

A Dying Population

The nation is succumbing to a low birthrate, disease and despair. Leaders see the trend as a security threat.

By Kim Murphy, Times Staff Writer
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Welcome to Kstinovo, population one.

Antonina Makarova, 78, spends her days watching news and soap operas in her peeling wooden dacha, the only inhabited structure in two lanes of sagging cottages that once were a village. Her nearest neighbor, 80-year-old Maria Belkova, lives in adjacent Sosnovitsy, population two. But she can't hear anymore, and all in all, Makarova finds the television better company.

"All the houses here were filled with people. There was a cheese factory. But now everyone else has died. God has taken care of them, and he's still making me suffer," Makarova said. "Even the thieves have disappeared."

The Tver region, along the upper reaches of the Volga River 130 miles north of Moscow, is dotted with more than 1,400 villages such as Kstinovo labeled *nezhiloye* — depopulated. Since 1989, the number of people here has shrunk by about 250,000 to about 1.4 million, with deaths outnumbering births more than 2 to 1.

The Tver region is far from unusual in this country.

Russia is rapidly losing population. Its people are succumbing to one of the world's fastest-growing AIDS epidemics, resurgent tuberculosis, rampant cardiovascular disease, alcohol and drug abuse, smoking, suicide and the lethal effects of unchecked industrial pollution.

In addition, abortions outpaced births last year by more than 100,000. An estimated 10 million Russians of reproductive age are sterile because of botched abortions or poor health. The public healthcare system is collapsing. And many parents in more prosperous urban areas say they can't afford homes large enough for the number of children they'd like to have.

The former Soviet Union, with almost 300 million people, was the world's third-most populous country, behind China and India. Slightly more than half of its citizens lived in Russia. The country has lost the equivalent of a city of 700,000 people every year since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, only partially offset by an influx of people from other former Soviet republics.

A country that sprawls across one-eighth of the globe is now home to 142 million people.

The losses have been disproportionately male. At the height of its power, the Soviet Union's people lived almost as long as Americans. But now, the average Russian man can expect to live about 59 years, 16 years less than an American man and 14 less than a Russian woman.

Sergei Mironov, chairman of the upper house of Russia's parliament, said last year that if the trend didn't change, the population would fall to 52 million by 2080.

"There will no longer be a great Russia," he said. "It will be torn apart piece by piece, and finally cease to exist."

That may be an overstatement, but there are serious questions about whether Russia will be able to hold on to its lands along the border with China or field an army, let alone a workforce to support the ill and the elderly.

The government, flush with revenue from record prices for the country's oil exports, has started to respond. President Vladimir V. Putin this year pledged payments of \$111 a month to mothers who elected to have a second child, plus a nest egg of \$9,260 to be used for education, a mortgage or pensions. He also called for renewed efforts to attract ethnic Russians still living in the former Soviet republics.

"Russia has a huge territory, the largest territory in the world," Putin said. "If the situation remains unchanged, there will simply be no one to protect it."

'This Infection in Us'

The economic earthquake of Russia's transition from communism to capitalism plunged tens of millions into poverty overnight and changed the value systems upon which many had planned their lives.

A small minority, mostly in urban centers such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, were able to exploit the absence of rules in the chaotic 1990s to become fabulously wealthy. But such a profound social transition, coming at the end of a century of war, revolution and ruthless social experimentation, condemned a great many more to a deep malaise.

Those who lost out have proved susceptible to drinking, smoking and other habits that killed millions of Russians even in the best of times. In more extreme cases, they kill themselves.

The suicide rate jumped nearly 50% during the 1990s; half a million people killed themselves from 1995 through 2003. Russians fling themselves from balconies, slash their wrists or simply walk out in the snow on a bitter night. Russia's suicide rate, at about 36 per 100,000 people, is second only to that of Lithuania, according to the Serbsky National Research Center for Social and Forensic Psychiatry. In

some remote areas of Russia, the rate exceeds 100 per 100,000.

Nikolai Zavada, a 21-year-old musician who goes by the name Serial Self-Killer, posted a song on <http://www.mysuicide.ru>, a well-known website that was later shut down because of public pressure:

I'm going out.

And it doesn't matter whether it's up or down.

Or who's holding your hand, an angel or otherwise....

The cold has worn me out.

"People have a lack of hope," Zavada said in an interview. "That all their efforts are in vain. And also, they have a feeling of eternal emptiness."

Russia's transformation from a society that guaranteed employment means that millions of people, especially in the provinces, "have become surplus; they do not have a place in the current economy," said Andrei Demin, president of the Russian Public Health Assn., a nongovernmental advocacy group.

"They do not protest openly. They protest inside," he said. "And the most extreme form of protest is just dying."

Others tried to adapt, and still failed. Birthrates declined, not only because couples such as those elsewhere in Europe elected to have fewer children, but because they couldn't afford to have large families.

Roman Kiptenko, 35, has a family, his health and two university degrees, but his life is turning out far differently than he had imagined. The national parks institute where he worked disintegrated in the Soviet collapse. He now works as a technical director in a friend's advertising company in Moscow. But the firm is small and its future uncertain. His wife was laid off last spring from her job as a dental office manager.

Kiptenko has begun to realize that they might never do better than the \$330-a-month apartment — a cramped living room adjoining a tiny kitchen — where they live with their 10-year-old daughter. Kiptenko and his wife sleep on a pullout sofa. Their daughter's bed in the corner seats guests by day, her toys stacked neatly to one side. Clothing is stacked in cupboards next to Kiptenko's computer.

"At first, situations would come up when my wife would talk about wanting another child," he said. "But gradually, she stopped raising those questions."

Alexei Chaika, another Moscow resident, blamed the heart attack he suffered at 27 on stress from his job as a transportation manager for a construction company. Recovering at a clinic in the capital, he said he had worked every day until 11 p.m., and every weekend for months on end, all for a salary of \$525 a month.

"At work, the tension is very high, and you have to quarrel with people," he said. "Somebody hits me on the back of my head; I hit someone lower than me; he hits somebody else."

Although the problems are surfacing in the post-Soviet period, some argue that their cause can be found in communism's willful destruction of generations of the country's most capable and adaptable people.

"Seventy-five years of Bolshevik life in this country led to the formation of a tribe of people which was cultivated to listen to orders, and fulfill them," said Alexander Gorelik, a St. Petersburg physician. Stalinism, he said, aimed for "the planned and gradual physical destruction of the most moral, the most creative group of the population."

"There is such a thing as a will for life. And the whole trouble is that the Russian public in general, and especially the male population, has a big deficiency in this area."

Vyacheslav Pushkarev, a Russian Orthodox priest who oversees several congregations in Siberian villages now too small to have a full-time cleric, said the Soviet system destroyed bodies and spirits in equal proportion.

"We are left with this infection in us, this sickness of degradation in everything around us because we were all part of it," he said. "We're living in a huge bowl here, and we're all getting boiled together."

Drowning in Alcohol

Many a Russian village that once might have been the subject of an idyllic painting of ruddy-cheeked peasants leading tired horses through the fields are now part of a twilight world of illness, drunkenness and stunning lethargy.

Moscow has the second-largest concentration of billionaires in the world. But one-fifth of all Russians live on less than \$38 a month, many of them in the countryside. The collapse of collective farming and the failure to replace it with viable private agriculture has left thousands of villages in limbo, their residents living on minuscule government stipends, odd jobs, kitchen gardens — and vodka.

There is a long history of alcohol abuse in Russia. Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev tried to tackle the problem 20 years ago by limiting the production and distribution of

liquor. Male life expectancy increased three years.

But consumption levels shot back up as soon as the controls were eased. The average Russian drinks five gallons of pure alcohol a year, causing an estimated 900,000 deaths over the last decade from acute alcohol poisoning, fights and accidents, according to figures released by Tatyana Yakovleva, head of the Russian parliament's healthcare committee. Others suffer permanent brain damage or liver damage from homemade alcohol.

"People drink, and they drink a lot, and they drink for a long time, because they can't help but drink," said Yuliya Kovgan, 25, her voice trembling as she struggled to sit without falling over in a potato field on the edge of Ryazanovshchina, a Siberian village northeast of Irkutsk.

She was surrounded by a few dozen seed potatoes, an empty shot glass, a bottle of industrial-grade alcohol and her reeling brother, an unemployed roofer. Standing to the side in an old housecoat was Larisa Berezhnaya, her 53-year-old mother, tapping a grimy foot and affecting a disdainful air; it became apparent that she was drunk too.

"This is our life; we call it normal. We plant potatoes, we dig them out, and that's it," Berezhnaya shrugged. "There's nothing for people here."

A few decades ago, Ryazanovshchina was a collective farm center with thriving livestock operations and about twice its current population. Men would go into the forests to fell timber all summer and the women would celebrate their homecoming with samovars of tea in the street. But without the support of the Soviet state, one by one the farms failed.

Last winter, villagers say, someone burned down a neighbor's hay shed when she wouldn't give a bottle on credit. In a nearby town, a drunk grandmother threw a crying infant out the window of her fifth-floor apartment. Pushkarev, the regional archpriest, confided that the church in nearby Tikhonovka was not functioning because "the priest is on a drunken rampage."

Olga Kolotygina, 36, one of several women who have assumed leadership of the Ryazanovshchina town council, estimates that no more than half a dozen men among the village's 160 people are sober and "trying to improve their lives."

Much more typical is the filthy two-room shack at the end of a street where Lyudmila Borisova, 16, is looking after her three younger siblings. Her mother moved to the next town with her boyfriend, leaving the children behind.

While Borisova earns money by tending cattle in a pasture outside town, her siblings wander the village gathering handouts. They retire each night to a pair of bare mattresses. Borisova says she doesn't blame her mother for leaving, and she'll do the same when she

can.

"There's nothing good here," she said.

AIDS Strikes the Young

It has been five years since Svetlana Glukhova was diagnosed as HIV-positive, but she says she still has no idea whether she needs drug therapy. Doctors at the only AIDS center in her city do not have the necessary laboratory equipment to decide that.

She does know that even when she took her first AIDS test, the sores on the fingers she once used to inject heroin already were failing to heal.

The United Nations says Russia has more people infected with HIV than any other country in Europe, due in part to "extraordinarily large numbers of young people who inject drugs."

But the disease has spread widely through the population, and more than half of all new cases result from heterosexual intercourse. Officially, more than 300,000 Russians are infected with HIV or have AIDS, but the U.N. says the number could easily be much higher.

The problem is not as serious as Africa's. The difference, experts say, is that African birthrates are high enough to replace those who die. Not so in Russia. Compounding the problem, the prevalence of AIDS among young people threatens to add to the population decline by killing them before they can bring a new generation into the world.

Murray Feshbach of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, one of the world's leading experts on Russian health and demographics, said in a study that 80% of Russian AIDS patients are younger than 30. In the West, it's nearly the reverse: 70% are older than 30.

That means 5 million to 10 million Russian teenagers could contract the disease within a few years, federal health officials say. The Russian Military Medical Commission has recorded a twenty-fivefold increase in the number of HIV-positive military conscripts in the last five years, Feshbach said.

"Even optimistically, you're looking at 250,000 deaths a year from AIDS alone in 2020, and pessimistically, we're talking about 650,000 a year," Feshbach said.

Deaths among adults between the ages of 25 and 49 would be particularly devastating, he said.

The Russian government pledged in 1995 to provide free AIDS treatment. But more than a decade later, only about 5,000 people are getting antiretroviral drug therapy.

Putin announced a twentyfold increase in funding this year, providing \$120 million for the treatment of perhaps 15,000 AIDS patients.

A coalition of nongovernmental organizations known as the Global Fund is allocating another \$120 million to treat as many as 50,000 additional patients through 2010.

But the World Health Organization said in June that shortages in AIDS drugs had developed in several regions, apparently resulting in interruptions in treatment and possibly some deaths.

Akrom A. Eltom, the agency's AIDS program leader in Moscow, said patients who had been coaxed with great difficulty into a healthcare system that strongly stigmatized them might not return, endangering their health and encouraging the development of drug-resistant strains of the disease.

Glukhova said AIDS patients in the city of Tula, the arms manufacturing center 112 miles southwest of Moscow where she lives, would be ostracized if they went public. She said she wouldn't dare talk to Russian news media without covering her face.

"If I uncover my face, I will be eaten alive at the bus stop tomorrow," she said in an interview. "I will lose my job, without any doubt."

Glukhova headed a support network of fellow HIV patients in Tula until international funds ran out in 2004. She said doctors told her they estimated that 1,000 people in Tula — population 600,000 — needed drug therapy for AIDS, but only 10 were getting it — and only partial treatment at that.

"When I asked the doctors in the AIDS center about this therapy, they just shrugged their shoulders. Because when I told them I heard there are three drugs you're supposed to take, they had a notion of what I was talking about, but they don't have access to it. The maximum they can offer you is just one drug," Glukhova said.

Sitting in a dimly lighted cafe that doubles as a dance hall on Saturday nights, Glukhova wiped away tears and said she was watching her friends slowly die.

"One person I know, he was trying to stifle all his pangs by injecting and injecting himself with drugs. He couldn't even get up from his bed anymore, but he continued to call his friends and ask for more drugs," she said.

"When I said to him, 'Let me take you to the hospital, let me try to get something for you,'

he waved me away.

"Some people have such moments of despair that they just don't have the guts to struggle for their life anymore."

Male mortality

The average Russian man lives to about 59 and is much more likely to die before 60 than men in other industrialized nations.

	Life expectancy at birth (2004)	Probability of males dying between 15 and 60
Japan	79	9.2%
Australia	78	8.6
Germany	76	11.2
U.S.	75	13.7
Mexico	72	16.1
China	70	15.8
Lebanon	68	19.8
Russia	59	48.5
Afghanistan	42	50.9
Sierra Leone	37	57.9
Zimbabwe	37	85.7

Source: World Bank. Graphics reporting by Julie Sheer

For the Sick, No Place to Turn

The population decline can be blamed in part on the broken-down healthcare system. If you're seriously ill, only serious money can help.

By Kim Murphy, Times Staff Writer
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He was 40 when he had his first heart surgery, a quadruple bypass to correct damage caused by the swirling poisons of the ancient copper smelter where he worked. But that was a decade ago, when the decrepit Russian healthcare system still provided low-cost care to those who could wait.

Now, Mikhail Lychmanyuk has been told he will die unless he has a second heart operation. This time, it will cost him \$5,000.

It might as well be \$1 million.

"I'll wait for the end," he said, sitting in an empty playground in this desolate industrial

town about 1,000 miles east of Moscow. "What can I do without money? Wait for the end."

Russia's steep population decline in the 15 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union has many causes, but the end of the Soviet healthcare system and the debut of free-market medicine have added to the slide.

In the new Russia, millions are born sick. Many succumb to poisons in the air and water around them, or are slowly killed by alcohol, cigarettes or stress. Most are too poor to buy back their health.

The overwhelmed healthcare system can't help much. Although medical care still is nominally free, in practice all but the most basic services are available only to those able to pay hefty fees.

Bribes, the cost of superior treatment even in the Soviet era, are a feature of nearly every successful medical transaction. They can ensure that a patient will be admitted to a decent hospital and increase the chances that a doctor will be diligent.

For the well-off — mostly foreigners and those who struck it rich in Russia's transition from communism — there are gleaming "European medical centers" with modern equipment and foreign-trained physicians who charge \$100 a visit. Everyone else is relegated to foul-smelling infirmaries with stained sheets, no food and a dearth of equipment as basic as a functioning X-ray machine. The doctors work for as little as \$140 a month.

The Scientific Center of Children's Health, a branch of the Russian Academy of Medical Sciences, estimates that 45% of Russian children are born with "health deviations," including problems of the central nervous system, faulty hearts, malformed urinary tracts and low birth weight.

Heart disease and strokes among those younger than 40 have increased by as much as 36% in the last five years, said Yevgeny Chazov, who heads the Russian Cardiological Center in Moscow and was personal physician to most of the Soviet leaders since the Leonid I. Brezhnev era.

Russian President Vladimir V. Putin has responded to the problem, pushing healthcare to the top of the nation's priorities. This year, his government is spending \$24.6 billion to more than quadruple some doctors' salaries, build hospitals, buy ambulances and equipment, pay for more surgeries, vaccinations and AIDS treatment, and subsidize medicines for children and pregnant women.

"It finally took Putin himself to understand what was happening," said Murray Feshbach of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, who has long

studied health and demographics in Russia. "But it's very late."

Breathing Poison

Nowhere is the healthcare crisis more pronounced than in Karabash and other poisoned cities of the Soviet-era industrial belt. A legacy of chemical and heavy metal emissions and radiation leaks, including one worse than Chernobyl, earned the Karabash region a reputation in the 1990s as the most polluted spot on Earth.

The looming smokestack of Karabash's blister-copper smelter has been venting as much as 180 tons of sulfur dioxide and metal particulates into the air annually since 1910, before the Bolsheviks came to power.

Lychmanyuk knew he was slowly killing himself every time he stepped inside the smelter oven, where it was too stifling to even wear a gas mask.

"The stove is stopped for 24 hours. It gets a little cooler, and you go inside and start cleaning," he recalled. "But five minutes in there, and your clothes and felt boots start catching fire."

He started having pains in his chest and trouble breathing. His bypass surgery alleviated the problem for a while.

Outside the smelter, the particles spewed from what residents call "the torch" have settled over every yard, rooftop and doorstep for a mile or more. The hillside along the road into town, once a dense forest, is bare earth. Hardly a blade of grass grows in the yards near the smelter.

By 2000, deaths in Karabash were exceeding births 3.5 to 1. Although Karabash is subject to the same poverty and social ills as the rest of the country, residents have no doubt about why they're dying.

"No one in this town isn't sick. Not a single one. If they don't have bronchitis, they have problems with their stomach. If it's not the stomach, it's the heart," said Alevtina Nazarova, 40. "It's all because of the gas. You walk in the street, you come home and you cough like a madman."

Natalya Sharando, the chief physician at Karabash City Hospital, said she saw an endless parade of patients with ulcers, breathing problems, cancers and heart disease.

One of them was Anatoly Fomin. When the hospital could no longer treat his lung cancer, Irina Bespalova took her 56-year-old brother home to die.

At first glance, it appeared that no one was in his small room. But Bespalova moved a

jacket to reveal Fomin huddled in a fetal position. "No, it's cold," he whimpered, clutching at the jacket, as he lay on a metal bed frame. She had had the mattress removed, she said, because there was no running water to keep him clean.

Sharando noted that "three or four generations have grown up breathing this gas and smoke."

"That's why, even if you employ very intensive health improvement measures ... they will not bring any positive results," she said.

The environmental problems caused by the plant became so apparent that the Soviet government shut it down in 1990. Everyone expected massive infusions of aid to address the pollution and help residents find new jobs. But nothing happened.

When the plant reopened in 1997 under private management, hardly anyone objected. Recently, a filter was installed that significantly reduced plant emissions.

Still, in June 2004, an accidental discharge sent a poisonous cloud over the town, killing 250 acres of forest and 600 private gardens and yards. Sulfates, iron, zinc and copper have been measured in the groundwater at levels as high as 115 times the legal limits.

"We lived eight years when the plant wasn't functioning," Sharando said. "The ecology started to pick up, the air was fresher. Trees started to grow on the mountains. It was a good period, but it was also a depression. There were no salaries, people were unemployed. And our town was faced with a dilemma: Either we need to continue breathing the gas, or have no chance of any kind of passable life.

"We decided in favor of the gas."

The Smallest Victims

In a dim living room in Chechnya, a small shape on the sofa was distinguishable mostly by cries, low moans and occasional sharp shrieks. The toddler clenched and unclenched his tiny fists, legs trembling like a bird's wings.

"His spine and his head hurt badly," said Svetlana Shaipova, a nurse and friend of 2-year-old Askhab Dzhamulayev's family, "but his mother didn't want to keep him drugged asleep all the time with painkillers."

A year ago, Askhab was toddling energetically around the apartment and starting to talk. "Mama." "Give." "Bring." Then one day, he developed a fever and cramps in his legs. That was followed by a seizure, then a coma. When he awoke, he was partially paralyzed, and doctors don't know why.

Even when Russians can get a foot in the door of the healthcare system, the result often is unsatisfactory. Doctors came up with one diagnosis after another for Askhab: encephalitis, meningitis. None of them have been certain.

The family traveled to the nearby city of Makhachkala for a better hospital, but there weren't enough diagnostic instruments available to doctors there either.

Just go home, they said. Askhab probably would live, in pain and barely functioning, for 20 to 30 years.

But they suggested an alternative.

" 'Why don't you think of something else?' " the child's grandmother, Leila Dzhamulayeva, recalled a doctor telling her. " 'Why don't you put him to sleep? That would be better for him, and for you.' "

Another Chechen mother pushed for answers all the way to Moscow. Rossita Magomedova of Grozny, a 31-year-old psychology teacher, didn't believe the doctors who said the mysterious swelling in the jaw of her 3-year-old son, Anzor, was a complication from the mumps.

She drove him to the neighboring republic of North Ossetia, where she had to fight to get a doctor to see her son. He said the child had a tumor and needed immediate surgery.

"I'm holding my son in my arms," Magomedova said. "The doctor told us every second counts, and he had no time for anesthetic. So we open his mouth, and without any anesthesia at all the doctor takes a pair of scissors from the bottle and snips, snips on the tumor. He was cutting it like a piece of meat.

"And the horrible thing is, you have to trust this doctor, not with your own life, no, but with the life of your child."

When the tumor was found to be malignant, Magomedova bundled Anzor in blankets and flew with him to the best children's hospital in Moscow. She headed straight to the office of the deputy chief physician.

"I put Anzor on the table. I said, 'A doctor like you gave him three days to live, and this is the third day. Let's watch him die.' He immediately called in another doctor, and they admitted him."

The hospital gave Anzor top-flight medical care: chemotherapy and enough radiation treatment to shrink the tumor. But not long after the boy was admitted, a new tumor was detected in his belly.

Week by week, Magomedova watched her son's life dim like dusk, flickering out on May 6.

Rampant Tuberculosis

The healthcare crisis that accompanies Russia's population decline is a fact of life not only in far-flung regions and rural areas, but also in major cities. And it affects the middle class as well as the poor.

The 8.8 million people who ride the Moscow subway system every day are exposed to nearly 1 1/2 times the maximum safe level of carbon monoxide and other dangerous gases, the government reported.

An outbreak of hepatitis A traced to bad beer hospitalized 600 people in the Tver region last summer, and about 500 others were sickened with the same illness in November in Russia's third-largest city, Nizhny Novgorod. Cases of hepatitis A and typhoid fever climbed 20% in the first half of 2004, the Health Ministry reported.

But neither disease is as worrisome to health officials outside Russia as the alarming growth of AIDS and tuberculosis, a common infection associated with AIDS.

Russia and its neighboring former Soviet republics are experiencing the fastest-growing epidemics of AIDS and TB in Europe. Russia is seeing at least 120,000 new tuberculosis cases a year, 10 times the number in the United States, which has double the population. Last year, about 32,000 Russians died of the disease.

Tuberculosis, unlike AIDS, can be spread through casual contact with people who have compromised immune systems, sparking fears that Russia could become an "epidemiological pump" for spreading the disease to the rest of Europe and to North America.

"The worse off you are, the more likely you are to have tuberculosis," said Mikhail Perelman, director of Moscow's Phthisio-Pulmonary Institute, once a hospital for Napoleon's troops. Its dark, arched hallways are haunted by shuffling tuberculosis patients, many of them quarantined for months on end.

Tuberculosis has flourished in the airless confines of Russia's severely crowded prisons, and it seeps into the general population with the tens of thousands of convicts released each year. In a growing number of cases, the disease has mutated beyond the reach of drugs commonly used to treat it.

Russia has accepted international help to begin a serious fight, developing aggressive programs to make sure patients complete their treatment. In addition, \$480 million a year has been allocated for expensive "second-line" treatment for the estimated 30,000 cases

of drug-resistant TB.

But as with those who have AIDS, many TB patients outside Moscow have no access to the latest drugs.

Sergei Shelkovnikov, a 34-year-old fuel engineer who works for TNK-BP, British Petroleum's joint venture in Russia, was spending three months in the Moscow institute for treatment of drug-resistant tuberculosis. He thinks he caught it on the subway.

"All I know is, I had a persistent cough. It sounded like bronchitis to me," he said. "It lasted for about a month, and when I went to the doctor, a lung X-ray revealed I had tuberculosis."

Studies have shown that stress and general ill health increase susceptibility to tuberculosis. People may be exposed repeatedly but don't catch it until their resistance breaks down.

Galina Sokolova, chief physician at the Phthisio-Pulmonary Institute, cited the case of a well-educated 43-year-old man with two small children. When his wife died of cancer, he had to work as a security guard, and eventually came down with tuberculosis.

"This happens time after time," Sokolova said. "A state-owned enterprise is closed down. People lose their jobs. And they become our patients."

Crumbling Hospitals

The office of the head of neurosurgery at St. Petersburg's City Hospital 23 is at the end of a medieval-looking corridor with bare wires and peeling paint. Stuffing and springs are falling out of a sofa in the corner.

Doctors drink tea and chain-smoke at a tiny table etched with scratches. Their ancient electroencephalogram machine looks like something out of a horror movie.

Although tuberculosis and AIDS are becoming front-line priorities for the healthcare system, hundreds of hospitals continue to languish.

Doctors struggle with poorly equipped laboratories. Expensive equipment donated by foreign aid organizations may have broken down. There is no money to fix it, or the money budgeted for repairs has evaporated in the web of corruption that strangles public spending across the country.

"The CAT scanner we have at our hospital has not been working for a year — for a whole year," said Alexander Naryshkin, head of neurosurgery. Hospital management said that it provided \$80,000 to buy replacement parts for the scanner, which served an entire district of the city, but the money disappeared.

"So this \$1-million piece of equipment is standing useless, and nobody seems to care," Naryshkin said.

The doctors work with surgical instruments that are 20 to 30 years old. Naryshkin, who makes \$350 a month, said he and his colleagues pooled their money to buy a piece of equipment to close blood vessels during brain surgery after hospital management refused to make the purchase.

Most serious neurosurgery cases are transferred to other hospitals, but if there is an emergency or patients can't afford to go elsewhere, they end up at City Hospital 23. The death rate for brain surgery patients here has climbed from about 40%, when the hospital had a well-functioning neurological intensive care unit, to about 80%.

Twice during one recent month, Naryshkin lost patients who needed surgeries because the St. Petersburg blood bank was empty, and there were no relatives to serve as donors.

He has lost others, he said, because their families couldn't buy the \$35-a-day medicines essential to post-surgical survival.

"If a patient has relatives who are able to afford buying the medicines, then this patient has more chance to recover," he said. "If not, naturally, the chances of surviving a very hard skull trauma are close to zero."

A Legal Remedy?

Slowly, the court system and patient advocacy groups are gaining a foothold in healthcare.

In Moscow, the Patients' Protection Assn. is gathering data on hospitals and preparing to distribute on the Internet a list of hospitals that should be avoided.

In St. Petersburg, bookkeeper Irina Vladimirova recently won one of the first major medical malpractice judgments in Russia. She was awarded about \$7,100 in a case against the maternity hospital where she delivered a son who died two weeks later.

Hospital officials refused to discuss the case. But Vladimirova's version resembles other horror stories told by patients of Russian hospitals.

Vladimirova said she had started bleeding and suffering severe abdominal pains after a routine vaginal examination shortly before her due date, but waited all day and night at the hospital to be examined again.

By the next morning, Vladimirova said, she was "screaming with pain" and bleeding on

the floor, but was told by doctors that she had to wait. Doctors apparently believed she was suffering normal labor pains, despite the bleeding, she said.

She recalled that the baby stopped kicking. She thinks she must have nearly passed out.

Suddenly, the doctors became "very busy" around her, listening for a fetal heartbeat. They gave her several injections to induce labor. It was too late.

Danila Vladimirov died 13 days later, joining the growing population of the cemetery outside the city.

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The Future Looks a Lot More Diverse

Minority populations are growing rapidly. Ethnic Russians fret over their identity and their power.

By Kim Murphy, Times Staff Writer

In a room once used for baptisms, the Russian Orthodox matrons of St. Michael the Archangel Church have erected plywood walls and adorned them with icons. The sanctuary next door suffered bomb damage in Chechnya's war and is slowly being rebuilt. But for whom?

Hardly anyone shows up anymore.

Slavic Russia absorbed dozens of non-Slavic ethnic groups as it expanded along its vast southern and eastern fringes. Among them were Chechens, who, like many others, were given nominal autonomy and retained their language and religious identity. But Moscow left no doubt that it was in charge, and it often marginalized the local population.

Now, more than a decade of war has driven most of the fair-skinned ethnic Russians out of Chechnya's capital. In their place are the predominantly Muslim and dark-featured Chechens, who have reclaimed the city.

"You won't find any young Russians here. None," said Tatiana Kaverina, 48, an ethnic Russian who has stayed in Chechnya because she can't find anyplace else to live. "Soon,

there will be no Russians."

Added Raisa Skachidubova, a retired literature teacher: "You get on a bus and you're like a white crow among a dark flock."

Russia's post-Soviet population implosion is mainly the result of an alarming increase in deaths and a decline in the birthrate among ethnic Russians, who still make up about 80% of the country.

But as alcohol, cigarettes, pollution, stress, suicide and resurgent diseases contribute to Russian deaths, minority populations are growing rapidly. Many of these smaller groups, particularly Chechens and other Muslims in the Caucasus region, have the country's highest birthrates.

Long accustomed to unquestioned dominance, ethnic Russians are being forced to confront a multiethnic future and significant problems controlling sensitive border regions. Only 12 years ago, they made up more than 60% of Grozny's population; now they account for barely 4%.

And as their population and power diminish in the Caucasus, ethnic Russians are also deserting the most remote stretches of the far east, to be replaced in urban areas near the frontier by hundreds of thousands of immigrants from China.

U.S. experts worry that a politically weak and physically unhealthy Russia could destabilize Europe, making it harder to fight terrorism and possibly opening the gates to a regional pandemic.

Even now, said Duke University political scientist Jerry Hough, the toll from the country's demographic crash is more serious than Stalin's purges or the Darfur crisis in the African nation of Sudan. But there is little that U.S. and European policymakers can do except watch the crisis unfold.

"What, exactly, would [people] have the United States — or for that matter, human rights groups — actually do about Russian life expectancy?" said Thomas Nichols, a professor at the U.S. Naval War College. "Send troops to Russia to slap cigarettes and vodka bottles out of the hands of young men?"

An Identity Crisis

Russia's population evolution is in some ways similar to that of Western European countries. Italians, Spaniards and other nationalities have birthrates that are among the lowest in the world. The biggest difference is the rate at which ethnic Russians are dying, and the failure of the nation's majority, even in comparison with countries struggling to assimilate prolific immigrant populations, to come to terms with a multiethnic future.

Today's Russia includes seven predominantly Muslim regions. Ivan the Terrible conquered the first of them in the 16th century; the final pieces were small republics in the Caucasus with complicated names such as Ingushetia, Chechnya, Karachayevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan — the very places where Moscow now is battling Islamic insurrections.

Russian identity still is primarily cultural, remaining closely linked to the Russian language and the Orthodox Church. And the overall proportion of ethnic Russians has slipped only slightly, shrinking from 83% of the population to 79.8% over the last decade.

Demographic trends suggest that the decrease is likely to continue. Although most experts are skeptical, a former U.S. government expert on Russian nationalities recently predicted that Russia would have a Muslim majority within 30 years.

In addition to its own Muslim population, Russia is home to an estimated 10 million illegal immigrant workers from the largely Muslim former Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The city of Moscow has swelled to 10.4 million people, and one-fifth of them are Muslims. The Russian capital has the largest Muslim population of any city in Europe.

The Future Looks a Lot More Diverse

Along Moscow's wide boulevards, minarets rise next to the onion domes of Russian Orthodox churches. Across the country, there are 8,000 mosques, up from 300 in 1991, when Soviet strictures on religious observance were lifted. Markets more often than not are run by immigrants from Azerbaijan. Construction sites would come to a halt if not for low-paid workers from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Russian authorities have started a campaign to convince a nation historically hostile to foreign migration that its economic development, and perhaps its survival, depends on its opening its doors.

The Kremlin in July announced that it would try to attract as many as 1 million Russian-speaking immigrants from former Soviet republics by offering citizenship and other benefits, particularly to those willing to settle in underpopulated regions. The government also has proposed legalizing 1 million or more migrant workers, many of whom undoubtedly will be Muslim.

President Vladimir V. Putin, realizing that the country's survival is at stake, has exhorted the public to embrace a multicultural society. He has stepped up prosecutions for hate crimes. Recently, he launched a bid for Russia to join the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the premier political league of Muslim nations.

"Russia must be for Russians, Tatars, Mordovians, Ossetians, Jews, Chechens, for all our peoples and for the entire Russian nation," Vladislav Y. Surkov, the Kremlin's top political aide, told students in February.

The response in some quarters has been violent. About 50 Asians, blacks and other minorities died in racially motivated attacks across the nation last year, including a 9-year-old African Russian girl who was stabbed in St. Petersburg in March.

In August, riots broke out in an industrial backwater town of 35,000 people near the Finnish border after a bar fight between ethnic Russians and Chechen migrants left two Russians dead.

Soon after, an estimated 2,000 Russians turned out at a rally to complain that corrupt officials in Kondopoga were "selling our town to aliens," a reference to the estimated 200 Chechens who have a large presence in markets.

After the rally, a mob set fire to the restaurant where the fight occurred, as well as to the central produce market and several kiosks, stores and cars owned by immigrants.

Exodus in the Caucasus

Russia has applied its military and political might for more than 180 years to secure the largely Muslim border areas of the Caucasus region; wars waged by czarist troops there in the early 19th century are among the cornerstones of Russian literature. It is one of the country's deepest ironies that despite the effort, there are few ethnic Russians left in the region and its future is again in question.

Chechnya's demographic picture is changing, in large part because of the casualties and ethnic separation resulting from two wars. Researchers think as many as 55,000 civilians have been killed, 35,000 of them ethnic Russians.

But Chechnya's 5,800 square miles of shell-pocked towns, looted factories and scarred villages also illustrate forces that will help determine Russia's future.

Birthrates in the patchwork of republics of the North Caucasus are substantially higher than those in urban Slavic Russia. Whereas the old imperial capital, St. Petersburg, last year had a birthrate of 8.57 per 1,000 population, the rate in Chechnya was 25 per 1,000. In Dagestan, it was 16; in Ingushetia, 14.

The shift in Chechnya's demographics comes amid a high infant-mortality rate caused by poverty, the collapsing healthcare system and the aftermath of the Chechen war. Overall, the ethnic Russian population has decreased by about 300,000 over the last decade, slipping from 27% of the republic's population to less than 4%.

Migrants from the North Caucasus and neighboring Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union in Central Asia are also spreading north. They are rapidly expanding into traditionally ethnic Russian cities such as Astrakhan, Volgograd, Rostov, Stavropol, Krasnodar and beyond.

Analysts have warned that ethnic stratification along Russia's borders could induce a breakup of the country into ethnic enclaves. Although the point is debatable, the worry clearly has been aggravated by the demographic shift. Putin has encouraged ethnic Russians to resettle in the northern Caucasus.

The exodus, he said, "means a loss of a qualified labor force, and what is worse, the art of living together is getting lost too."

Ingushetia, a predominantly Muslim region adjoining Chechnya, has seen its Russian population drop to 4% from 15% over the last 10 years. Spokesman Issa Merzhoyev quoted the president of the republic, Murat Zyazikov, as saying the departure of the Russians represented a "road to nowhere."

The Future Looks a Lot More Diverse

The republic has allocated \$175,000 a year to help Russian families return and is building a Russian Orthodox church in one village. Last year, there were 800 returnees.

Alexander Zhilin, an ethnic Russian who is governor of the Astrakhan region on the Caspian Sea, said ethnic Russians there were not having children. However, his region is one of many experiencing a large influx of Chechens and Central Asians.

"The Muslim component is growing, and all the others have a decreased birthrate," he said. "And if we don't give birth to more children, in 50 years there will be nothing left of us."

Siberia's Changing Face

To fly across Asiatic Russia today is to look down on a carpet of uninterrupted forest and taiga, near-empty villages and rusting, abandoned factories sprinkled with a few oil and mining boom towns. The Magadan region on the Sea of Okhotsk lost slightly more than half its population from 1989 to 2002; Chukotka, in the far northeast, lost two-thirds.

Authorities have nearly given up trying to keep the most frigid, remote reaches of the country populated. The vast tracts of Siberia and the Arctic have barely one person per square kilometer, one of the lowest population densities on Earth.

Residents who were offered better pay and early retirement by the Soviet government to move there have migrated west and south for better jobs and warmer climates. In many areas, the government is encouraging the moves, realizing that populating remote, icy wastelands of the far north never made economic sense.

But some parts of Siberia still are a priority for Moscow. The country's most productive oil fields are in western Siberia, and some areas have experienced strong growth in population and the economy. The government says it needs 10,000 immigrants to develop the huge new Vankor oil and gas field in the Krasnoyarsk region of southern Siberia.

And there has been serious talk of relocation programs to boost the underpopulated far east, presumably as a bulwark to China.

Today, Chinese workers are tilling Russian farms, and towns such as Khabarovsk are dotted with Chinese restaurants and markets selling imported goods that are far cheaper and more popular than Russian products.

"There are Russian demographers who say, 'Oh, it's all right, let the Chinese populate the far east; we'll have mixed marriages and everything will be fine,' " said Yelena Breyeva, an expert with the Laboratory for Problems of Demographic Development, a branch of an institute associated with the Russian Academy of Sciences.

"But recently, I've been hearing a different idea: If we are in such a hurry to welcome the Chinese and people of other nationalities, is this still Russia, or is it some other country?"

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Mutual Suspicion

Any effort to build a multiethnic future would have to overcome deep suspicions from the Soviet past and the recent wars. In Chechnya, where people have suffered from both, each side accuses the other of "ethnic cleansing" and genocide.

Chechens still recall mass deportations by Stalin in 1944. An estimated 200,000 Chechens died on the way to the steppes of Kazakhstan or during the 13-year exile that followed.

Abukhadzhi Batukayev, 101, was separated from his wife and children when he was put on a packed train to take him into exile.

"They would stop the train and just dump bodies out on the side. There wasn't even room to sleep; people were standing and sitting — they were so jammed together," he said.

"Finally, I met someone who told me that my family, together with the other residents of

that village, were pushed into the horses' stables at the collective farm, and the stables were set on fire. And when people began to jump out through the doors and windows, the soldiers began to shoot at them."

The Future Looks a Lot More Diverse

Today, Chechens say the old policies have taken a more subtle form. They cite the government's failure to rebuild clinics and hospitals, and the continued arrest of young Chechen men as suspected insurgents. Many are never seen again.

"When a unit of federal troops destroys an entire village, shoots young men, hangs people, including children, what can you call this thing? You can't find another term but genocide for it," said Vahit Akayev, a sociology professor at Chechen State University.

Zarema Mukusheva, an activist with a human rights organization in Grozny, rejects that argument. But the result, she said, still is that young people, those who should be building the future of Chechnya, are dying in large numbers.

Ethnic Russians say they are the ones disappearing.

"Chechnya has become, on the whole, a mono-ethnic Muslim state. Russians fled Chechnya and spread like sand all over Russia," said Lidya Grafova, an advocate for ethnic Russians who lost their homes and relatives in Chechnya. "A majority of them today are leading a life from hand to mouth. People lost everything: housing, belongings, and the most important thing they lost was their relatives — people died, very many of them.

"The processes underway in Chechnya can be described by one and only one word: the genocide of the [Russian] people."

But with the war mostly over, some are hanging on. There are several Russian doctors and nurses at hospitals, and a few Russian engineers at the republic oil company. Money has come from Moscow to finish rebuilding the church, said Skachidubova, the Russian retired literature teacher in Grozny.

"There are still Russians living in the city, and on big holidays sometimes we have between 200 and 300 people here. All this room is full, and sometimes people are even standing outside," she said.

"Some of them don't even want to go. After all, their families, their friends, their parents are buried here. This is their home."