

*Department of Humanities, Northumbria University*

**Honours Dissertation**

**A Long Half-Life: Responses to Chernobyl in Soviet  
and Post-Soviet Society**

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**BA Hons History**

**2018**

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA (Hons) History.

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## Introduction

The Chernobyl disaster of 26<sup>th</sup> April 1986, is one of only two nuclear disasters to be classified with the highest rating of seven, 'Major Accident', on the International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale (INES).<sup>1</sup> In terms of its medical impact, the radioactivity released into the atmosphere is to the present day linked with high incidences of cancer in the most affected countries (Belarus and Ukraine): before the disaster, 82 out of 100,000 got cancer in Belarus; statistics collected from newspapers throughout 2002-2005 suggest a cancer rate of 6,000 in 100,000 after.<sup>2</sup> The official death toll stands at thirty-one, only counting those workers killed in the disaster's immediate aftermath.<sup>3</sup> A typical figure for the actual number killed stands between 6,000 and 8,000.<sup>4</sup> Another estimate published by Russian newspaper *Izvetiya* attributed 300,000 deaths to the disaster in the 150,000 km<sup>2</sup> region it contaminated.<sup>5</sup> Physically, this led to the abandonment and evacuation of 485 villages in Belarus.<sup>6</sup> By comparison, during Operation Barbarossa, the German Wehrmacht and SS destroyed 619 settlements and their inhabitants in that country.<sup>7</sup> The disaster's cause was a miscalculation of the No. 4 reactor's capacity during a routine test.<sup>8</sup> A series of power surges and failed emergency measures created an explosion, so large, that it forced a breach in the protective cap cover of the radioactive core and poured radiation into the air at an astonishing rate: fifty million curies (Ci) were released, 70% falling on the land of Belarus.<sup>9</sup> Belarus saw 23% of its territory contaminated with caesium-137, while in

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<sup>1</sup> The other is the Fukushima Disaster (2011), see Markus Vogt, 'The Lessons of Chernobyl and Fukushima: An Ethical Evaluation', *RCC Perspectives*, No. 1 [Europe After Fukushima: German Perspectives on the Future of Nuclear Power] (2012), p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer* (London: Penguin, 2016), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Adriana Petryna, *Life Exposed* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Anna Reid, *Borderland: A Journey Through the History of Ukraine* (London: Phoenix, 2001), p. 201.

<sup>5</sup> The number of deaths caused by Chernobyl is subject to controversy and authorities interfere with statistics for political reasons. See David R. Marples, 'Chernobyl: A Reassessment', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 45, No. 8 (2004), p. 588; Marples, 'The Legacy of Chernobyl' in 1997: Impact on Ukraine and Belarus', *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2013), p. 165.

<sup>6</sup> Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Reid, *Borderland*, pp. 194-5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid; Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, p. 1.

Ukraine the proportion of its territory contaminated was 4.8%.<sup>10</sup> These events took place on the territory of the USSR during the last half-decade of its existence. Its then leader, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, recognised the significance of the disaster immediately. Yet, he failed to make a public statement until eighteen-days later, briefly informing his television audience of the accident in vague terms, preferring to focus on the obstinance and weakness of Western states on nuclear issues.<sup>11</sup> This response by Gorbachev was deeply dissatisfactory to his viewers, who were insulted by his silence and incensed by the cover-up the authorities had attempted in the interluding period. This response was more acutely insulting, however, than it would have been under a different leader. Gorbachev had come to the premiership promising reform and openness, *perestroika* and *glasnost*.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the test of Chernobyl, the first major trial of his reformist outlook, was one he failed: it was the Swedes who alerted the world to the disaster, after their Forsmark Power Plant detected high-radiation levels in an employee's shoe; the Soviets remained silent.<sup>13</sup> In fact, as part of the cover-up, the Kiev authorities had even allowed the May Day parade to go ahead as planned, despite the saturation of the air with potentially lethal radiation.<sup>14</sup> Local officials suppressed information on the disaster's events, presenting dance shows on Kiev television rather than basic survival information, ostensibly in the name of preventing panic.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, as one witness recalled, books pertaining to radiation disappeared from her university library, many suspecting on the orders of the authorities.<sup>16</sup> However, as shocking as this may seem, in reality, the authorities were reacting in the way they naturally did when presented with any challenge to the Communist Party's claim to a monopoly on technological and knowledgeable supremacy. The impact of this cover-up is crucial to understanding

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<sup>10</sup> Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> 'Excerpts from Gorbachev's speech on Chernobyl disaster', *The New York Times*, 15 May 1986.

<sup>12</sup> Orlando Figes, *Revolutionary Russia, 1891-1991* (London: Penguin, 2014), pp. 389-99.

<sup>13</sup> George Fink, *Stress of War, Conflict, and Disaster* (Cambridge: Academic Press, 2010), p. 736.

<sup>14</sup> David R. Marples, *The Social Impact of the Chernobyl disaster* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1988), p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> B. Gubarev's report, 'Document 224: Report by *Pravda* journalist Gubarev on his observations at the suite, May 22, 1986', Diane Koenker & Ronald D. Bachman, *Revelations from The Russian Archives* (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1992), pp. 509-11.

<sup>16</sup> Referencing an interview between Svetlana Alexievich and Yevgeny Alexandrovich Brovkin, lecturer at Gomel State University, see Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, pp. 97-99.

many of the events which later unfolded in the USSR. Many Soviet citizens were radicalised and after Chernobyl, it being revealed how entrenched secrecy was in the system, *glasnost* took on a very different meaning: Gorbachev felt he had to expand it to regain credibility and did, so extensively, in fact, that Soviet politics became unrecognisable from what they had been previously.<sup>17</sup> Environmentalism emerged as an important political force and galvanised citizens into action. This was made more influential by the freer environment created by *glasnost*. The major beneficiaries of these political forces were the national independence movements in Ukraine and Belarus, who used environmental and Chernobyl related activism to gather momentum behind their campaigns, which were ultimately successful. This is one of the stories this dissertation will cover. It will argue that Chernobyl is central to understanding many of the changes that took place in the USSR in the late 1980s, and more crucially, that it is key to grasping the nature of its collapse. Additionally, it will explore the continued role of Chernobyl in these countries after they gained independence, both in terms of politics and national remembrance, and assess the examples of ‘counter-*glasnost*’ that have been conducted in both.<sup>18</sup> This analysis will be structured into three distinct but interrelated thematic chapters. The first chapter, ‘Politics, Democracy, and Social Change’, is a historical survey of the political events that took place in the Soviet Union from and after the 1980s in relation to the Chernobyl disaster. It charts the impact of the catastrophe on Soviet politics, specifically focussing on its role in the expansion of *glasnost* and environmentalism, and how these affected the national independence movements in Belarus and Ukraine. It argues that Chernobyl was a catalyst for change in the late USSR and places it as a central part of Belarus and Ukraine’s establishment of autonomy. The second chapter, ‘*Glasnost*, Counter-*glasnost*, and the Politics of Information’, examines the

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<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Andriole, *A Social History of Twentieth-Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), p. 271.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Counter-*glasnost*’ refers to the reversal and abandonment of open political practices inspired by *glasnost* by post-communist governments, in favour of a more authoritarian political system reminiscent of the unreformed USSR. A similar concept has been used by Vidosav Stevanovic and Zlata Filipovic, who applied it to the authoritarian politics introduced to Serbia by Slobodan Milosevic in the build-up to the collapse of Yugoslavia. Here, it is applied to the Chernobyl disaster, where this essay identifies attempts by the post-Soviet governments of Ukraine and Belarus to restrict discussion of Chernobyl. See Stevanovic & Filipovic, *Milosevic: The People’s Tyrant* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p. 47.

historical development of official attitudes to Chernobyl in post-Soviet Ukraine and Belarus. It looks at the evolution of official views on the disaster since independence and argues that its presentation has become more restricted for politically motivated reasons. As part of this discussion, it will additionally assess the applicability of the concept of 'counter-*glasnost*' in regards to Chernobyl's treatment by the post-Soviet governments of Belarus and Ukraine. The third chapter, 'Culture and Memory', examines Chernobyl's cultural interpretation as well as its memorialisation. It questions how the disaster is remembered by different sections of society in Belarus and Ukraine and highlights how alternate narratives compete to define Chernobyl's historical legacy.

On these topics, there is an extensive range of academic literature from a broad range of disciplines. Lacking, however, is a mature historical scholarship. To an extent, historians are neglectful of the Chernobyl catastrophe and though they acknowledge its significance, it lacks frequent book-length coverage; one article described Chernobyl as having 'virtually disappeared from international discussion outside scientific circles'.<sup>19</sup> That quote belongs to David R. Marples, one of the two main historians who have produced major book-length works specifically focussing on the disaster, the other being Svetlana Alexievich. The latter is the 2015 Nobel Laureate for Literature. She produced an oral history of the disaster's impact, *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* (2016).<sup>20</sup> Its main utility is as a source of quotes and voices that provide an intimate sense of the disaster's effects on individuals, communities, and nations, and finds greatest use here in the third chapter, 'Memory and Culture'. The former, Marples, is one of the most prolific writers on the disaster and since 1986 written numerous analyses of the disaster's political and economic impact arguing its importance to understanding change in the Soviet Union, such as *The Social Impact of the Chernobyl disaster* (1988).<sup>21</sup> Of his works however, more useful to this dissertation are such pieces as his interview with Chernobyl clean-up leader Yurii Risovannyi, published in Roman Solchanyk's interview collection, *Ukraine: From*

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<sup>19</sup> It is more common for a historian to award Chernobyl a few mentions throughout a book or a single chapter, as Anna Reid does, see Reid, *Borderland*, pp. 191-217; David R. Marples, 'Chernobyl: A Reassessment', p. 588.

<sup>20</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer* (London: Penguin, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Marples, *The Social Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1988).

*Chernobyl' to Sovereignty* (1992).<sup>22</sup> In fact, this selection is representative of this dissertation's attitude to the utility of secondary sources in general. Given the absence of a developed historical scholarship on Chernobyl, it is necessary to broaden the genres of writing used beyond history. Indeed, a multi-disciplinary approach is a defining aspect of this study's research and debate. For example, ethnography has informed many of this dissertation's arguments. Olga Kuchinskaya is the author of, *The Politics of Invisibility* (2014), which outlines the historical interference into Chernobyl's presentation in politics and science in Belarus, as the government of that country has attempted to restrict Chernobyl's public 'visibility' and reframe collective national understanding of the disaster to suit its nuclear policy.<sup>23</sup> In other instances, political analysts have been referenced, such as Aliaksandr Novikau, who has assessed the historical development of nuclear politics in Belarus.<sup>24</sup> Other scholarship which has been helpful, includes some that is less specifically related to Chernobyl, but contributes to understanding on issues such as late-Soviet nationalism and economics. In this capacity, numerous historians can be used. For example, Catherine Wanner's *Burden of Dreams: History and Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine* (1998), gives context on the overall political situation in the Ukraine in the late 1980s, while also providing an entry point for analysing Chernobyl's role within it.<sup>25</sup> Of similar use is Harley D. Balzer's, *Five Years That Shook the World: Gorbachev's Unfinished Revolution* (1991), which gives an overview of major social and political changes throughout Gorbachev's premiership.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, the range of secondary sources useful to this dissertation is broad and varied. Equally so are the primary sources which it uses.

A number of document and interview collections have been of particular use. Of the first type, declassified publications by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), provide essentially impartial

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<sup>22</sup> Roman Solchanyk, *Ukraine: From Chernobyl' to Sovereignty* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1992), pp. 139-49.

<sup>23</sup> Olga Kuchinskaya, *The Politics of Invisibility* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Aliaksandr Novikau, 'The Evolution of the Environmental Movement in Belarus: From Chernobyl to Global Climate Change', *Environmental Sociology*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2015), pp. 92-101.

<sup>25</sup> Catherine Wanner, *Burden of Dreams: History and Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> Harley D. Balzer (ed.), *Five Years That Shook the World: Gorbachev's Unfinished Revolution* (Boulder & Oxford: Westview Press, 1991).

contemporary coverage of the disaster's impact in the Soviet Union and observations on the changes resulting from Gorbachev's *glasnost* program. Of note is the Agency's research paper, *The Chernobyl Accident: Social and Political Implications* (1986), which gives insight into the political movements which took place in the USSR in the disaster's aftermath, including changes in *politburo* personnel.<sup>27</sup> Also of use are the Agency's analyses of the 27<sup>th</sup> CPSU Congress and Deputy Director Robert M. Gates', *What is going on in the Soviet Union?* (1988), with both providing crucial context on the events which were unfolding in the USSR during the late 1980s, and the former providing a useful point of comparison between the reforms announced before and after the disaster (the 27<sup>th</sup> Congress being held only a few weeks before it occurred).<sup>28</sup> Of the second type, Grigory Ioffe's *Reassessing Lukashenka* (2014), is of particular use, including interviews of the Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenka by Ioffe, providing valuable insight into the dictator's attitudes to Chernobyl's historical legacy in his country.<sup>29</sup> Another source includes newspaper coverage, both of the disaster itself and of contemporary attitudes to it, from both Western and Eastern European perspectives. Unmentioned thus far, are internet sources. Though not extensively used, some online sources proved to be surprisingly useful to this dissertation's research. Of particular note are such sites as that of the *Kryly Khalopa* Theatre, an activist performance group who actively challenge establishment interpretations of Chernobyl's history in Belarus.<sup>30</sup> Thus, using all these different source types, this dissertation will provide a historical analysis of the Chernobyl disaster infrequently attempted by historians.

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<sup>27</sup> U.S. Directorate of Intelligence, *The Chernobyl Accident: Social and Political Implications* (Washington D.C.: 1987).

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Directorate of Intelligence, *The 27<sup>th</sup> CPSU Conference: Gorbachev's Unfinished Business* (Washington D.C.: 1986); U.S. Directorate of Intelligence, 'What is going on in the Soviet Union?', Robert M. Gates, Dallas Council on World Affairs (Washington D.C.: 1988).

<sup>29</sup> Grigory Ioffe, *Reassessing Lukashenka: Belarus in Cultural and Geopolitical Context* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Театр "Крылы халопы" (Kryly Khalopa Theatre) Website (2018), [online], available at: <http://teatrkh.com/en/archive>, accessed 20/02/18.



## Chapter One – Politics, Democracy, and Structural Change

Chernobyl had enormous political consequences for the USSR, changing the character of Soviet political society beyond recognition to what it had been before. The disaster brought environmentalism to the fore of public debate and forced changes in the government apparatus of the Soviet Union. The rise in ecological activism, in the more open political environment generated by the ongoing reforms, became intimately connected with the burgeoning democratic spirit in the USSR. At the same time, environmentalism became intertwined with the messages of pro-independence movements in Ukraine and Belarus. After communism fell however, Chernobyl did not lose its political relevance and continued to play an important role in the politics of post-Soviet countries to varying degrees. This chapter will explore the political response to Chernobyl, charting the growth of environmentalism from 1986 onwards and how it became associated with the nascent democracy in the USSR, while also reflecting on the disaster's significance to the collapse of the Soviet Union and its continued role in the successor republics.

Before Chernobyl happened, there had in fact been an active environmentalist movement in the USSR, most being members of the All-Union Society for Nature Protection.<sup>31</sup> Differing from most other unofficial groups, whose activities were normally tightly controlled, green organisations in the Soviet Union could enjoy a comparatively greater level of freedom.<sup>32</sup> The Communist Party felt unthreatened by them, their benign activities posing no ideological challenge as they focussed on specific, local problems.<sup>33</sup> Still though, the authorities actively suppressed environmental activism where it was perceived as a threat.<sup>34</sup> After Chernobyl however, the character of environmentalism

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<sup>31</sup> Paula Garb, *A History of Environmental Activism in Chelyabinsk* (Washington, DC: The National Council for Soviet and East European Research, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Novikau, 'The Evolution of the Environmental Movement in Belarus', p. 94.

<sup>33</sup> Mike Bowker & Antje Grebner, 'The Referendum on the Construction of a Nuclear Heating Plant in Voronezh in 1990: An Example of Grassroots Democracy in the Soviet Union', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 85, No. 3 (Jul., 2007), p. 548.

<sup>34</sup> Yevgeny Gontmacher & John M. Whiteley, 'The Governmental Response to Nuclear Environmental Problems in the Chelyabinsk Region' (Washington, DC: The National Council for Soviet and East European Research, 1994), p. 1.

changed dramatically. As Mike Bowker and Ante Grebner say, the secretive response to Chernobyl worsened the existing distrust between citizens and the government and provoked a public debate which questioned not only environmental safety, but the Soviet political system itself.<sup>35</sup> As a result, environmentalism became an important political force which thrived in the liberal atmosphere produced by Gorbachev's ongoing reforms. Gorbachev's reforms themselves however, were directly affected by Chernobyl.

On the structural and policy level of politics, the disaster at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) had a profound impact. The exposure of the fatal consequences of corruption and secrecy, made it impossible to back-track or slow-down the pace of reform initiated by Gorbachev. In fact, it made it necessary, in Gorbachev's view, to accelerate and expand reform. In an essay of 2014, he has clarified how much Chernobyl changed:

The nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl even more than my launch of perestroika, was perhaps the real cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union five years later... the Chernobyl disaster, more than anything else, opened the possibility of much greater freedom of expression, to the point that the system as we knew it could no longer continue. It made absolutely clear how important it was to continue the policy of glasnost.<sup>36</sup>

Gorbachev realised that the whole system had to be changed, and after the disaster, there was a noticeable radicalisation of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. This was in stark contrast to the tentative proposals made at the 27<sup>th</sup> CPSU Congress, held just a month before Chernobyl's fourth reactor

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<sup>35</sup> Bowker & Grebner, 'The Referendum on the Construction of a Nuclear Heating Plant in Voronezh in 1990', pp. 544-5; Gontmacher & Whiteley, 'The Governmental Response to Nuclear Environmental Problems in the Chelyabinsk Region', p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, in, Gerd Ludwig, *The Long Shadow of Chernobyl* (Baden: Edition Lammerhuber, 2014). See John Vidal, 'The Long Shadow of Chernobyl', *The Guardian*, 4 July 2014 [online], available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jul/04/-sp-the-long-shadow-of-chernobyl>, accessed 12/4/17.

exploded. Though open with his intention to bring about reform, he only offered limited measures aimed at 'quickenning' the economy and improving the efficiency of the bureaucracy.<sup>37</sup> In a report on the Congress, the CIA expressed surprise at the conservative nature of Gorbachev's statements, stating that it did not represent a 'decisive break with the past', as had been expected by some Soviet and Western experts.<sup>38</sup> In particular, the CIA cited the changes of personnel in Gorbachev's administration as evidence of the gradual pace of reform. Despite promoting some reformists, Gorbachev left many 'Brezhnevite holdovers' still filling key positions, while also holding his supporters back from speaking at the congress.<sup>39</sup> Clearly, Gorbachev maintained a pragmatic realism about what could and could not be done at the top level of politics. He also understood that change needed to be incremental rather sweeping or incidental, and assured the party old guard there would be no 'purge'.<sup>40</sup> Yet after Chernobyl, this attitude was abandoned. Gorbachev quickly made use of the disaster and it served as an opportunity to push his reform agenda. If the system was to be changed, as Chernobyl had shown it drastically needed to be, obstacles would have to be thrown out. A 'purge' was well underway by 1988.<sup>41</sup>

Multiple 'Brezhnevite holdovers' were ousted in the disaster's immediate aftermath, followed by the retirement of 'three elderly members of the Central Committee' (CC) and the sacking of several 'ministry-level officials'.<sup>42</sup> But while Chernobyl provided the impetus to fill the ministries with pro-reformists, it also led to the creation of entirely new departments. In 1988, the first environmental agency was created, *Goskompriroda*, headed by Fedor Morgun.<sup>43</sup> It was designed to combat environmental negligence in the USSR and ensure that new ecological legislation was enforced.<sup>44</sup> Its

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<sup>37</sup> Figes, *Revolutionary Russia, 1891-1991*, p. 392.

<sup>38</sup> U.S. Directorate of Intelligence, *The 27<sup>th</sup> CPSU Conference: Gorbachev's Unfinished Business* (Washington D.C.: 1986), p. iii.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. v.

<sup>40</sup> U.S. Directorate of Intelligence, *Talking Points for ADDI 27<sup>th</sup> CPSU Congress* (Washington D.C.: 1986), p.1.

<sup>41</sup> U.S. Directorate of Intelligence, 'What is going on in the Soviet Union?', Robert M. Gates, *Dallas Council on World Affairs* (Washington D.C.: 1988), p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Directorate of Intelligence, *The Chernobyl Accident: Social and Political Implications* (Washington D.C.: 1987), p. vi.

<sup>43</sup> Murray Feshbach, 'Social Change in the USSR Under Gorbachev: Population, Health and Environmental Issues', in Harley D. Balzer (ed.), *Five Years That Shook the World*, p.55.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*.

establishment highlighted the level of acceptance by the regime towards environmental issues and shows how reform was facilitated by but also enabled the growth of ecological politics. There is however, a more dramatic conclusion that can be drawn from this. Chernobyl can be taken as one of the practical starting points for the collapse of Soviet governance.

Though five more years of communist rule followed April 26<sup>th</sup> 1986, Chernobyl was key to initiating the process of the Soviet collapse. As already shown in the words of none other than the last Soviet First Secretary himself, the disaster forced changes upon the Soviet system at such a pace and so broadly, that it simply could no longer continue. The accelerated expansion of *glasnost*, though Gorbachev hoped it would restore some credibility to his position, brought more damage to his regime, by exposing poor conditions and ultimately many truths as fallacies, to the extent that when he allowed democratic elections, his vision was rejected.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Chernobyl was a psychological shock to millions of Soviet citizens who had been led to believe that their way of life and system of governance were infallible to such tragedies, especially with the emphasis placed on and centrality of technological superiority to Soviet ideology.<sup>46</sup> As we shall see, this provoked a debate about not just ecology, but the eligibility of the Soviet regime as a whole. In this way, at the grassroots level of politics, Chernobyl began to make itself felt through Gorbachev's democratisation program.

Though this was a process initiated from above, it quickly became a citizens' movement, particularly amongst ecological activists who took advantage of the more open environment democratisation allowed. For example, the environmental movement in the city of Chelyabinsk, despite initially having little organisation, was able to use Chernobyl to draw Gorbachev's attention to their region, deep in the industrialised South Ural, and persuade him to commission a report on environmental conditions there.<sup>47</sup> From here, the environmental crowd became a source of strength

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<sup>45</sup> Wanner, *Burden of Dreams*, p. 31.

<sup>46</sup> See Johanna Lindbladh, 'Deconstructing the "Peaceful Atom" in the Soviet Collective Memory after Chernobyl: The Beginning of the End of the Soviet Union?', *Baltic Worlds* (2014), pp. 1-10.

<sup>47</sup> Maria Tysiachniouk, Natalia Mironova, & Jonathan Reisman, 'A Historical Perspective on the Movement for Nuclear Safety in Chelyabinsk, Russia', *International Journal of Contemporary Sociology*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2004), p. 44.

for other activist groups concerned with democracy, who joined forces with the greens and eventually found their way into government as members of the People's Front.<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere, in Leningrad, people began joining a diverse number of other environmental groups. By 1990, sixty 'ecological organisations' could be counted there, ranging from 'fiercely nationalist organisations to apolitical bird-watching societies.'<sup>49</sup> Most significant of all however, were a number of citizen led referendums held throughout the USSR on environmental issues, specifically, campaigns against the construction of new NPPs. One such vote was held in the city of Voronezh in 1990.

Voronezh, being at the core of the USSR's military-industrial complex, was never a natural breeding ground for 'any anti-establishment democratic movement' and thus, when in 1979, the Energy Ministry commissioned a new AST-500 power plant (VAST), there was no public outcry.<sup>50</sup> After Chernobyl, however, with the reactor incomplete, the ecologically sensitised public began to make its voice heard. The impetus for the opposition to VAST came from Voronezh State University, where staff, some of whom had been involved in the Chernobyl clean-up, organised a campaign with their students and forced the local administration to release information in May 1988, which detailed many of the shortcomings of the VAST plant.<sup>51</sup> Their campaign gathered momentum, involving locals in a petition which between November 1988 and December 1989 received around 50,000 signatures.<sup>52</sup> From here, the opposition's main aim moved to organising a vote. The local authorities would have preferred to resist the growing opposition to the VAST project, but were unable to do so as they would have previously. The combination of Chernobyl and Gorbachev's reforms, meant they were obliged to respond.<sup>53</sup> After pressuring the Voronezh administration, the environmentalists achieved their goal

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<sup>48</sup> Tysiachniouk, Mironova, & Reisman, 'A Historical Perspective on the Movement for Nuclear Safety in Chelyabinsk, Russia', p. 44.

<sup>49</sup> D. J. Peterson, *Troubled Lands: The Legacy of Soviet Environmental Destruction* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 206-7.

<sup>50</sup> Bowker & Grebner, 'The Referendum on the Construction of a Nuclear Heating Plant in Voronezh in 1990', p. 545.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 549.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 550.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 550-1.

and a successful referendum was held: 96% voted to halt the VAST project on a turnout of 81.6%.<sup>54</sup> The decision was accepted by the City Council, made legally binding, and represented a triumph of grass-roots democracy in the USSR.<sup>55</sup>

The case study of Voronezh's referendum is revealing in many ways. First, given that it was so unlikely a place to develop either an environmentalist or democratic movement, the successful referendum that was eventually held highlights the strength and pervasiveness of the impact of Chernobyl. Despite living in a highly Sovietised city, the effects of Chernobyl and the cover-up were so potent, that the local population were inspired to take politics into their own hands. Second, it shows the key relationship between Chernobyl and the Gorbachev reforms. As Bowker and Grebner point out, though Chernobyl 'was the decisive factor that triggered ... the referendum ... none of this would have happened without Gorbachev's reforms.'<sup>56</sup> Chernobyl combined with the reformist environment to provoke unprecedented examples of democracy in the USSR. However, though the referendum was without precedent in Voronezh, it was certainly not an isolated incident. Chernobyl, through *glasnost*, resulted in many other similar exercises in ground-level democratic action. Between 1988 and 1992, referendums were held on the construction of new NPPs across Russia: 90% of Khabarovsk's residents rejected the proposed Primorsky NPP; 96% of voters in Medvezhegorsk were against the construction of the Karelia NPP; and 76% of Chelyabinsk's residents voted to close the No. 1 reactor of the South Ural NPP.<sup>57</sup> In the same period, environmental activists also prevented the expansion of the Kostroma, Kaliningrad, Beloyarsk, Rostov, and Kursk NPPs.<sup>58</sup> Elsewhere in the USSR, beyond Russia, similar activism was taking place.

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<sup>54</sup> Bowker & Grebner, 'The Referendum on the Construction of a Nuclear Heating Plant in Voronezh in 1990', p. 555.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. 556.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p. 548.

<sup>57</sup> Yelizaveta Mikhailovna Sharonova, 'Nuclear energy status in Russia: Historical and contemporary perspectives', *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (IOSR-JHSS)*, Vol. 21, Issue 9, Version 8 (Sep., 2016), p. 41.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*.

First of all, the Baltic nations were angered. Ecological issues were already sensitive in those three republics.<sup>59</sup> Chernobyl however, not only exasperated environmental tensions between Moscow and the Baltics, but also worsened strenuous ethnic relations. The call-up of Baltic reservists in large numbers to liquidate the disaster zone, was perceived as disproportionate and discriminatory and led to large-scale protests as well as adding to calls for independence.<sup>60</sup> In Ukraine however, the republic where the Chernobyl NPP was actually located, the impact was even greater. Ukrainians were outraged at the disaster and the cover-up. Very quickly, the environmentalist movement grew to occupy an important place in Ukrainian politics. By 1990, the green movement had enormous influence and was able to impact government policy. Yurii Risovannyi, a head of the clean-up operation, in an interview with David Marples discussed the moratorium on the construction of nuclear power plants declared by the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet in 1990.<sup>61</sup> He attributed the decision, at least in part, to the influence of the environmental movement and described a general atmosphere of public pressure against the government.<sup>62</sup> Like in Russia, Chernobyl had the dual effect of heightening Ukrainians' ecological awareness and advancing the democratic spirit present in Soviet society. But in Ukraine, Chernobyl became associated with new forms of politics beyond democratisation: the disaster came to form an important part of the Ukrainian independence movement's message.

The rebirth of nationalism, particularly in Ukraine, is often cited as one of the most influential factors in the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>63</sup> In the last half of the 1980s, Ukraine's politicians and intellectuals began reviving Ukrainian national identity and building a new history, which differentiated them from the Soviet one they had been brought up with. Ukrainian culture and

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<sup>59</sup> Rubin B. Goldberg, 'Russian and Soviet Nationalities Policy in the Baltic States, 1855-1991' (Honours Diss., University of Vermont, 2015), p. 47.

<sup>60</sup> U.S. Directorate of Intelligence, *The Chernobyl Accident: Social and Political Implications* (Washington D.C.: 1986), p. vi.

<sup>61</sup> See Solchanyk, *Ukraine: From Chernobyl' to Sovereignty*, p. 139.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 146-7.

<sup>63</sup> Mark R. Beissinger, 'Nationalism and the Collapse of the Soviet Union', *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (August, 2009), pp. 331-347.

language were celebrated to promote a sense of nationalism amongst Ukrainians, who were disgruntled at the Soviet system which was failing to deliver for them.<sup>64</sup> However, literature and national customs were one thing, but Soviet ‘crimes’ were something far more pervasive.<sup>65</sup> The Ukrainian Famine was constructed as an act of ‘genocide’ and used to portray the Soviets as foreign abusers.<sup>66</sup> Chernobyl came to be used in a similar way, providing ‘evidence that Ukrainians would never be entirely safe as a colony of Moscow’.<sup>67</sup> And indeed, there was evidence to suggest to Ukrainians that they simply did not matter to the Soviet ‘centre’.<sup>68</sup> As late as 1989, as *Pravda* exposed, residents of Ukraine, and elsewhere throughout the three Slavic SSRs, were living in dangerously contaminated areas without receiving any knowledge from the authorities.<sup>69</sup> Such an exposé drove deeper the divide between non-Russian Slavs and their Russian counterparts, who were perceived as *too* Soviet and alien by the former.<sup>70</sup> Belarus in fact was the worst affected of the two countries and Chernobyl became a similarly important symbol in its push for independence.<sup>71</sup> Eventually, nationalism won out in both countries and they were independent by 1991. After this however, Chernobyl did not lose its political relevance. Nationalists in Ukraine and Belarus still had to distance themselves from Russia and build new identities, and employed Chernobyl in a variety of ways as they forged new nation-states. In particular, Kiev made use of Chernobyl to solidify Ukrainian nationhood. Specifically, it began using the acceptable levels of radiation exposure and compensation as a political tool.

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<sup>64</sup> For an overview of the development of Ukrainian nationalism in the 1980s, see Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 144-174.

<sup>65</sup> Richard Sakwa, *Gorbachev and His Reforms 1985-1990* (Hemel Hempstead: Philip Alan, 1990), p. 250.

<sup>66</sup> For an overview of the Holodomor’s revision, see Marples, ‘The Famine of 1932-33’, *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), pp. 35-79.

<sup>67</sup> Petryna, *Life Exposed* p. 23; Catherine Wanner, in, Stephen M. Norris, ‘Ukraine’s Sites of Memory: Chernobyl in the Heart’, *The Moscow Times* (April 7, 2014), [online], available at: <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/ukraines-sites-of-memory-chernobyl-in-the-heart-33697>, accessed 21/12/17.

<sup>68</sup> Feshbach, ‘Social Change in the USSR Under Gorbachev’, in Balzer (ed.), *Five Years That Shook The World*, pp. 50-1.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Paul Goble, ‘Imperial Endgame: Nationality Problems and the Soviet Future’, in, *ibid.*, p. 100.



In Soviet times, the level of radiation to which a person could legally be exposed was 35 rem, a very high figure.<sup>72</sup> After independence, the Ukrainian government opted to drastically reduce this figure to 7 rem, on par with American standards.<sup>73</sup> It also introduced Chernobyl related taxation legislation, proscribing a 12% tax on profits of private business and state enterprises to pay for new laws designed to compensate victims of the disaster.<sup>74</sup> These new policies were designed to reinforce the post-independence values of democracy and human rights, which would distance the new Ukraine from its Soviet past and give its government legitimacy.<sup>75</sup> Petryna rightly sees these laws as evidence of Chernobyl and 'bio-scientific knowledge' being used as mediums in the process of state-building.<sup>76</sup> In this way, issues to do with Chernobyl became a crucial part of the state's campaign to build a sense of cohesiveness between Ukrainians. It was hoped the tax laws would create a 'national bond between sufferers and nonsufferers' by placing on the latter 'financial and moral obligations' to help people who were ultimately, in the Ukrainian nationalist view, now victims of foreign, Soviet oppression and terror.<sup>77</sup> These new stipulations cemented Chernobyl as a central pillar of Ukraine's new nationhood, and inscribed the disaster as a 'key moral, economic, and political event in daily postsocialist Ukrainian life'.<sup>78</sup>

As brought out by this chapter, from the outset, Chernobyl was an event that had profound, long-lasting, and far-reaching political consequences for the countries which it affected. On a practical level, the disaster and the cover-up forced change upon the Soviet regime and provided an opportunity for Gorbachev to push his reform program. After April 1986, Gorbachev's policies became more radical and targeted broader and more sensitive parts of the Soviet system. This had a great impact on the ground-level. The expansion of *glasnost* and democratisation, ran alongside a rapid growth in environmentalism as a political movement. Together, the disaster had the dual effect of

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<sup>72</sup> Petryna, *Life Exposed*, p. 23.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, p. 24.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 23-5.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 23-4

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p. 24.

providing an impetus for environmental debate and broadening the space in which it could take place. And as the CIA almost predicted in their 1986 assessment of the disaster's implications, Chernobyl became a 'focal point' which citizens gathered around to express their dissatisfaction with the regime.<sup>79</sup> Most importantly, Chernobyl became a catalyst for nationalism. The disaster and the cover-up, fed into the nationalist narratives that demanded independence on the basis of Soviet incompetence. In Ukraine and Belarus, the disaster seemed to suggest that Soviet rule could no longer provide safety or prosperity. Yet, even after independence was secured, Chernobyl continued to be relevant. As each new country built itself a new national identity, memory of Chernobyl was a crucial political tool, shaping ideas of Ukrainian and Belarusian victimhood at the hands of the Soviets. However, after gaining independence, the political climates in both countries began to change significantly. As the post-independence realities of self-governance and economic recession made themselves felt, the newly autonomous nations began to surrender the liberalising spirit upon which they were founded. This led to a marked shift in the political meaning of Chernobyl, especially in Belarus but also in Ukraine.

While in the late 1980s and 1990s, the disaster was a source of national unity in the face of Soviet barbarity, in the following years, Chernobyl soon became a cause for conflict between the state and its citizens. Chernobyl was still remembered as a tragedy and continued to serve an important purpose for national memory and identity.<sup>80</sup> However, at the same time, nuclear power had been revived by the mid-2000s in both countries and repurposed as a symbol of national strength, with Chernobyl omitted from discussions regarding its safety and implementation. Opposition groups sprang up to oppose this and began to use Chernobyl as a humanitarian symbol, but also as a tool of general protest. Meanwhile, most of all in Belarus, especially from the accession of Lukashenka to the presidency in 1994, there started a reversion to Soviet style governance and tactics, such as the

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<sup>79</sup> U.S. Directorate of Intelligence, *The Chernobyl Accident: Social and Political Implications* (Washington D.C.: 1987), p. 32.

<sup>80</sup> Norris, 'Ukraine's Sites of Memory', *The Moscow Times*, 7 April 2014 [online], available at: <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/ukraines-sites-of-memory-chernobyl-in-the-heart-33697>, accessed 21/12/17.

increasing use of arguments of 'Chernobyl Syndrome' by the government to attack opponents and dismiss their concerns as illegitimate, while also depriving them of accurate information on nuclear power's safety.<sup>81</sup> In many ways, Chernobyl has become a source of conflict, no longer unity, and subject to attempts at what this dissertation calls, 'counter-*glasnost*', by post-Soviet government. In fact, this is related to a wider backlash against the liberalism which accompanied these countries' independence, which Chernobyl can be used as a lens to observe through. This will form part of the focus of the following chapter, which covers the relationship between Chernobyl, *glasnost*, and the politics of information.

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<sup>81</sup> 'Chernobyl Syndrome' is a term that describes the psychological effects disasters like Chernobyl have on people who are affected by them. Many see their mental health suffer as a result of the fear they experience. However, it is frequently used by the pro-nuclear lobby in a derogatory sense, to denigrate green opponents as paranoid scaremongers. See Aliaksandr Novikau, 'What is "Chernobyl Syndrome?" The Use of Radiophobia in Nuclear Communications', *Environmental Communication* (Jan., 2017), pp. 1-10.

## Chapter Two – *Glasnost*, Counter-*Glasnost*, and the Politics of Information

The previous chapter has illustrated the impact of Chernobyl on official attitudes to reform within the USSR and post-Soviet Belarus and Ukraine. Most significantly, the disaster and the public pressure that resulted from its attempted cover-up, led to an expansion of governmental openness and transparency (*glasnost*). However, just as it is necessary to explore the ways in which Chernobyl changed attitudes within government, it is equally important to judge how official attitudes have evolved towards the disaster itself. Reaction to the disaster in terms of late-Soviet democratisation and environmentalism is only one part of the history of Chernobyl. In the following analysis, this chapter will detail the evolution of governmental outlooks towards Chernobyl, from the late 1980s to modern-day Belarus and Ukraine. Despite gaining their autonomy on the back of the disaster and *glasnost*, open coverage of Chernobyl began to disappear from the media and politics shortly after independence. Meanwhile, the governments of both countries started reintroducing Soviet-style administrative and political practices, and generally retreated from *glasnost*/openness. Identifying this shift, this chapter will additionally assess the possibility of a ‘counter-*glasnost*’ in regards to open discussion of Chernobyl (see footnote 18, p. 5 for a definition). To assess the relevance of this concept, key examples of government interference into Chernobyl’s presentation will be examined in: the political debate over nuclear power that emerged in the post-Soviet period; the depiction of the disaster in school and university history textbooks; and in scientific research into Chernobyl’s long-term health effects.

Though *glasnost* prevailed in the late 1980s, largely in response to the political fallout of Chernobyl and its attempted cover-up, the disaster’s initial presentation in the media fell in line with the position of the Communist leadership.<sup>82</sup> Despite the significant threat to health from radiation,

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<sup>82</sup> Kuchinskaya, *The Politics of Invisibility*, p. 68.

the majority of experts quoted in the media were members of the Soviet establishment who were adamant that there was little risk from contamination, while most other coverage focussed on the disaster's socioeconomic effects.<sup>83</sup> The difference between these two different presentations is crucial and vital to understanding further aspects of this chapter's argument. Were the health consequences to have been openly discussed in the press and politics, the disaster would be presented as an ongoing issue that required direct action from the authorities, thus forming a vulnerable point of criticism for the regime. It was necessary to avoid this, as was normal for any Soviet administration, and therefore expedient to shift focus away from Chernobyl's ongoing effects and towards its non-health related impact so as to depict it as an issue that could be solved through Soviet policy, in-line with official ideology, like any other socioeconomic problem. However, such an approach became unsustainable in the political climate that evolved in the late 1980s. *Glasnost*, in light of the disaster and the cover-up, had to be expanded. Once put fully into force, media outlets began reporting on the disaster's health effects and providing advisory information.

For example, in Belarus, after the Communist leadership announced the five-year plan for Chernobyl Program (1989), the press began reporting on the wide-spread health effects of the disaster.<sup>84</sup> In much the same way that democratisation, as a top down policy decision, had profound consequences for the development of Soviet democratic movements, the Chernobyl Program, particularly after its publication, led to a shift in media coverage of the disaster to discussion of a '*long-term* problem.'<sup>85</sup> The state-run *Sovetskaya Byelorussiaya (SB)*, began publishing a wide range of maps detailing the geographic extent of contamination and information on 'background radiation.'<sup>86</sup> Later, in 1990, that year's session of the Supreme Council of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) was broadcast live on television with Chernobyl as the main point of debate.<sup>87</sup> Harley D. Balzer has

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<sup>83</sup> Kuchinskaya, *The Politics of Invisibility*, p.70.

<sup>84</sup> The Chernobyl Program centralised efforts to combat Chernobyl's effects and represented a significant shift in government attitudes towards taking the disaster seriously. See Kuchinskaya, *The Politics of Invisibility*, p. 72.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 72 & 70.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, p. 72.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, p. 72.

identified a more general trend regarding Soviet television coverage after the Chernobyl disaster. She draws an explicit link between Chernobyl, *glasnost*, and the media, describing how the first Western-style news personality emerged in the form of Alexander Krutov, who worked on the 'Vremia' TV program that attempted to cover the disaster.<sup>88</sup> Yet Balzer also draws attention to some back-tracking on these policies that began to take place in 1991: 'the backlash potential [was] enormous, and by early 1991 a retreat appeared to be well underway.'<sup>89</sup> It is interesting that Balzer identifies such a trend, which seems so at odds with the general perception of the period as a time of increasing openness. Yet there was evidence of significant back-tracking which continued after the fall of the Soviet Union, as Olga Kuchinskaya has identified. In *SB's* coverage, the scientists began disappearing from coverage of Chernobyl and 'radiological maps' were published in far fewer numbers, falling from thirty in 1990 to below ten in 1991.<sup>90</sup> Instead, the focus of coverage of Chernobyl shifted back to the socioeconomic issues and continued to do so throughout the 1990s and beyond. What accounts for this sudden shift and why, after gaining independence, did the press in a country such as Belarus resume such a Soviet-style practice? The answer is to be found in the economic circumstances facing Belarus and Ukraine upon achieving autonomy and their governments' reaction to them.

Independence brought with it significant economic challenges for the re-born republics of Belarus and Ukraine. Amongst the most pressing were respective energy crises. In 1994, the year of Aleksandr Lukashenka's election as president, over half of the Belarusian national debt (\$1 billion) was in gas payments to Russia.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, GDP had fallen 22% and consumer goods production was down 17%. Furthermore, 14% of 1995's budget would be spent on mitigating the effects of Chernobyl.<sup>92</sup> In 1997, Belarus still remained unable to provide for any more than 12% of its own energy

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<sup>88</sup> Balzer, 'Perestroika as Process: Lessons from the First Five Years', in Balzer (ed.), *Five Years That Shook the World*, p. 64.

<sup>89</sup> Balzer, 'Perestroika as Process', in Balzer (ed.), *Five Years That Shook the World*, p. 64.

<sup>90</sup> Kuchinskaya, *The Politics of Invisibility*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>91</sup> David R. Marples, *Belarus: From Soviet Rule to Nuclear Catastrophe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 112.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

needs.<sup>93</sup> In the same period, Ukraine's GDP contracted drastically, falling 34% in 1994<sup>94</sup> and by 1997 \$13.8 billion had been expended on dealing with the disaster.<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile, Ukraine also remained dependent on nuclear power for its energy needs, with atomic power providing 40% of its electricity.<sup>96</sup> Equally serious was the loss of agricultural production capacity as a result of Chernobyl. 20% of Belarus' land was 'removed from agricultural cultivation' due to contamination.<sup>97</sup> The response to these economic circumstances took shape in two main policies. First of all, despite the horror of the Chernobyl disaster, both countries revived civil nuclear power as the solution to their energy problems. In 2011, Lukashenka confirmed the plan to build Belarus' first nuclear power plant, despite declaring a moratorium in 1999.<sup>98</sup> Ukraine, already dependent on nuclear energy, began developing eleven new reactors in 2006.<sup>99</sup> The second policy was a rehabilitation program, which looked to revitalise the contaminated region for agricultural production by encouraged resettlement and re-cultivation.<sup>100</sup> Both these policies have been strongly upheld by each government and continue to be this day. However, the pro-nuclear authorities have faced a serious challenge in changing public attitudes. Upon gaining independence, national opinion towards nuclear power was largely hostile in both countries.<sup>101</sup> Chernobyl was (and continues to be) people's main point of historical orientation on the safety and dangers of nuclear power. Therefore, both governments began attempts to reframe Chernobyl's discussion in the media, politics, and scientific debate, to be more conducive to positive public attitudes to nuclear power. Most importantly, as Andrei Stsiapanau says, both governments have attempted to frame Chernobyl in terms of a 'liquidation discourse', which portrays the disaster's

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> US State Department, 'Ukraine: 1994 Country Report on Economic Policy and Trade Practices', *Online Research Collections*, [online], available at: [http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/economics/trade\\_reports/1994/Ukraine.html](http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/economics/trade_reports/1994/Ukraine.html), accessed 12/1/18.

<sup>95</sup> David R. Marples, 'The Legacy of Chernobyl' in 1997', p. 168.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p. 167.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p. 168.

<sup>98</sup> Petryna, *Life Exposed*, p. 157; Joint Institute for Power and Nuclear Research (Minsk), [online], available at: [http://sosny.basnet.by/npp\\_construction/npp\\_project](http://sosny.basnet.by/npp_construction/npp_project), accessed 23/1/18.

<sup>99</sup> 'Nuclear Power in Ukraine', *World Nuclear Association* (Sept., 2017), [online], available at: <http://world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-t-z/ukraine.aspx>, accessed 22/1/18.

<sup>100</sup> Kuchinskaya, *The Politics of Invisibility*, pp. 15 & 157.

<sup>101</sup> Novikau, 'The Evolution of the Environmental Movement in Belarus', p. 98; Taras Kuzio, *Ukraine: Perestroika to Independence* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000), p. 191.

effects as something that can be soon eliminated.<sup>102</sup> The alternative: open discussion of the disaster's medical consequences, would see Chernobyl depicted as an ongoing problem and serve as a counter-argument to the development of nuclear power. Thus, it has become important for the pro-nuclear authorities to move discussion away from Chernobyl's health effects and towards socioeconomic issues, just as the Soviet authorities tried to do in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. Indeed, the tactics used to achieve are reminiscent of Soviet politics: misinformation and withholding of information, disrupting scientific research, arresting critics of government policies, and doctoring educational textbooks. Here, it becomes possible to suggest that there has been a counter-*glasnost* on Chernobyl. For example, the political debate surrounding nuclear power in Belarus is characterised by oppressive government action and suppression of information pertaining to the disaster's health effects. One particular tactic has been to dismiss criticism of nuclear power for health reasons on grounds of hysteria, or more specifically, 'Chernobyl Syndrome' (for definition see footnote 81, p. 19).

Belarus' only president has called people complaining of conditions in the zone 'hypochondriacs' for linking their bad health to the Chernobyl disaster.<sup>103</sup> Similarly, he has argued that 'an NPP would be one of the cornerstones of the country's independence and sovereignty' but a 'Chernobyl syndrome' persisted which had to be overcome.<sup>104</sup> In 2006, the Belarusian strongman insisted that the nuclear program should not be hindered by 'radiophobia'.<sup>105</sup> By using this terminology in such a way, it becomes 'a tool to deny citizens questions about the health effects of Chernobyl', and re-frame the debate over nuclear power and Chernobyl along socio-economic lines, in much the same way as the pre-*glasnost* Soviet authorities.<sup>106</sup> Despite this, the post-Soviet opposition in have Belarus tried to make their voice heard on nuclear power and Chernobyl's health effects, and periodically organised rallies, the most significant being the annual Chernobyl Path

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<sup>102</sup> Andrei Stsiapanau, 'The Chernobyl Politics in Belarus: Interplay of Discourse Coalitions', *Filosofija. Sociologija*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2010), p. 145; K. Kalmbach, 'Radiation and Borders: Chernobyl as a National and Transnational Site of Memory', *Global Environment*, Vol. 11 (2013), pp. 144-5.

<sup>103</sup> Ioffe, *Reassessing Lukashenka*, p. 229.

<sup>104</sup> Novikau, 'What is "Chernobyl Syndrome?"', p. 6.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, p. 5.



demonstration held in Minsk on the anniversary of the disaster. The authorities have responded with a number of oppressive measures to suppress their message.

In the build-up to the 2013 march, as has and continues to take place every year, pre-emptive arrests were carried out and extensive intimidation tactics employed to reduce participation in the event. Workers and students were threatened with expulsion from their respective employer or educational institution if they took part, but most effective was the media campaign run by the state.<sup>107</sup> 'The Belarusian regime has re-established a system of state propaganda that is strikingly similar to its Soviet predecessor' that is generally successful in its intentions.<sup>108</sup> Crucially, though the majority of Belarusian citizens have expressed opposition to the nuclear power plant project; 46.7% against to 25.8% for (2005)<sup>109</sup>, only 20% trust opposition politicians.<sup>110</sup> The regime has capitalised on this mistrust which has been damaging to the organisers, given the overt presence and participation of such figures in the event.<sup>111</sup> Lukashenka's government has successfully delegitimised the march as a PR stunt conducted by the opposition to boost their publicity, preventing the participation of real scientific experts whose voices would lend serious weight to the activists behind Chernobyl Path.<sup>112</sup> These tactics have been used to great effect since the late 1990s and had serious outcomes. Most of all, attendance at the march has fallen significantly year on year: 50,000 in 1996, 5,000 in 2001, 700-1,000 in 2013.<sup>113</sup> This conflict over the march and the debate on nuclear power are emblematic of the return to Soviet-style politics since independence in Belarus and represent the culmination of the state's effort to recast Chernobyl's health consequences as an irrelevant issue. The lengths to which the state has been willing to go to achieve this however, have not been restricted to national politics. The state apparatuses of Belarus and Ukraine have interfered with Chernobyl's representation in

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<sup>107</sup> Olena Nikolayenko, 'Marching Against the Dictator: Chernobyl Path in Belarus', *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2015), p. 234.

<sup>108</sup> Novikau, 'The Evolution of the Environmental Movement in Belarus', p. 93.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, p. 98.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, p. 234.

<sup>111</sup> Nikolaeyenko, 'Marching Against the Dictator', p. 234.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, p. 230.

educational textbooks and scientific research in order to suit their pro-nuclear ambitions. On the former point, the shift in the portrayal of Chernobyl was quite sudden.

Despite the centrality of Chernobyl to the formation of modern Ukrainian national identity, the disaster's treatment in the main history textbook became very selective after 1991. The Soviet edition of 1990, in line with the prevailing politics of the time, gave significant coverage to Chernobyl and emphasised its importance to Soviet politics. In particular, it framed the disaster in the context of *glasnost*, directing criticism at government officials who remained silent in the disaster's wake.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, though the text did suggest that future action could mitigate some of the disaster's effects, it frankly admitted that Chernobyl's consequences would 'not be liquidated within the next few centuries.'<sup>115</sup> This was in stark contrast to the disaster's treatment in the Ukrainian edition published just the following year. It devoted a mere sentence to Chernobyl, written in passing in a more general 'indictment' of the Soviet system.<sup>116</sup> Such minimalism is testament to the sensitivities of Ukraine's energy politics, especially at that time when it was reliant on Russia, and though this Ukraine's dependence on Russian fuel imports has 'waned', the renewed nuclear policy has meant that this interpretation has remained predominant.<sup>117</sup> The case is similar in Belarus. Despite the Chernobyl disaster occupying an equally central place in collective memory of the Belarusian national experience, the disaster's treatment in educational textbooks has been skewed for political purposes. Coverage of Chernobyl does not depict it as an important part of Belarusian or Soviet history and it is contained within an overall narrative that is critical of *perestroika*, directly reflecting the authoritarian, pro-nuclear and anti-liberal agenda of the Lukashenka regime.<sup>118</sup> These examples are testament to the counter-*glasnost* tendencies of the matured post-Soviet governments of Ukraine and Belarus, and

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<sup>114</sup> Wanner, *Burden of Dreams*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, p. 99.

<sup>117</sup> Charles Digges, 'Ukraine announces its dependence on Russian made nuclear fuel is waning', *Bellona* (Jan., 2018), [online], available at: <http://bellona.org/news/nuclear-issues/2018-01-ukraine-announces-its-dependence-on-russian-made-nuclear-fuel-is-waning>, accessed 24/1/18.

<sup>118</sup> Andrei Dudchik & Maharyta Fabrykant, 'Ordinary Tragedy: "Perestroika" of Collective Memory about Chernobyl disaster in Belarusian History Textbooks', *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2012), pp. 69 & 75.

demonstrate how official attitudes have changed and impacted the discourse of the disaster. However, perhaps more revealing of the determination of the pro-nuclear authorities to ensure positive reception of their atomic expansion, has been Belarus' willingness to interfere with scientific research pertaining to the Chernobyl's long-term effects.

The effects of contamination deprived Belarus of 20% of its land, a significant loss to its agricultural sector.<sup>119</sup> Facing such a loss, the government began to encourage resettlement and rehabilitation in the areas most affected by the disaster in the 1990s. This policy stipulates that a quarter of university graduates must do some work in the zone and youth organisations hold events to encourage resettlement.<sup>120</sup> Lukashenka has been a staunch defender of rehabilitation and has made public appearances in the contaminated zone to emphasise the lack of risk involved and to promote an image of normality.<sup>121</sup> In interview with Grigory Ioffe, the president said that, under his tenure, 'we have created such conditions there that nobody wants to leave' and asserted that much of the concern regarding Chernobyl's effects is the result of exaggeration.<sup>122</sup> Lukashenka, when questioned on scientific research which suggests dangerous conditions in the zone, countered, arguing that the accuracy of such data is highly questionable given the lack of comparative research available. Such research is of paramount importance to controlling the image of Chernobyl, something Lukashenka recognised quickly upon gaining the presidency.<sup>123</sup>

Upon Lukashenka's ascension to power in 1994, the authorities assumed more active control over the conduct of scientific research and there is clear evidence to show an active effort to shape this research along political lines has taken place since.<sup>124</sup> This is most evident in the treatment of dissident scientists who have criticised the government's policies. Professor Yuri Bandazhevsky questioned the government's approach to Chernobyl upon finding evidence of a high incidence of

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<sup>119</sup> Dudchik & Fabrykant, 'Ordinary Tragedy', p. 168.

<sup>120</sup> Nikolayenko, 'Marching Against the Dictator', p. 232.

<sup>121</sup> Ioffe, *Reassessing Lukashenka*, p. 228.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 229-30.

<sup>123</sup> Kuchinskaya, *The Politics of Invisibility*, p. 143.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, p. 142.

cancers in the contaminated region.<sup>125</sup> He was subsequently arrested in 1999 and convicted in 2001.<sup>126</sup> Bandazhevsky was later released in 2005 and shortly left the country.<sup>127</sup> His 'treatment was extreme', but it 'does illustrate the government's commitment to the policies of rehabilitation of the areas affected by Chernobyl.'<sup>128</sup> In other, less severe, but no less revealing incidents, other scientists have been ostracised from their chosen fields of research. In particular, leading researchers at the Institute of Radiation Medicine by the Ministry of Health were the target of government suppression in the late 1990s. Vladimir Matukhin was ousted from his position in 1993 and replaced by Aleksandr Stozharov.<sup>129</sup> Stozharov himself was subsequently dismissed in 1996.<sup>130</sup> He had expressed opposition to the revision of 'radiation medicine', his institution's field, to the revised concept of 'radiation protection'.<sup>131</sup> At the time, Belarusian researchers viewed such interventions as politically charged, intended to ensure the predominance of the 'official' government view, which underestimates health consequences beyond the single issue of thyroid cancers.<sup>132</sup> Such levels of interference have had serious consequences to the quality of research.

By presidential decree, in 2003, all Chernobyl research facilities were ordered to relocate to Gomel from Minsk. The ostensible intention was ensure that the focus was on the most affected regions, in line with the rehabilitation policy. Yet, despite this, the move involved significant relocation costs and resulted in the loss of many staff who remained in the capital.<sup>133</sup> Members of the scientific community also expressed concern that this move, as a result of the 'loss of continuity in data collection and analysis' that occurred, caused the research conducted to lose its value, with 'empirically based research' giving way to 'theoretical calculations'.<sup>134</sup> Such an outcome perfectly

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p. 137.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, pp. 137-8

<sup>127</sup> Kuchinskaya, *The Politics of Invisibility*, pp. 137-8.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, pp. 143-4

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, p. 144.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Kuchinskaya, *The Politics of Invisibility*, p. 145.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

suited Lukashenka's needs: a dearth of accurate information deprives the opposition of a counter-narrative to his nuclear and rehabilitation policies.<sup>135</sup> However, the question remains, does this historical intervention into science, the educational presentation of Chernobyl, and the political debate over nuclear power, represent a counter-*glasnost* on Chernobyl by the governments of Ukraine and Belarus? Before answering this question, it is necessary to make clear that there are important limits and national differences to this policy.

First of all, Belarus, since independence, has historically been far more authoritarian than Ukraine and politically closer to Russia.<sup>136</sup> As such, the motivations for the development of nuclear power and the reframing of Chernobyl to achieve this, despite the similarities in the means to pursue both, are different for each. Belarus, despite Lukashenka's emphasis on the link between nuclear power and independence, has closely co-operated with Russia on nuclear issues since 1991, as it does today on the construction of Belarus' new NPP.<sup>137</sup> Ukraine on the other hand, has pursued nuclear power to distance itself from Russia and end its dependence on Russian energy imports.<sup>138</sup> This is a reflection of the debate over Ukraine's national identity and international status since independence, as to whether it is more European than Russian, especially since the end of the Orange Revolution (2004).<sup>139</sup> Furthermore, while Belarus maintains a general 'hostility to foreign contacts', there is at least one aspect of its interaction with foreign powers on Chernobyl, which contradicts the counter-*glasnost* interpretation: child exchanges.<sup>140</sup>

Children in Belarus, with the assistance of international charities, who suffer illnesses arising from radiation are given the opportunity to take a recuperative trip to, normally, a Western country.

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<sup>135</sup> Nikolayenko, 'Marching Against the Dictator', p. 232.

<sup>136</sup> Ioffe, *Reassessing Lukashenka*, p. 140.

<sup>137</sup> *AtomStroyExport* is the firm responsible for constructing this plant, located at Astravyets. A Russian company, many Belarusians are uncomfortable with its role, concerned about its safety standards and as a threat to Belarusian autonomy by reinforcing the country's dependence on Russian energy imports. See *ibid*, pp. 232-3.

<sup>138</sup> Charles Digges, 'Ukraine announces its dependence on Russian made nuclear fuel is waning', *Bellona* (Jan., 2018) [online], available at: <http://bellona.org/news/nuclear-issues/2018-01-ukraine-announces-its-dependence-on-russian-made-nuclear-fuel-is-waning>, accessed 24/1/18.

<sup>139</sup> See Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine's Orange Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 174-98.

<sup>140</sup> Aliaksandr Novikau, 'The evolution of the environmental movement in Belarus', p. 99.

For several decades the United Kingdom and Belarus, despite a brief intermission in 2008-9, have had a bilateral agreement to facilitate the exchange of ill children to enjoy a stay in Britain.<sup>141</sup> This stands at odds with the usual attitude of the Belarusian government to Western interactions, which has typically been hostile since independence. Still though, despite the continuation of this policy, it represents an exception.

On the balance of the evidence assessed here in this chapter, the only conclusion we can reach on the question of a post-Soviet counter-*glasnost* on Chernobyl, is that the concept can only be applied with real relevance to the Republic of Belarus, not Ukraine as well. Though each country's government has sought to frame the disaster in a similar way: namely in terms of a 'liquidation discourse' conducive to more favourable public attitudes to nuclear power, there are important differences between the methods used to achieve this.<sup>142</sup> These are largely the result of the opposing systems of governance in each: dictatorship versus democracy. Though Ukraine's has suffered from high levels of corruption, since independence, its democracy has continued to function relatively well.<sup>143</sup> As such, while its politicians have made active efforts to reframe Chernobyl in pro-nuclear terms, the debate has been far more open and activist groups have functioned in a way they would find impossible in Belarus.<sup>144</sup> There, the beginning of Lukashenka's presidency announced a return to the politics and practices of the pre-*glasnost* USSR, evident in the active suppression of Chernobyl Path and interference into scientific research on the disaster's health effects. In Belarus, since 1994 Chernobyl's 'visibility' has been minimised as a health problem and it can be safely concluded that those activists and scientists who have been suppressed in their attempts to expose its ongoing

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<sup>141</sup> Lukashenka banned all trips when a young girl refused to return from America in 2008. See Daniel McLaughlin, 'Behind the Chernobyl children's travel ban', *The Irish Times*, 13 September 2008 [online], available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/behind-the-chernobyl-children-s-travel-ban-1.938394>; House of Commons, *Exchange of notes with Belarus in respect of the travel of children affected by the Chernobyl incident to the United Kingdom on charity-sponsored respite visits* (Minsk, 2009).

<sup>142</sup> Stsiapanau, 'The Chernobyl Politics in Belarus', pp. 144-5.

<sup>143</sup> Wilson, *Ukraine's Orange Revolution*, p. 174.

<sup>144</sup> Sarah D. Phillips, *Disability and Mobile Citizenship in Postsocialist Ukraine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 120.

dangers, have been the targets of a counter-*glasnost*.<sup>145</sup> However, that is not to say that there are not restrictions on discussion Chernobyl in Ukraine. From independence, many obstacles have emerged to inhibit free expression and information on Chernobyl, and crucially, its memory. In both countries, the memory of the disaster is contested, with official and unofficial interpretations competing for representation. The state seeks to frame commemoration in very different terms to how many individual citizens remember the disaster. This conflict over memory will form an important part of the next and final chapter's discussion, 'Culture and Memory'.

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<sup>145</sup> See Kuchinskaya, *The Politics of Invisibility*, p. 6.

## Chapter Three – Culture and Memory

As already demonstrated in the preceding chapters, Chernobyl's legacy continues to serve as a historical reference point for participants in modern-day political debates in the nations affected by it. In these debates, official interpretations of the disaster's history compete with those of activists and members of the political opposition. This political discussion is intense, however, it is not the only arena in which Chernobyl's historical meaning is contested as this conflict manifests itself in a cultural sense also. This chapter will assess the nature of memory towards Chernobyl in post-Soviet society in Belarus and Ukraine. Already, it has been shown how governments have attempted to reconstruct memory of Chernobyl through media such as school history textbooks. Here, official attitudes are generally predominant, either serving a nationalist or pro-nuclear agenda. In other forms of media however, there is a far greater degree of diversity, such as in the arts. Since the catastrophe took place, a broad spectrum of individuals and groups have offered varying cultural responses to the disaster and made their own contributions to collective memory of Chernobyl. These include the official branches of the state but also independent theatres, artists, and performers.

There are some groups who reconstruct memory of Chernobyl to deliberately and directly contradict to the official narrative. One particular example are the members of the *Kryly Khalopa (KH)* theatre based in Brest, Belarus. Their theatre is a self-described 'independent cultural space' and their intended mission is to provide a 'critical view on the surrounding reality' and 'reaction to the political situation'.<sup>146</sup> As part of their 'Histories of Belarus' series, they staged the play *Chernobyl* (2014).<sup>147</sup> They took 'stories from the past and attempted to connect them with the present' and used the play to question 'why a nuclear power plant is being built in the country where one fourth of the territory

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<sup>146</sup> Театр "Крылы халопы" (Kryly Khalopa Theatre) Website (2018) [online], available at: <http://teatrkh.com/en/archive>, accessed 20/02/18.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.



has been polluted by Chernobyl'.<sup>148</sup> Their message has parallels with that propagated by opposition movements such as Chernobyl Path and they have similar concerns. In interview, *KH*'s director, Oksana Haiko, described the taboo surrounding cancer statistics and the 'semi-restricted' environment she and her co-actors worked in with reference to oversight of the authorities.<sup>149</sup> Indeed, just as Chernobyl Path's activists have been the targets of government orchestrated suppression, *KH* have suffered censorship of their performances, as Haiko describes in a story concerning one of their planned performances of *Chernobyl* in Brest:

When everything was ready (the show is technically very complex: it took us eight hours to do the installation), we were told that an urgent renovation was to start in the cultural centre. We were bewildered. And then I got a call from the ideological committee and was directly asked: "Have you, dear Oksana, forgotten that the play needs to be first shown to the ideological committee?"<sup>150</sup>

The existence and interference of such bodies as 'ideological committees', captures well the scale and nature of Belarus' state censorship and its determination to prevent alternative interpretations of Chernobyl's history from gaining legitimacy.<sup>151</sup> Haiko reflected that by using 'excerpts from online forums where people discuss the Astravyets nuclear power plant and often criticise the authorities' the play 'would never receive the approval of the "artistic" committee' for being 'too critical of the Belarusian president's pet project'.<sup>152</sup> Lukashenka would much prefer commemorative events that promote the Ostrovets project and the resettlement program. And Lukashenka, like all good dictators, recognises the importance of culture to securing his regime's monopoly on memory of the disaster.

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<sup>148</sup> Andrei Zavadski, 'Amnesia: A Key Feature of Belarusian Memory', *openDemocracy* (8 January 2018) [online], available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/andrei-zavadski/amnesia-a-key-feature-of-belarusian-memory>, accessed 20/02/18.

<sup>149</sup> Zavadski, 'Amnesia: A Key Feature of Belarusian Memory'.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> See Novikau, 'The Evolution of the Environmental Movement in Belarus', p. 93.

<sup>152</sup> Zavadski, 'Amnesia: A Key Feature of Belarusian Memory'.

‘For example, the state-sponsored youth organization Belarusian Republican Union of Youth in cooperation with government agencies implemented a cultural program ‘Chernobyl Path – the Road to Life’ and assisted with the organization of charity concerts in the contaminated regions.’<sup>153</sup> This is quite an unusual event to stage on the part of the Lukashenka regime, but it still represents a manifestation of its desire to frame Chernobyl in terms favourable to its agenda, in this particular case to the re-resettlement program. The name given to this event makes clear its highly charged political motivations. The choice of ‘Chernobyl Path – the Road to Life’ reflects the two-way intention of the regime to promote the contaminated regions as a centre of future potential and to delegitimise and debase the memory of Chernobyl propagated by the ‘original’ Chernobyl Path discussed in Chapter Two.<sup>154</sup> This example however, as already said, is somewhat unique and the events of the greatest concern both to the regime of Lukashenka and also the government of Ukraine, are the official commemorations held annually.

During these services, in the actions of both leaders, it is made quite clear how the state seeks to remember the event. During the official ceremony of 2017 held in Kiev, Ukraine’s incumbent president Petro Poroshenko laid flowers at the base of both the memorial sign dedicated to the ‘Warriors of Chernobyl’ and at the Memorial Mound honouring the ‘Heroes of Chernobyl’.<sup>155</sup> The focus remains on the liquidators who battled the blaze started by the explosion in much the same way as war memorials commemorate the dead of the Second World War.<sup>156</sup> In this way, the disaster is honoured in a military fashion that depicts it as a battle than has been *won*, rather than ongoing, reinforcing the official narrative that places Chernobyl as a past event.<sup>157</sup> In Ukraine, this forms an

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<sup>153</sup> Nikolayenko, ‘Marching Against the Dictator’, p. 232.

<sup>154</sup> Sander Brouwer, *Contested Interpretations of the Past in Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian film: screen as battlefield* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p. 113.

<sup>155</sup> ‘President honored memory of the Chernobyl liquidators’, *President of Ukraine Website* (14<sup>th</sup> December 2017) [online], available at: <http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/prezident-vshanuvav-pamyat-likvidatoriv-avariyi-na-chaes-45046>, accessed 21/02/18.

<sup>156</sup> Liquidators were the 600,000 reservists called-up to battle the blaze at Chernobyl; Thom Davies, ‘A Visual Geography of Chernobyl: double exposure’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, Vol. 84 (2013), p. 122.

<sup>157</sup> Kalmbach, ‘Radiation and Borders’, pp. 137, 144-5.

important part of the history of the disaster, which is often used to serve a nationalist agenda.<sup>158</sup> Comparing Chernobyl to conflict however, is not a practice exclusive to the state's style of commemoration. Many individuals who witnessed the disaster remember it in terms of a conflict in their attempts to rationalise their experiences.

The experience of Chernobyl was militarised from the very start, both in terms of how it was observed and depicted in the media.<sup>159</sup> In the first respect, many were fooled into thinking that a general mobilization had been ordered when soldiers began arriving in the Chernobyl area. The servicemen themselves recall: 'I had a call-up notice ... we were issued weapons: assault rifles. In case the Americans attacked. In our political sessions, they lectured us on sabotage operations by Western intelligence'.<sup>160</sup> Another man described his confusion towards his experiences: 'At first, it was baffling. It all felt like an exercise, a game. But it was genuine war. Nuclear war.'<sup>161</sup> One man could only offer to his son, in response to his question, 'Daddy, what did you see?' the words: 'A war.'<sup>162</sup> For many victims, viewing and remembering Chernobyl in terms of conflict has been the only way they can comprehend their experiences. One man called it 'The war to end all wars.'<sup>163</sup> The Soviet authorities, after coming to terms with the necessity to allow coverage of the disaster, focussed on the distribution of awards for bravery to the liquidators. Family members of a soldier called-up recall seeing his picture in the magazine *Izvetia* and their mother bursting into tears.<sup>164</sup> Yet, there was genuine pride in the sacrifices made by the soldiers amongst Soviet citizens, who celebrated their bravery separately from the state's glorification. The stoicism of many of the people involved evoked feelings of Soviet pride and determination.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Norris, 'Ukraine's Sites of Memory', *The Moscow Times*, 7 April 2014 [online], available at: <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/ukraines-sites-of-memory-chernobyl-in-the-heart-33697>, accessed 21/02/18.

<sup>159</sup> Anna Reid, *Borderland*, pp. 200-1.

<sup>160</sup> Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, p. 82.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*, p. 84.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid*, p. 93.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*, p. 55.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, p. 81.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, p. 97.

Clearly, memory of Chernobyl is complex. It evokes feelings of shame for the Soviet system and admiration for its values amongst individual citizens. Being this complex, the question arises as to how to assess Chernobyl's memory status? There is not a single, exclusive narrative that dominates cultural interpretation of the disaster. Instead, there are multiple competing ones that attempt to interpret and reinterpret the catastrophe from various political standpoints among different demographics. This conflict however, can be summarised as having two main sides.<sup>166</sup> On the one side, there is the official memory of the disaster pushed by the state, with clear policy motivations. On the other, there are the diverse and disparate individuals and groups who try to challenge this narrative, and add voices not motivated by policy. Such a situation, has many parallels with the debate over another contested moment in Soviet history: The Siege of Leningrad (1941-1944).

This battle was one of the most important and bitter of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) killing over one and a half million Soviet citizens.<sup>167</sup> The struggle was monumental, marked by extreme food shortages which led to incidents of cannibalism.<sup>168</sup> The experience left a marked imprint on its survivors, the *blokadniki*, but in the aftermath of the war, they were prevented from telling their stories.<sup>169</sup> Instead, the Siege of Leningrad became absorbed into the mythology of the Cult of the Great Patriotic War that the Stalinist regime went about constructing.<sup>170</sup> Its primary aim, was to use victory in the Second World War as a vindication of the Soviet system and provide legitimacy to the regime's claim to technological superiority, which had been severely tested during the Great Famine (1932-1933).<sup>171</sup> Thus, the Siege's depiction was tightly controlled to maintain this image. Any challenge to this narrative by an individual *blokadniki*, was a threat to the regime itself. Therefore, stories of cannibalism were suppressed, as was any other mention that might spoil the image of Soviet heroism

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<sup>166</sup> Stsiapanau, 'The Chernobyl Politics in Belarus', p. 145.

<sup>167</sup> Michael Ellman & S. Maksudov, 'Soviet Deaths in the Great Patriotic War: A Note', *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (1994), p. 680.

<sup>168</sup> Lisa Kirschenbaum, *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941–1995: Myth, Memories, and Monuments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 239.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>170</sup> Frank Biess, 'Introduction', in Frank Biess and Robert G. Moeller (eds.), *Histories of the Aftermath: The Legacies of the Second World War in Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), p. 6.

<sup>171</sup> Patrick Finney, *Remembering the Road to World War Two* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), p. 40.

that the state had constructed. Eventually, with the incoming of *glasnost*, this situation began to change and more frank discussions were held on the Siege and the Soviet regime's conduct in general.<sup>172</sup> After the collapse however, the Cult of the Great Patriotic War was revived, and has been particularly used by Vladimir Putin to support his new Russian nationalism.<sup>173</sup> Here, there are many similarities with how Chernobyl is remembered. The states of Belarus and Ukraine prefer to construct Chernobyl in terms of a heroic battle within the context of their national independence stories. Most importantly, this commemoration depicts Chernobyl in terms of a *past* event that no longer holds relevance, to suit the expansionist nuclear policies of both governments, otherwise the disaster's commemoration becomes a focal point for criticism of atomic energy.<sup>174</sup> Any unofficial interpretations which challenge this are suppressed in Belarus, and in Ukraine there is little room within official narratives for the stories of individuals to be told. What, then, is the future for Chernobyl's memory?

With both governments unlikely to cease the expansion of nuclear power, it can be expected that the disaster's official commemoration will continue to be treated in military terms, and in Belarus, groups like the *KH* theatre will receive continued harassment. That said, the Belarusian regime is not unchallenged, both generally and in terms of Chernobyl. In 2017, protests sprang up against the Lukashenka regime, while in Ukraine, Poroshenko's position is increasingly unstable.<sup>175</sup> Furthermore, despite the risks they expose themselves to, groups like the *KH* theatre do continue to hold performances and attempt to challenge the official narrative. But, such groups face significant obstacles to successfully pushing their own messages. Political apathy is high in both countries, and in Belarus, the continual decline of the Chernobyl Path movement shows that the government is being

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<sup>172</sup> For example, the Katyn massacre was admitted to. See Alexander Etkin and Rory Finnin et al., *Remembering Katyn* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 106.

<sup>173</sup> Mikhail Tsyppin, 'The Soviet Military Culture and the Legacy of the Second World War', in Frank Biess and Robert G. Moeller (eds.), *Histories of the Aftermath: The Legacies of the Second World War in Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), p. 269.

<sup>174</sup> Kalmbach, 'Radiation and Borders', p. 137.

<sup>175</sup> Tracy McViegh, 'Riot police in Belarus attack protesters calling for end to 'dictatorship'', *The Guardian*, 25 March 2017; Veronika Melkozerova, 'Poroshenko comes in 4<sup>th</sup> place in presidential poll', *Kiev Post*, 20 March 2018 [online], available at: <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/poroshenko-comes-4th-place-presidential-poll.html>, accessed 7/4/18.

successful in its counter-*glasnost*.<sup>176</sup> Meanwhile, there are signs of change though outside these two countries. Svetlana Alexievich's recognition as Nobel Laureate in 2015 brought widespread attention to the issues addressed in her *Chernobyl Prayer* (2016). Ultimately, Chernobyl's legacy and memory will remain contested, but it seems that unofficial groups and interpretations will be increasingly marginalised, something no better represented than by the suppression of Alexievich's work in her home country, despite being independent Belarus' only ever Nobel Laureate.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Olena Nikolayenko, 'Marching Against the Dictator', p. 230.

<sup>177</sup> Shaun Walker, interview with Svetlana Alexievich, *The Guardian*, 21 July 2017 [online], available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jul/21/svetlana-alexievich-interview>, accessed 7/3/18.

## Conclusion

This dissertation set out to survey the historical impact of the Chernobyl disaster on the societies of the Soviet Union and its successor republics, especially Belarus and Ukraine. Additionally, it aimed to explore the evolution of Chernobyl's political meaning in the politics of these countries since their independence. Furthermore, it took the opportunity to examine commemoration, memory, and cultural interpretations of the disaster's historical meaning in contemporary Belarusian and Ukrainian society. It conducted its research informed by a wide-range of interpretations from numerous academic disciplines. Lacking however, was a mature and developed historiographical debate with which to engage. As such, it became necessary to incorporate a diverse set of scholarly fields into its argument, such as anthropology and sociology. Taking such an approach, this dissertation believes, has added to its worth and enabled it to provide a more accurate and encompassing understanding of the historical significance of the Chernobyl disaster in the various contexts considered across its three chapters.

In the third chapter, the focus was upon memory, commemoration, and cultural interpretations of the disaster. Here, the oral history of Svetlana Alexievich was used together with online articles on the *KH Theatre*, and newspaper coverage of the official remembrance ceremonies to illustrate the different ways the disaster is remembered. The chapter demonstrated the clear differences between official and unofficial interpretations of the disaster's historical meaning. The governments of Ukraine and Belarus both depict the disaster in military terms and prefer to remember it as a past event, rather than one which holds contemporary relevance. By contrast, many unofficial groups wish to place the disaster in a historical context and chronology that extends to the present-day. This conflict of interpretations arises from the debate over nuclear power in the two countries, with their governments seeking to expand atomic energy. The state is therefore hostile to these unofficial interpretations of the disaster's history, for their potential to act as a focal point for anti-nuclear criticism and activism. The political aspect of this conflict was the focus of the second chapter.

*'Glasnost, counter-glasnost, and the politics of information'*, examined Chernobyl's official treatment in independent Belarus and Ukraine. Through the use of interview collections and political studies, it illustrated the evolution of Chernobyl's political meaning from being a unifying symbol of national independence, to a highly divisive topic. It outlined the relationship between renewed nuclear power ambitions and Chernobyl's subsequent treatment by the state. Additionally, it demonstrated how the Belarusian state has, since the 1990s, conducted a counter-*glasnost* with regard to Chernobyl to support its nuclear policy, and suppressed activism related to it that was once tolerated in the era of *glasnost*.

Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy was covered in detail in the first chapter, which surveyed the impact of Chernobyl on Soviet politics. Using CIA papers and a wide selection of secondary literature, it illustrated how the disaster provoked a surge in environmental activism which became intertwined with the democratisation movement, further bolstered by the radicalising effects of the failed cover-up attempted by the authorities. In particular, it made good use of specific case studies, focussing on the development of these political movements in the city of Voronezh to illustrate the rapid changes that took place in late 1980s Soviet politics.

This dissertation has made clear both the centrality of Chernobyl to the collapse of the USSR and its continued relevance in post-Soviet society. In addition, it has demonstrated the varied cultural responses to the disaster and how the concept of counter-*glasnost* can be applied to the treatment of Chernobyl in Belarus. In doing these things, it has provided a study of the disaster's history of a kind which is infrequently attempted and helped contribute to the development of historical scholarship on Chernobyl.



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