 there were 194 nationalities in the country, whereas in 1979 there were but 101 nationalities. What has become of the other 93 nationalities? They were mechanically "merged together" with other nationalities. There emerged the practice of artificially incorporating smaller ethnoses into numerically greater ones. This leads not only to cultural losses but also to severe ecological consequences. For every people living in a given locality lives in harmony with its natural environment.

² For more details on the problems of the numerically small peoples of the North see the interview with Y. Gaer ("I Want to Help People") in STP No. 3, 1990—*Ed.*

So it seems that the failure to understand the significance of national diversity has led to the undermining of man's traditional relationships with nature?

Yes, of course. We have lost the regional cultural diversity. No matter how interesting and important it might be, it is of course wrong to consider millennial cultures, say, in Armenia, Georgia, Russia and what is now Soviet Central Asia and the Baltic Republics only in terms of the history of the USSR spanning slightly more than seventy years. This leads to the substitution of a popculture for genuine culture. And a further consequence is the loss of respect for the individual. As a biologist I would like to say that speaking of the individual we value in him or her his or her singularity—genetic, physiological and psychological specific features. And if we fail to take this into consideration then along with a standard education, mode of life and architecture there emerges a kind of standard thinking which reduces to the formula: "Man is the hub of the Universe". And this in turn gives rise to ethnocentrism ("My ethnos is superior to all others") and sociocentrism ("My class is superior to others")...

And we have satisfied ourselves where all that eventually leads.

To the loss of humanism, to technocratic thinking and to the destruction of nature. The disruption of feedback links has brought us to the brink of ecological and social crisis.

We maintain that ecological diktat is necessary in order to solve ecological problems. But how does this fit in with the process of democratization, extension of freedoms and the process of creating a law-governed state?

I think that in this case, speaking of diktat, democratization can furn-

ish such juridical, legal mechanisms that would operate properly and effectively. The way they operate in a number of Western countries within the framework of socially heterogeneous society where under traditional democracy they have succeeded in working out a stringent mechanism making it obligatory for everyone to pay taxes. That is precisely why they have solved many ecological problems. I recently visited Chicago which even as children we knew of as a very smoke-laden city. What did I see? A clean city within forty miles of which they fish for trout in the rivers. It is precisely the laws that have raised these very tough economic hindrances in the path of environmental pollution.

I am under the impression that Soviet ecologists still occupy defensive positions vis-à-vis the departmental setups. Perhaps now is the time to launch the offensive?

I believe it is above all necessary to get rid of ecological ignorance. Many people are noted for it, and not only technocrats but also those battling for nature.

A dispute is now under way over the Northern central heating-and-power plant not far from Moscow. Before rejecting or endorsing this design it is first necessary to see what the ecological capacity of that district of Moscow is, what is situated in the adjacent regions, what kind of wind rose there is in the area, what kind of discharge will result, etc. And, besides, every resident should know what he will not have without the central heating-and-power plant. How many kilowatts of energy he will have and how many he has now. Besides it is necessary to decide who and what will suffer should there be any shortage of the electric

energy in Moscow. The population or industry? And whether it is necessary to have for the industry of a gigantic city a non-deficit energy supply. Isn't it simpler to situate plants in other areas? A complex of questions of this kind should be submitted for the consideration of the people before the right decision is made.

I should say that there are some absolutely justified ecological movements. But there is also ecological extremism which is based on downright misunderstanding and on the negation of everything. Indeed, there are perhaps things which should not be combatted.

Mind you, this misunderstanding did not arise out of nothing. The deficit of ecological information has also played a role.

I regard such lack of information as disrespect for the individual. In general, the right of man to information is one of the more important rights of civilization.

What tasks do you face as the Chairman of the USSR State Committee on Nature Conservation?

The foremost task is to draw the country's scientific potential into the Committee. We need a collective reason for elaborating the strategy. The problems of nature conservation cannot be solved without science. We need not only applied research in the sphere of ecologically pure technologies and systems of closed-cycle recirculation of water, and so forth, but, above all, fundamental research and development projects. It is necessary to further develop botany, zoology, soil science, genetics, evolutionary biology, hydrobiology, marine biology. These sciences are not counted among the prestigious ones in the USSR but it is precisely

in these areas that Soviet specialists still occupy positions of world leadership even though they are inadequately financed.

The next step is to secure complete ecological glasnost. We need closer contacts with the official and "informal" nature conservation societies and social movements in our country and abroad. We need dialogue. I also favour broader participation of the USSR in international ecological projects.

Besides enthusiasm and common sense the nature conservation effort requires, as I have already mentioned, general culture and a good knowledge of laws of nature. One problem which ecologists come up against today and which our Committee should tackle in order to achieve reliable results is the need to raise the level of knowledge and ecological thinking. We need ecological studies on a countrywide scale. But the main thing is that the USSR State Committee on Nature Conservation will prove effective only if environmental protection becomes an element of state policy not in words but in reality and when the national strategy in the ecological field is adopted with the ultimate object of building a society with a high level of ecological consciousness.

The adoption of such a strategy will require a range of new nature conservation services hitherto unknown to the country. The State Ecological Safety Service under the USSR State Committee on Nature Conservation will be the first of these. Its responsibilities should in-

clude the absolute right to supervise the observance of all plans and activities pertaining to national strategy by all Ministries and other departments, and by Soviet and party bodies, and so forth. In addition this service which will be provided with a network of stationary and mobile laboratories is to watch over the level of ecological danger in different regions and to have the right to finally endorse (or reject) all types of ecological surveys. It is also possible to charge this service with the prevention of accidents or acts of sabotage at industrial projects which are especially vulnerable to ecological catastrophe.

Equally important, perhaps, is the need for an ecological information service that would control the real ecological conditions of rivers, lakes, forests and farmlands. The need for information about the zones of ecological danger along and around the gas and oil transmission lines and industrial projects is crucial.

The USSR Ecological Fund is to be established to finance ecological strategy. It will be maintained by means of collecting payments from individual citizens and all enterprises and institutions in the country for the use of resources. It goes without saying that such payments will be differentiated depending on region and type of enterprise.

I hope that all these measures will do a great deal to ameliorate the ecological situation in the country.

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