

Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 5

4-2016

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Recommended Citation

Kurylo, Bodhana (2016) "The Role of Chernobyl in the Breakdown of the USSR," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2016.060105

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol6/iss1/5>

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The Role of Chernobyl in the Breakdown of the USSR

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The Chernobyl disaster was a watershed event that in a matter of a seconds changed destinies of millions of lives behind the Iron Curtain, as well as of Communism itself.¹ It generated outcomes that have still have not been completely researched and overcome, but it also revealed the degree to which reality had been distorted by the dogmatic efforts of the state. Despite the temptation to claim Chernobyl to be the sole reason for the failure of the Soviet citizens' belief in their state, as well as the fall of the Soviet Union, it would be an oversimplified misjudgement, as Chernobyl was a trigger but not the cause. Its major role was in highlighting the systematic failures of the government, and more importantly, the failure to establish trust between the government and the people of the USSR. The failure of trust may have a contributing factor, but it is questionable whether it was, indeed, the main cause of the breakdown of the USSR. It was fear that filled the void of the absence of ideology and trust as the foundation for the Soviet state, the loosening of which had a detrimental effect on the system.

The disaster happened on 26th of April 1986, when the Unit Four of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor exploded twice in a row, emitting high levels of radioactive particles into the atmosphere. As a result, a huge radioactive cloud appeared over Ukraine and Belarus, the west of

¹ Adriana Petryna, *Life exposed: biological citizens after Chernobyl* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013), 20.

the USSR and Europe. It took Mikhail Gorbachev, as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991, eighteen days to officially acknowledge the fact of the nuclear disaster.² During this period, a large amount of population was unknowingly exposed to iodine-131 due to the state's unwillingness to admit the catastrophe and excessive misinformation of the people, causing a massive spread of thyroid cancer in the following years.³

Systematic Failures

The cause of the Chernobyl disaster is considered to be the combination of the incompetence of the plant operators, flaws in the nuclear reactor and more generally the Soviet approach to nuclear safety and security.⁴ Since the accident, there have been many debates over which of these factors was the most fatal. There is undeniable evidence that the root cause of the Chernobyl nuclear power station was structural, contributed further by negligence of the operators. These problems were discussed in the article by Lyubov Kovalevska, a journalist in *Literaturna Ukraina* famous for her deep insight in the catastrophe, which was released just a month before the accident.⁵ The author gave clear “descriptions of equipment and material shortages, low labour morale, equipment defects, unrealistic building deadlines, and a slackening of construction standards.”⁶ In addition to this article, there had been many others since the 1970s that were concerned about the poor quality of the Soviet nuclear power industry and its

² Petryna, *Life Exposed*, 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lucy Kerner and William Porter, “Soviet Decision-making for Chernobyl: an Assessment of Ukrainian Leadership Performance*,” *Studies in Comparative Communism* 21 (1988), 207.

⁵ David Marples, “Chernobyl: A Reassessment,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 45 (2004): 10

⁶ Kerner and Porter, “Soviet Decision-making for Chernobyl,” 208.

effects on the environment.⁷ This proves that these problems were known by the government, though no real attempts were made to fix them.

In addition to the long-term systematic failures unveiled by Chernobyl, the USSR's domestic failure laid in the reluctance to prioritise the wellbeing of its citizens. It was sharply highlighted in the immediate aftermath of the accident. Firefighters, being one of the first to deal with the explosion, were not aware of the radiation and lacked relevant clothing and equipment for a catastrophe of such magnitude. Similarly, the in-house medical team in the nuclear power station that aided the victims were not properly informed, thus, not having appropriate medicine and clothing. The very fact that the town had only four sprinkler trucks further evidences the trivial way in which nuclear safety was viewed upon in the USSR government.⁸

Furthermore, it is striking that effects on the people's health could have been minimised had the nonradioactive iodine pills been distributed, or at least if the people had been warned to avoid the worst affected areas of the country. The city closest to the disaster, Prypyat, lying three kilometres away, had not been evacuated until the 27th of April, meaning that its population had already been exposed to high levels of radiation, with many feeling its symptoms, such as vomiting, metallic taste and headaches.⁹ Instead, the government decided to maintain the normal state of events in order to avoid panic. It is seen through one of the earliest Soviet news reports discussing the explosion, that the government played it down as an ordinary case of a "reactor being damaged," without warning the people of the consequences of being exposed to the radiation.¹⁰ Another example of the government's attempts to cover up the extent of Chernobyl

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 213 and 214.

⁹ Frank Hippel and Laura Kahn, "Nuclear Power Plant Emergencies and Thyroid Cancer Risk: What New Jersey Physicians Need to Know," *Supplement to New Jersey Medicine* 101 (2009): 80.

¹⁰ 'Программа "Время" 28 апреля 1986-го года.', [online video], 1986, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sC7n_QgJRks (accessed 1 December 2014).

was the casual carrying out of the May Day demonstration in Kyiv, which is approximately 130 kilometres south of the reactor.¹¹ “We were encouraged to come to this ‘parade of death,’” said one of the witnesses.¹² It was during the days when the wind from Chernobyl changed its direction to Kyiv, leading to a dramatic rise in radiation levels, with a level that reached 700 mr/hour.¹³ All in all, it seems that the state’s incompetence and its routinized habit of dissimulation, in this case, seen in the downplaying of the consequences, had a more annihilating impact on the people’s health than the explosion itself.

In a wider perspective, there was the state’s uncontrollable desire to display its power through the advancement of Soviet technology and society, leading to chaotic achievements at the expense of the unprepared and underdeveloped society. Just months before the tragedy, the total capacity of Ukrainian nuclear plants was accounted for about 32 percent of the total nuclear capacity in the Soviet Union. Despite this accomplishment, it was still ten percent under the Eleventh Five Year Plan target (1981–1985).¹⁴ The fact that, in a year, the Ukrainian nuclear capacity was planned to have grown 150 percent shows the lack of a professional approach that did not take into account the country’s limited technological capacity.¹⁵ Such pressure on meeting the target was due to the location of the plant that was strategic to the central position of Ukraine in the enlargement of Soviet nuclear technology. The meeting of the unrealistic deadlines came at the expense of the quality of the construction of the plant and skilful

¹¹ Paul Goble, “Window on Eurasia: Gorbachev Ordered Shcherbitsky to Go Ahead with May Day Parade after Chernobyl Accident, Late Ukrainian Leader’s Daughter Says,” *Windowoneurasia*, [web blog], 26 June 2010, <http://windowoneurasia.blogspot.co.uk/2010/06/window-on-eurasia-gorbachev-ordered.html> (accessed 8 November 2014).

¹² *The Battle Of Chernobyl – Documentary*, [online video], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_50t2P2NR1E, 2014 (accessed 1 December 2014).

¹³ Marples, “Chernobyl: A Reassessment,” 10.

¹⁴ Kerner and Porter, “Soviet Decision-making on Chernobyl,” 206.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

workforce, contributed by labour shortage. Although such unprofessionalism was present in most spheres of Soviet life, the disaster made it especially acute.

Beyond the Reactor

As it is shown, the Soviet government failed to construct a safe nuclear power station, disregarding the problems concerning its operation and neglecting to prevent the fallout from causing further damage. Knowing their faults, the Politburo tried to contain the truth from people, further alienating them. This may have worked with the events of a lesser extent, but the impact of Chernobyl on the USSR differed from others as its effects could not be concealed. The suicide of Valery Legasov, a key member of the Chernobyl investigation commission, who tried to provide a truthful account on the causes and consequences of Chernobyl and the Soviet nuclear industry itself, was another event which destabilised all their attempts to show that the situation was under control. In doing so, Gorbachev once assumed that Chernobyl “was perhaps the real cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union,” introducing the idea of the USSR’s “death from ecocide.”¹⁶

However, it would be wrong to give monocausal explanations and claim that these systematically piling up failures at Chernobyl could be the cause of a broader process that was taking place, the fall of the USSR. To compare, the accident that happened at Three Mile Island in the United States in 1979 was also a big shock for the American people, taking into account that it happened at the very beginning of the nuclear development. In contrast to Chernobyl, however, its effects on the state were not detrimental, affecting only its economic sphere. Despite

¹⁶ Joachim Radkau, *Age of Ecology* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 357.

being quite costly, it caused comparatively little emission of radiation thanks to efficient containment, evidenced by the fact that there have not been any eventual deaths that could be related to it. In addition to the efficient safety management, the Three Mile Island accident was different from Chernobyl, since behind the latter stood a long-term disappointment of the Soviet populace with their government. In fact, the Chernobyl disaster became the symbol highlighting the long-established failures of the USSR, serving as a trigger of the breakdown of the people's trust of the government. Indeed, it was trust of the citizens that could have been the true foundation for the Soviet state's existence, a fuelling factor which the Soviet government deprived itself of.

Radkau argues Chernobyl revealed that the top-down approach in addition to corruption in most spheres of Soviet life was disastrous to the state.¹⁷ This was later admitted by Gorbachev, who himself came to the realisation that central planning has a lot of limitations: it deprives the lower level of its own initiative and decision making, causing incompetence and negligence, as in the case of Chernobyl. It revealed that by suppressing independent critical thinking, the society has a low capacity for development: it discouraged progress by preventing the flow of ideas other than those allowed and already circulating. Chernobyl almost ridiculed the Soviet system of central governing, as it became evident that the multiple attempts to cover up the extent of the disaster prevented even the higher echelons of the USSR from having a full knowledge of the situation, leaving even Gorbachev "a victim of the bureaucracy."¹⁸

Moreover, the USSR had initially based its appeal on certain Marxist ideas of the socio-economic order, the main problem being the alienation of society from the state, with the supremacy of the proletariat as a goal. According to the Leninist theory, a monopolistic party and

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 359.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

central planning are necessary to represent the interests of the people, since the government's function is to guide the society. In reality, this monopoly of power and inability of the population to reach to the government more than anything alienated Soviet citizens, whereas Chernobyl exposed the degree to which the Communist leaders neglected the representation of their needs. Even during the decontamination operation, the only thing that was on the Soviet officials' minds was "not the people, but how straight and proud the flag was flying," the flag which was now flying over the heads of four barely conscious soldiers who had initially attempted to put the flag up.¹⁹ Until the Chernobyl catastrophe, environmental problems were only attributed to the nature of the American capitalist system that prioritised profits over its citizens, which seemed to have been impossible in the socialist society. Chernobyl appeared as a considerable evidence of the contrary.

Chernobyl acutely pointed out the necessity for *Glasnost*, the policy of openness and relaxation of censorship introduced by Gorbachev just a year before the tragedy. The demands for truth about the environmental disaster in the following years led to the details of it becoming public, which in turn led to more need for making the archive records of the Soviet government's crimes open to public, as it was done in early the 1990.²⁰ Throughout the almost seven-decades-long existence of the USSR, 'the act of believing dissimulation' played a dangerously big role in the everyday existence of Soviet citizens.²¹ The core influence on the Soviet social organisation came from the higher bodies of the state, so called *nomenklatura*, which suppressed any criticism of the system or individual political expression. Despite Gorbachev's attempts to democratise the

¹⁹ Volodymyr Ivanovych Soloviov, interviewed by Olena Gorobets, 2010, V. Vinnychenko Kirovohrad State Pedagogical University, Kirovohrad

²⁰ Alla Yaroshinkaya, "The Big Lie: Secret Documents on Chernobyl," Eurozine. April 21 2006. <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-04-21-yaroshinskaya-en.html> (Accessed 16 November 2014)

²¹ Petryna, *Life Exposed*, 69

state of affairs, as the disaster pointed out, the newly introduced policy of openness failed, maintaining the “classic Soviet cover-up” and disinformation techniques.

In the case of such a tremendous catastrophe as Chernobyl, the importance of truth was vital, and not giving it to people should be considered as a criminal offense against society. The testimonies of Igor Kostin, a journalist who took the first photos of the destroyed reactor, clearly depict the regime’s attempts “through every means possible to hide the truth about Chernobyl, ... about the extent of the tragedy, and about the number of people harmed by the accident.”²² Despite such attempts, society was able to testify the lie; “we knew that something awful happened, but were not told what.”²³ Overall, Chernobyl raised Soviet public consciousness and exposed the main weakness in the Soviet state structure, which was the idea that the communication between the Soviet state and the populace was through propaganda, disinformation, and lies.

As a result of the bureaucratic incompetence, ideological downfall and the systematic practice of lying, the Chernobyl disaster signified possibly the most important failure of the USSR, that of winning the trust of its citizens. This is reflected through the images from Chernobyl which serve as a reminder today of the false promises of the Communist Party. As it can be exemplified through the utopian school painting of *Matushka Priroda*, the Soviet government built its utopian values on cooperation and co-existence with nature, feeding them onto its people.²⁴ In reality it only brought destruction and devastation. This reality is further highlighted through the picture of a *babushka* standing in front of a Soviet poster propagating the

²² Igor Kostin, interviewed by Christine Daum, *Eurozine*, April 21, 2006, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-04-21-kostin-en.html>, (accessed 16 November 2014)

²³ Galina Volodymyrivna Melnyk, interviewed by Svitlana Tomashevskya, 2009, V. Vinnychenko Kirovohrad State Pedagogical University, Kirovohrad.

²⁴ See <http://www.longshadowofchernobyl.com/main/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/MM7291-050425-00448.jpg> (accessed 29 November 2014).

supremacy of the Communist Party and portraying itself as a saviour by lending its hand.²⁵ At the time, despair and hopelessness are mirrored through her eyes.

However well Chernobyl accident exemplifies the unreliability of the state, the beginning of the process of trust destruction can date back to the Stalin era, when the victory in the Second World War had been the only considerable achievement of the USSR. Nevertheless, even the victory did not have a lot of positive impact on the society, as it did not meet the hopes for a better standard of living. Instead, the society had to deal with the greatest scale of the post-war destruction and human losses, following the mass terror, purges and deportations prior to and after the war.²⁶ Being the second largest nation in the USSR, Ukraine has suffered a lot from the Chernobyl explosion. However, the Communist rule had left a lot more of devastating outcomes in it, one of the examples can be the manmade famine of 1932-3 that led to 25,000 Ukrainians dying every day due to starvation.²⁷ Arguably being effective in subordinating people's will, such methods made the government despised and left a collective wound in the post-Soviet states as a reminder of the utopian Soviet ideological beliefs and dogmatic leadership.

Breakdown of Trust, Breakdown of the USSR

The question arises whether the long-term distrust accelerated by Chernobyl could really be the cause for the collapse of the USSR, considering people had been disenchanted with the state multiple times, yet it had not collapsed until 1991. The answer seems to be the idea that the USSR had never previously been built on openness, but on fear. Niccolò Machiavelli, for

²⁵ See <http://www.antoninkratochvil.com/#!/Stories%201/Chernobyl/22> (accessed on 29 November 2014)

²⁶ Geoffrey Hosking, *Trust: A History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 17.

²⁷ "Ukraine Famine," United Human Rights Council, http://www.unitedhumanrights.org/genocide/ukraine_famine.htm (Accessed 22 November 2014.)

example, distinguishes between well-used and abused cruelty, saying that cruelty “used to secure one’s power, and are not repeated, rather every effort is made to ensure one’s subjects benefit in the long run.”²⁸ Clearly, for the statement to fit better nowadays, one must understand its meaning as a need of having the means of maintaining law and order, while not abusing it. However, the USSR failed, as it continuously misused it to preserve its power, killing the trust of its citizens and replacing it with fear.

Despite the failure to build trust with its citizens, a state can find the alternative to trust foundation for itself that can, indeed, be fear. The idea is brought forward by the radical supporter of the importance of fear, Thomas Hobbes, who claimed that “during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are all in a condition that is called war, as if of every man, against every man.”²⁹ He sees the need for a strong state, the power of which would be based on the fear to disobey and break laws, the image that suited the description of the USSR until the radical change of its leadership in 1985.

Gorbachev sincerely intended to change the foundation of the Soviet state and ideology from fear to trust. However, in order to do so, transparency and improvement in the standard of living were needed; the government provided neither. Technologically, the USSR was behind even the newly industrialised countries of Asia, whereas Chernobyl’s consequences drained a huge amount of money from the economy. Socially, the Chernobyl tragedy awoke public discontent, while *Glasnost* allowed exchange of information and political participation. In the retro perspective, this brought up the notion of political accountability and responsibility, the

²⁸ Niccolo Machiavelli, “The Prince,” in *Modern Political Thought: Reading from Machivalli to Nietzsche*, edited by David Wootton (Indianapolis. Hackett, 2008), 23.

²⁹ Thomas Hobbes, “Leviathan,” in *Modern Political Thought: From Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, edited by David Wootton, (Indianapolis, Hackett, 2008), 159.

criteria that the Communist Party did not meet.³⁰ It is, of course, uncertain whether the state could have been held together even despite these problems, since the Soviet population had grown accustomed to living under a strong discipline for almost 70 years, associating the Communist Party, if not Communism itself, with it.

When Gorbachev started loosening fear in the system, in the absence of a strong enough alternative to both ideology and fear as a means to exert influence upon society, nationalist movements filled the vacuum. It is interesting that this idea is also linked to Chernobyl, as the majority of the nationalist movements in the USSR originated from the early environmental movements.³¹ Since *Glasnost* allowed the expression of concerns about the level of pollution after the Chernobyl catastrophe and its effects on public health, a hope appeared amongst the nationalists that they could also have their freedom of speech. That is why, Soviet environmentalists, being closely linked to nationalism, acquired a distinction from the rest of the world form. While environmentalism around the globe tended to be characterised by its “one world” outlook, environmentalists in the USSR blamed the central government for the environmental issues and sought to solve them by taking control over their regions.³²

Conclusion

The Chernobyl disaster has now become a haunting symbol of the Soviet technological and political backwardness. Therefore, there was much more involved with the reactor that failed

³⁰ Charles Ziegler, “Political Participation, Nationalism and Environmental Politics in the USSR,” in *The Soviet Environmental Problems, Policies and Politics*, edited by John M. Stewart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 24.

³¹ Marshall Goldman, “Environmentalism and Nationalism: An Unlikely Twist in an Unlikely Direction,” in *The Soviet Environment Problems, Policies and Politics*, 2.

³² Goldman, “Environmentalism and Nationalism,” 2.

at Chernobyl. In addition to the systematic technological failures, its impact was powerful, as it revealed a number of long-term failures of the USSR, leading to the destruction of trust: central planning; ideology; and communication between the people and the government. Nonetheless, evidence of already established failures and the destroyed trust had begun to emerge since the Second World War, showing that even such a significantly exposing event as Chernobyl was not enough to cause the collapse of the USSR. For this to happen, the foundation needed to be shattered, in this case, the final catalyst was, fear. In doing so, Gorbachev appeared to be an architect of the collapse, as he led away the fear of the system, without constructing trust with the people as an alternative foundation for the existence of the state.

For the majority of the post-Soviet citizens, especially in Ukraine, Chernobyl will be forever remembered as a personal tragedy and the point of no return to what had seemed certain. UN secretary general, Kofi Annan, once said, “Chernobyl is a word we would all like to erase from our memory,” in a foreword to the report, “but more than 7 million of our fellow human beings do not have the luxury of forgetting. They are still suffering, every day, as a result of what happened.”³³ Although scientists can only operate with approximate figures of Chernobyl victims, he stated that at least 3 million children still require treatment and “many will die prematurely.”³⁴ However, no numbers can express the tragedy more hauntingly than the graffiti of a child’s cry drawn in a deserted Chernobyl building, which symbolizes the cry of victims who were forced to die in suffering and those who will never be born.³⁵

³³ Kofi Annan, “Foreword to the UNSCEAR Report on Chernobyl Presented to the U.N. General Assembly,” in Alla Yaroshinkaya, “The Big Lie: Secret Documents on Chernobyl,” *Eurozine*, April 21 2006. <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-04-21-yaroshinskaya-en.html> (Accessed 16 November, 2014).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ See http://inapcache.boston.com/universal/site_graphics/blogs/bigpicture/chernobyl_25th_anniversary/bp1.jpg (accessed 30 November 2014).

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