

Passing the buck – downwards

Power without responsibility

Argumenty i Fakty

It is now four years since the Chernobyl tragedy. Several government commissions have investigated the causes of the disaster, conclusions have been drawn, and those guilty punished. But not all the questions have been answered. What is the State Committee for Nuclear Power afraid of? AIF's Yuri Medvedev interviews A Kovalenko, former head of the Chernobyl information centre

LET US begin with the causes of the accident. A lot has been written about them, but it is still not clear why the station personnel started that experiment.

What they were doing can hardly be described as an experiment. Under regulations, pumps driven by a turbine rotating by inertia ought to have been tested when the No. 4 unit was commissioned. Such tests are mandatory at any station and must be attended by specialists from the designers and the State Committee for Supervision over the Safety of Work in the Nuclear Power Industry. Without those tests the station manager, Bryukhanov, had no right to sign an acceptance act of the state commission.

Why then were they not carried out during the start-up?

Remember – it was December 31. If such tests are routine at all nuclear stations why, then, the explosion?

If it had not been for a pure accident, everything would have ended normally. On April 25 when they began shutting down the reactor in preparation for tests a dispatcher from Kiev rang up, asking that the tests should be postponed until night-time in order not to throw the grid system out of balance. There had been an accident at a thermal power station and power was short. The station's personnel set about raising the reactor's power. This was a mistake. The point is that wherever power had been reduced, the reactor

needed to be shut down so that it could pass through the iodine pit, otherwise it would be 'contaminated' with xenon. It was not until then that power could be raised again.

In other words, the duty shift deliberately violated regulations?

Yes. But mind you, they always did so and this was considered normal. Having raised the output and fed power into the grid, the personnel continued the tests at night, that is, they began to lower output again.

Meanwhile the reactor had already been 'poisoned' with xenon?

Precisely. And at that moment a reactor engineer because of inexperience let the output drop almost to zero. What followed has been described many times: they started to switch off safeguards, remove rods, etc.

They were trying to raise the reactor's output instead of shutting it down?

Quite true. The persistence with which the personnel were breaching rules is amazing.

That seems so today. They lived by the laws and concepts of their time. At that time all were sure that no matter what they might do to the reactor an explosion was out of the question.

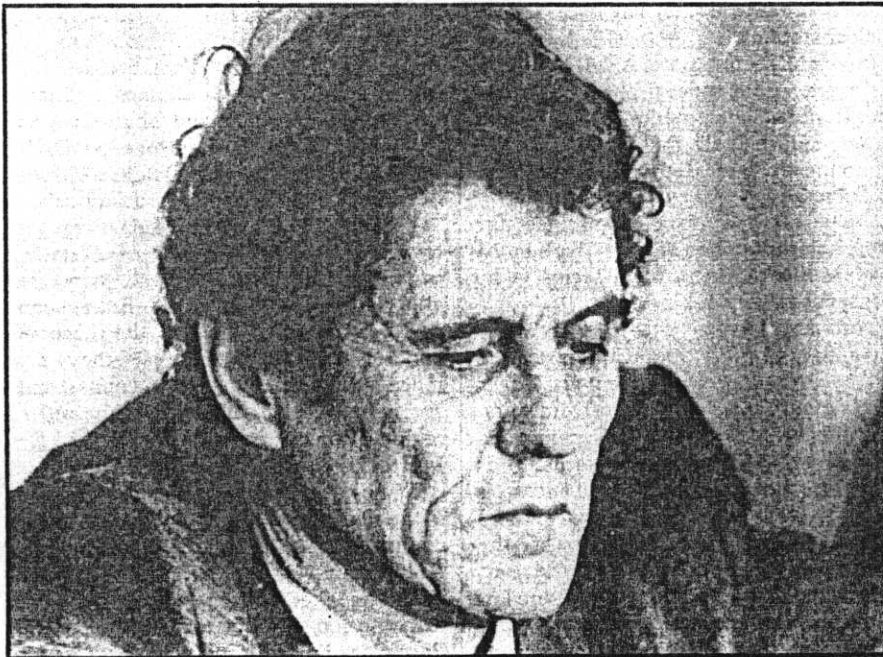
But it was in writing that a reactor must have no less than sixteen rods.

Yes, that is set. But no document said that if they were to be removed, there would be an explosion. All the textbooks and instructions stated the reactor would not blow up under any circumstances. Yet a similar accident had occurred at the Leningrad nuclear station. And the course of events was about the same, although everything ended all right there.

Wasn't that incident made known to all stations?

It was. But the information simply did not reach the personnel; it had been deposited with security departments – secrecy is our number one priority, you know. Of course, the heads of the Chernobyl station must have read this information, but when the tests were on they were sleeping peacefully at home. As for the personnel, they knew that the instructions had had a new line added to them limiting the number of rods that were to be removed, but they had not the slightest notion that if they were taken out there would be an explosion. Unfortunately, previous accidents at nuclear stations had taught us nothing. Why didn't they evacuate people in good time from the accident zone?

For the same reason. No one could believe there had been an explosion. The categorical statement – 'an explosion is impossible under any conditions' – had



Former Chernobyl power plant director, Viktor Bryukhanov aged 51, during his trial in July 1987

everyone believing it. Bryukhanov is now accused of failing to provide the station's personnel even with radiation level meters. But they were not required there by the regulations, which were not written with an eye to an explosion.

CHERNOBYL SCAPEGOATS Then Bryukhanov was not guilty?

Let us be objective. He had built the best town of all among those with nuclear stations. Having built four units, he appealed to every quarter, among them the CPSU Central Committee, saying that two new units could not be built while the station was being operated. Bryukhanov was insisting on a training centre and was the first to begin setting one up at stations of that type. He is the man who has put all his life into the Chernobyl station. Nevertheless, he was tried and sentenced to ten years.

I do not think that the Chernobyl trial can be truly called a strictly juridical one. If everything had been as dictated by the law, if all aspects of the accident had been taken into account, it would hardly have been possible to pass such a verdict. Many Western news agencies headlined their trial reports 'Chernobyl Scapegoats'.

What, in my view, was the real guilt of Bryukhanov and the personnel? A nuclear station is so complex a mechanism that in any situation it is simply necessary to carry out instructions mechanically. If it is written down that no more than sixteen rods can be taken out, do not take any more. But Bryukhanov and his personnel thought that laws were laid down for fools. This they learned from their experience. They were sure that instructions could be skipped. Why not, if they accepted a not quite completed reactor on December 31, if one thing was constantly said, another thought, and still another done? So I think it was quite natural that the officially best station in the country should have exploded. One cannot live indefinitely by double moral standards.

But why didn't Bryukhanov decide to evacuate people when the civil defence chief told him of a high radiation level?

The second secretaries of the regional and town committees, the chairman of the town executive and other top officials arrived at the station right after the accident. They had been manipulating Bryukhanov for years. Now tell me who had to decide on evacuation and whether Bryukhanov could have done so himself.

To understand Bryukhanov's logic, we must remember that he always lived under strict control. A manager cannot in fact recruit his own personnel, especially when the nomenklatura is involved: he accepts those chosen by Party functionaries. And

the main thing is that he who directed Bryukhanov, who told him to start up the unit on December 31 and to take on staff recommended by others, bore no responsibility for anything, but could have expelled Bryukhanov from the party and removed from his post.

The Chernobyl trial was to have heard three more cases: one of the designers, another of heads of nuclear power industry, and still another of those who failed to take proper measures to evacuate people and protect the population. Where are they? They were shelved.

RIGHTS AND DUTIES

Who do you think is to blame?

No one could have said it better than Nikolai Ryzhkov: 'We ALL were moving towards Chernobyl.' The more I looked into the situation, the more clearly I saw that it was not that the nuclear power industry was bad. With our system of management and decision-making, the station could not have been safe. So my main conclusion is this: what exploded was not just the station, but our administrative-bureaucratic system.

Everyone must answer for his or her business. To do so they must have their rights and duties clearly formulated. In the West a customer orders a building firm to construct a station. It builds it and the client accepts and operates it. The US Nuclear Regulatory Commission, responsible only to the US President, supervises the operation of nuclear stations. There are well-defined limits, and it is clear who is in charge of what. In the ultimate analysis, the state is interested only in the safe working of nuclear stations.

In our case the state is an owner, a customer, and a supervisor combined in one. Hence all our troubles. In the nuclear power industry all this is even more pronounced: one department designs, builds and operates.

What about the State Committee for Supervision over the Safety of Work in the Nuclear Power Industry? It seems to be independent.

You know that everyone is now demanding that the State Committee for Nature Protection should be no longer subordinate to the Council of Ministers. Why? Because that committee cannot be independent by its present status. It is within the Council of Ministers and so is guided, as a rule, by departmental interests. The same is true of the Committee for Supervision. But the most amazing thing is that while the Council of Ministers is responsible for everything, it is the Central Committee that makes decisions, for which it bears practically no

responsibility.

Who approved senior executives for the Ministry? Who approved directors and chief engineers for nuclear power stations? They are all the nomenklatura. And where was the policy of siting units and reactor types endorsed?

WHERE IS THE PARADOX?

Take, for example, V Maryin, who is now first vice chairman of the Council of Ministers' Bureau for the Fuel and Energy Complex. For clean-up operations at Chernobyl he was awarded the Order of the October Revolution. Before that he had worked as head of the nuclear power sector of the Central Committee. Former first secretary of the Prip'yat town Party committee Gamanyuk is now working in Kiev's regional Party committee. Former deputy chief engineer of the Chernobyl station G Kopchinsky, who was formerly responsible for the nuclear physical characteristics of the project and is also to blame for the accident, has been decorated with the Order of the Red Banner of Labour and is now head of the nuclear power department of the Council of Ministers. In the meantime Bryukhanov is serving his sentence. But was it he who reported to Brezhnev about another early start-up of Chernobyl units? No. This was done by the secretary of the Kiev regional committee - and there is a newsreel of that.

It ought to be said that during the most dramatic period of eliminating the accident's consequences, somewhere until the spring of 1987, local Party bodies left the station alone. And at once people began to be promoted on their abilities, not their personal file characteristics. Take, for example, Y Samoilenko, who came to Chernobyl as an ordinary workshop manager, and then became general director of Spetsatom. Or Dr E Ignatenko, appointed in October 1986 as director of the Kombinat association.

Where is the paradox? When things get tough, when the country's fate is at stake, competent and experienced men are allowed to show their mettle. But as soon as the situation gets normal, they become undesirable. Why? Because they are independent, keep their own counsel and are hard to order about. I witnessed a regional committee instructor lecture Dr Ignatenko on reactor safety methods.

I wish to emphasise once more that one of the reasons for the crisis situation in the country is that decision-making is done by one group, while responsibility for decisions taken is borne by another. The Constitution should clearly formulate the Party's leading role and not saddle it with economic functions. ●