

Geography in the News™

Neal G.
Lineback



RUSSIA'S POPULATION COLLAPSE

Russia's rapid population decline is a surprising footnote to the Soviet Union's 1991 devolution. The declining population and slide toward economic collapse threatens the balance of global politics. What's happening to this world power?

Up until 12 years ago, Russia was the predominant power within the Soviet Union, which was on par with the United States. The break-up of the Soviet Union, however, began Russia's steep economic slide with numerous repercussions.

Russia's population is declining rapidly, according to a recent article in *Parade Magazine* (Dec. 15, 2002), titled "Russia on the Ropes?" The Russian population's poor health and migration are draining the country of its best and brightest minds. The population's negative rate of natural increase (-0.7 percent) is typical of what is happening all across Eastern Europe.

Most Russians reside within the Russian Triangle. The Triangle extends from the Baltic Sea southward to the Black Sea and eastward to near Lake Baikal. This includes most of the cultivated portion of the country. North of the Triangle, Siberia and the Northern Lands are lightly populated because agriculture is not possible.

Russia's estimated 2000 population was 146 million, only 53 percent as large as the U.S. population (275 million). With a huge territory of 6.6 mil-

lion square miles, its population density is only 22 people per square mile (8 per sq. km.), compared to the United States with 76 per square mile (30 per sq. km.).

Russia's 1999 Gross National Income in Purchasing Power Parity per capita (GNI PPP in US\$) was only \$8,390. In comparison, Romania's was \$5,970, China's \$3,550 and the United States' \$31,910 (Population Reference Bureau, 2001).

The sources of Russia's population and economic collapse are rooted in the Soviet Union's socialist system, which was tainted by poor political management and graft. With most means of production controlled by the Soviet government, its breakup left at least two generations of Russian without an understanding of, or the means for private enterprise. The Soviet devolution left the majority of Russia's population destitute almost overnight.

Only 33 percent of Russia's children are born healthy and only 10 percent of its teenage children are healthy, according to *Parade Magazine* (Dec. 15, 2002). Tuberculosis is epidemic and alcoholism and drug abuse are national tragedies. Five percent of the population could be infected with HIV-AIDS in six years, potentially halving the population by 2050.

Intertwined with health are rising prices, there is an urban housing shortage and an increasing gap between rich and poor. A *Journal Wire Report* (Dec. 20, 2002) noted that President Vladimir Putin recently faced a barrage of questions when he held his second televised question-and-answer session from the Kremlin. Although he tried to console the public about the country's economic future, distressed citizens sent him 1.4 million questions by phone and Internet.

Impoverished pensioners left with reduced or nonexistent government pensions after the Soviet collapse asked, "How can we go on living like this?"

Some who saw the Russians as our Cold War enemy prior to 1991 may take satisfaction in seeing the "Russian Bear" brought to its knees. But there can be no satisfaction in this massive scale of human suffering.

The United States has increasingly found Russia on its side in global politics. The implications of Russia's internal problems on its role as a world power bear watching.

And that's *Geography in the News*. January 24, 2003. #660.

(The author is a Geography Professor at Appalachian State University, Boone, NC.)

Russia's Population

