

Mother Russia by Rachel Douglas

The 'front' at Chernobyl

Moscow exploits the nuclear accident to propagandize the benefits of combat and qualities of the "Soviet soul."

Since the time, some three years ago, when Soviet media began to publicize the war in Afghanistan as a scene of great heroism and battle-testing of a new generation of Soviet soldiers, the army paper *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star) has printed many articles under the rubric, "The place of the feat was Afghanistan." The "feat," the Russian *podvig*, is always a heroic deed, carried out at great risk to the hero and often costing his life.

In May 1986, *Krasnaya Zvezda* now trumpets a variation: "The place of the feat was the Chernobyl NPS" (Nuclear Power Station).

Krasnaya Zvezda's readers are told that those who performed best during the Chernobyl disaster were the communists and the combat-tested Afghanistan veterans. The qualities they manifested, the paper adds, were the deepest, in-born strengths of the "Soviet soul"—Soviet propaganda's lightly disguised version of the mythical "Russian soul" (invoked here without regard for the fact that the accident took place in the Soviet Ukraine).

Moscow has also issued an endless stream of complaints about how the U.S.S.R. was wronged throughout the Chernobyl events—claims that nuclear accidents in the West were just as bad, unnamed Soviet officials' insinuations to the effect that imported Western, especially German, instruments were to blame for the accident, and so forth. In combination with this, the battle-style press coverage aims to impress upon Soviet readers, that the

police and Army forces on the scene are warring with not only the elements and the accident, but also foreign enemies.

Here, in direct translation, is some of *Krasnaya Zvezda's* propaganda from the Chernobyl "front."

From Col. A. Polyakov's dispatch, published May 9: "'Much has been said about the beauty of the soul of our people,' said . . . Internal Service Col. N. Khoroshok, 'Chernobyl and the tragedy that unfolded here have brought to light many new colors in it. . . . Take Sergeant Aleksandr Nemirovskii, a driver. . . . When daring of a high order was required, he found it: He decisively drove a special fire truck right up to the reactor to pump off water.'"

A few days later: "Brought up on the great heroic idols of the Great Patriotic War and the Soviet warriors who fulfill their international duty in Afghanistan, soldiers here document, in an altruistic, heroic effort, the most secret depths of the soul of Soviet man—his dedication to sacrifice, if it helps to avert danger from his fatherland."

On May 14, Polyakov filed a story on the arrival of a junior officer at the scene of the hurried effort to construct a dike, to contain contaminated water around the Chernobyl reactor: "Lt.-Col. Belousov met Kostenko only at the scene of the task. . . . He met him, and couldn't believe his eyes. Before him was that same Yuri Andreyevich Kostenko, who in his time had commanded a mortar battery platoon,

which covered for the advance of the first motorized company in one battle with the [Afghan] bandits. He had earned a medal, 'For Valor.' . . . Well, the battalion commander himself had spent quite a bit of time on Afghanistan's steep slopes and had seen battle. He had received two Orders of the Red Star and a medal 'For Meritorious Combat,' in recognition of his combat services to the Motherland."

A picture of a helicopter adorned with the military's red star illustrated a May 17 story by "front" correspondent Col. V. Filatov, who noted that some pilots wore mustaches, "just like those our pilots wear in Afghanistan."

The military's role at Chernobyl is not only the stuff of *Krasnaya Zvezda's* propaganda. On May 20 came an announcement, that Army Col. V. Keleberda had been put in charge of coordinating the military, civil defense, and other forces engaged the clean-up at Chernobyl.

The next day, a press appearance by Viktor Sidorenko, deputy chairman of the State Committee for the Safe Conduct of Work in the Atomic Power Industry, hinted that aspects of military activity at Chernobyl may not yet have been made public. He told foreign journalists, "I myself was at Chernobyl," beginning just three hours after the explosion.

Until this statement, no presence at Chernobyl or other role of Sidorenko and his committee had been mentioned in public. Yevgenii Kulov, its chairman, is a former official of the Ministry of Medium Machine Building, which oversees "military applications of nuclear energy" and fuel-cycle operations at all Soviet nuclear power plants.

Sidorenko said that the accident occurred "at the stage of experimental research work," being carried out during a routine shutdown of the reactor.