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Chernobyl: seeking truth in the political fallout

Marjorie Mazel Hecht reviews how the Soviets' disregard for human life led to Chernobyl and continues covering up its aftermath four years later.

Four years after the Chernobyl nuclear accident on April 26, 1986, the political fallout continues to hinder attempts to assess the actual health effects of the radiation release. The Soviets have classified much of the health information they have collected at the All-Union Center for Radiation Medicine in Kiev. Especially guarded are the results at the center's Institute of Clinical Radiology, which is monitoring the first radiation victims. David Marples, a research associate at the Canadian Institute for Ukrainian Studies and the author of two books on Chernobyl, reports that even the more "acceptable" Western medical experts, like Robert Gale, were denied permission to visit this center.

In the West, the environmentalists have capitalized on the radiation horror stories to push for a shutdown of all nuclear power plants, which the Soviets have long sought through their support for the Greens in West Germany and elsewhere. To the environmentalists all nuclear plants are alike in "danger"; the fact that the Chernobyl reactor did not have a containment structure or safety systems like those required in the West is immaterial to their irrational arguments.

In the areas of Ukraine and Belorussia that were contaminated, the stories about mutations, deformities, and various illnesses attributed to radiation have maintained—understandably—an atmosphere of panic. Equally understandable is the still-growing rage at the official Soviet bureaucracy for the bungling, lies, unconcern, and secretiveness that have characterized the government's handling of the disaster from day one. In addition to a lack of specific information about current radiation damage and how to deal with it, there is almost no accurate information about radiation in general

and what it does, providing fertile ground for rumors.

Chernobyl has been a rallying point in Ukraine and Belorussia not just for environmentalist concerns but for broader nationalist goals. In response to the political situation, the Soviet Council of Ministers in April 1990 allocated an additional \$26 billion for an emergency aid program to protect the health and safety of residents in affected areas, even including resettlement of some villages this year. How effective the funds will be in solving actual health problems remains to be seen. As U.S. nuclear expert Dr. Richard Wilson points out below, we have a responsibility to future generations to use accurate information to determine the health results of the accident. Will the Soviets cooperate by allowing scientists access to the area to collect such information?

There are no signs that the Soviet regime, now even more beleaguered, has changed its flawed outlook on safety, where military and political expediency, not protecting human life, is the priority. The archaic Chernobyl reactor—a graphite-moderated reactor used for both power production and weapons plutonium—was the Soviet design of choice in the 1970s because it was cheaper and easier for them to produce than the more technically advanced light water reactors used in the West. On May 24, 1990, Yevgeni Velikhov, head of the Kurchatov Institute of Atomic Energy and a leading spokesman for Gorbachov, told scientists in Washington that his country could build the next-step fusion engineering reactor at three times less than it would cost the West or Japan. The Soviet nuclear industry, Velikhov said, is more "cost-effective." This statement could only be made by someone who does not include human lives lost in the balance sheet.