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RUSS -- SOVIETS DIG CANAL WITH NUCLEAR EXPLOSIVES

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BY VLADIMIR GEDILAGHINE *1976*

PARIS, NOV. 6 (AFP)--SOVIET SCIENTISTS HAVE JUST COMPLETED AN INITIAL SURVEY DIGGING A CANAL WITH NUCLEAR EXPLOSIVES.

THE CANAL WILL BE USED TO DRAW OFF WATER FROM THE RIVER PECHOR IN THE NORTHERN PART OF THE COUNTRY AND DIVERT IT TOWARDS THE RIVER VOLGA.

WORK IS DUE TO START ON THE CANAL DURING THE 1976-1980 FIVE-YEAR PLAN AND WILL MARK THE BEGINNING OF A VAST PROGRAMME TO DIVERT WATER FROM RIVERS IN THE NORTHERN SOVIET UNION AND SIBERIA TOWARDS THE VOLGA BASIN AND THE ARID ZONES OF CENTRAL ASIA.

THE CANAL WILL LINK THE PECHORA TO THE RIVER KAMA, ONE OF THE VOLGA'S MAJOR TRIBUTARIES. IT WILL BE ABOUT 100 KILOMETRES (ABOUT 60 MILES) LONG.

THE SOVIET UNION FIRST TESTED THE USE OF NUCLEAR EXPLOSIONS FOR THIS KIND OF WORK LAST SPRING.

SCIENTISTS USED A SMALL NUCLEAR CHARGE TO BLAST OUT AN ARTIFICIAL LAKE 100 METRES (YARDS) DEEP AND 500 METRES (YARDS) IN DIAMETER. ONLY A FEW DAYS AFTER THE EXPLOSION THE RADIO-ACTIVITY LEVEL HAD DROPPED TO NORMAL AND THE WATER IN THE LAKE WAS JUDGED SAFE ENOUGH TO BE USED FOR IRRIGATION PURPOSES.

SOVIET MINISTER FOR LAND DEVELOPMENT AND WATER CONSERVATION EVGUENI ALEXEVSKY FIRST BROUGHT UP THE POSSIBILITY OF USING NUCLEAR POWER FOR BLASTING OPERATIONS IN 1975. AT THAT TIME HE PROPOSED THE BUILDING OF A HUGE CANAL 2,500 KILOMETRES (1,600 MILES) LONG LINKING THE MIDDLE STRETCH OF THE RIVER OBI IN WESTERN SIBERIA WITH THE DESERTS OF KAZAKHSTAN.

THE CANAL WOULD MAKE IT POSSIBLE TO DRAW OFF ABOUT SIX PER CENT OF THE WATERS OF THE SIBERIAN RIVERS OBI, YENISSEI AND LENA.

ECONOMICALLY, THE SOVIET UNION NEEDS THE SIBERIAN WATER TO DEVELOP THE DESERTS AND VIRGIN LANDS IN CENTRAL ASIA. AT THE MOMENT 80 PER CENT OF RIVER WATER IN THE SOVIET UNION FLOWS TOWARDS THE NORTH WHILE 82 PER CENT OF THE WATER NEEDED FOR THE COUNTRY'S ECONOMY IS USED IN THE SOUTH.

BUT THERE HAVE BEEN PROTESTS FROM ECOLOGISTS WHO CLAIM THAT THE PLANS TO DIVERT THE SIBERIAN WATERS TO THE SOUTH COULD LEAD TO WHAT THEY CALL "ECOLOGICAL CATASTROPHES."

THE SOVIET PRESS HAS CITED A NUMBER OF EXAMPLES OF IRRIGATION WORKS CARRIED OUT WITHOUT FULL CONSIDERATION FOR THE EFFECTS THEY MIGHT HAVE ON THE ECOLOGY.

IT HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED THAT THE WORK CARRIED OUT OVER RECENT YEARS ON SECTIONS OF THE RIVERS DON AND KUBAN HAVE CONSIDERABLY REDUCED THE FLOW OF WATER INTO THE GULF OF AZOV WHILE STEPPING UP THE FLOW OF SALT WATER INTO THE BLACK SEA. THE WATER IN THE AZOV SEA HAS BEEN AFFECTED TO SUCH AN EXTENT THAT MUCH OF ITS NATURAL PLANT LIFE HAS BEEN DESTROYED.

THE EXAMPLE SET BY THE AZOV SEA IS SIMILAR TO THAT FACING THE CASPIAN, WHERE THE LEVEL OF THE WATER IS DROPPING STEADILY BECAUSE OF THE NUMBER OF DAMS BUILT ON THE VOLGA. THE PECHORA CANAL IS SPECIALLY AIMED AT INCREASING THE FLOW OF WATER INTO THE VOLGA AND, EVENTUALLY, INTO THE CASPIAN WHICH IS A UNIQUE RESERVOIR OF A NUMBER OF VARIETIES OF STURGEON, FROM WHICH CAVIAR IS OBTAINED.

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BUT ALREADY THERE ARE DOUBTS ABOUT THE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF THE PROJECT. THE WATERS OF THE PECHORA WHICH FLOW INTO THE BARENTS SEA ARE RELATIVELY WARM AND THERE ARE FEARS THAT A REDUCTION IN THE FLOW OF WATER COULD BRING ABOUT CLIMATIC CHANGES WHICH WOULD LEAD TO INCREASED ICING IN THE GULF OF BARENTS.

THOSE WHO FAVOUR THE BUILDING OF THE CANAL MAINTAIN THAT THE REDUCTION IN THE FLOW OF WATER FROM THE PECHORA WILL HAVE NO MARKED EFFECTS ON THE CLIMATE IN THE BARENZ REGION.

HOWEVER IT IS THE PLANS TO DEVELOP FIVE MILLION HECTARES (APPROX 12 MILLION ACRES) OF DESERT LAND IN KHAZAKHSTAN WHICH IS STIRRING UP THE BIGGEST CONTROVERSY.

VAST IRRIGATION SYSTEMS ARE BEING BUILT IN THE KARCHINSK STEPPES, IN THE CHICHIK VALLEY AND IN THE KARAKUM CANAL REGION WHICH, ECOLOGISTS SAY, ARE BEING DEVELOPED WITHOUT ANY THOUGHT FOR THE EFFECTS THEY MIGHT EVENTUALLY HAVE ON THE REGIONS CONCERNED.

IN SUPPORT OF THEIR CLAIMS THE ECOLOGISTS CITE THE DAMS WHICH WERE BUILT ON THE RIVERS SYR, DARIA AND AMU-DARIA WHICH CUT BY HALF THE AMOUNT OF FRESH WATER FLOWING INTO THE ARAL SEA, THUS THREATENING THE EXISTENCE OF THE VAST SALT LAKE WHICH GOVERNS THE REGION'S CLIMATE AS WELL AS ENDANGERING THE FLOURISHING FISHING INDUSTRY THERE.

THE ECOLOGISTS SAY THAT BY SPENDING VAST AMOUNTS OF MONEY TO CONQUER EXISTING DESERTS THE EXPERTS SEE ONLY THE IMMEDIATE BENEFITS OF THEIR ACTIONS AND DO NOT REALISE THAT THEY ARE CREATING CONDITIONS WHICH COULD FAVOUR THE DEVELOPMENT OF OTHER DESERTS.

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