

CHERNOBYL

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USSR--CHERNOBYL', SUMMER 1990 (Part One)
Munich, June 15, 1990 (RLPRD/David Marples)

One fallout from the Chernobyl' disaster has been a gap between the conclusions of scientific research and the popular understanding of the effects of the accident. While scientists have often found that radiation in certain regions was too low to be significant, many people have nonetheless suffered radiation-related illnesses. This division between popular and scientific experiences has now reached acute proportions in the Soviet Union, a development highlighted by the second All-Union scientific meeting on the "results of liquidating the consequences" of the Chernobyl' disaster, which took place recently at the town of Chernobyl'. Some of its conclusions can be assessed against important new information released in conjunction with the fourth anniversary of the disaster.

Some speakers at the meeting took rather a gloomy view of the likely medical costs of Chernobyl'. K.K. Dushutin, the deputy director of the scientific-technical center of the Pripyat Research and Industrial Association (formerly called "Kombinat"), for example, pointed out that the health of cleanup workers is likely to be affected by premature ageing processes, a rise in nervous diseases, heart vessel illnesses and digestive problems. The longterm effects of ionizing irradiation, in his view, may be revealed less in physical illnesses than in the reduction of the lifespan.¹ Such a conclusion has been supported in a recent publication on Chernobyl', which has suggested that a radiation dose of 100-200 rads might shorten the length of life of a person by six to seven years.² Dushutin's comments, however, were not echoed by N.N. Savkin, head of a laboratory of the Institute of Biophysics, who has been involved in research for the past four years on the evacuated zone, thirty kilometers in radius, around the damaged reactor.

Savkin maintained that there was a real possibility of returning evacuees to the zone to live a normal life. Over seventy years, workers in his laboratory have determined, assuming that evacuees returned to the zone in the year 1990, they would receive only between 1.5 and 6 rems of irradiation over a lifetime, and could live without any restrictions. It appears that this view did not meet with unanimous approval, but most of those present did concur that shiftwork in the zone on a longterm basis was acceptable. Other speakers objected to the fact that the republics have assumed control over aspects of scientific research on the affected population, especially in the nonevacuated "zone of acute control." One declared that while Kombinat/Pripyat association was financing such work, the independence of researchers was assured, but now this association

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could control only the monitoring of those workers directly under its jurisdiction. There was also discussion of how one could control the passage of radionuclides into the organisms of livestock to produce "clean" meat and milk.

In short, then, discussion focused on how to live in a contaminated territory, and scientists associated in particularly with the Institute of Biophysics of the USSR Ministry of Health objected to the "control" of their work by the Belorussian, Ukrainian or Russian authorities. By contrast, one can observe an apparent spreading of the effects of radiation across Soviet territory, ostensibly not just because the danger of radiation increases with time as radionuclides penetrate the food chain, but because of the failure to discern the fallout region at the outset. There are several regions of concern:

Northern Ukraine

On the fourth Chernobyl' anniversary, the newspaper *Pravda Ukrainy* published an interview with Deputy Chairman of the Ukrainian Council of Ministers, K.I. Masyk, who has been the Ukrainian government official assigned specifically to deal with Chernobyl'.³ He noted that 1,614 settlements in Ukraine have been irradiated, inhabited by 1.44 million residents (the earlier figure, cited by Ukrainian Health Minister, Yuri Spizhenko, was 1.0 million),⁴ including 250,000 children. In regions such as Narodichi, Ovruch, Olevs'k and Luhyny, 150,000 people had manifested signs of severe irradiation from radioactive iodine. Yuri Izrael, Chairman of the USSR State Committee for Hydrometeorology, acknowledged in a "Pravda" interview of mid-April 1990, that the radiation contamination of the soil in parts of Narodichi and Poleskoe exceeded 100 curies per square kilometer (against a recommended norm of 15, and an emergency level of 40).⁵ Some 15,000 people are to be resettled on the basis of the "norm" of forty curies, in addition to some families who are said not to be living in such dangerous areas, but who have expressed a desire to leave.

Thus some 2,053 families are to be moved from the Poleskoe Raion (Kiev Oblast) and 936 from Narodichi (Zhitomir Oblast) by 1993, from nineteen settlements. Among these new evacuees are families with pregnant mothers, and sick or schoolage children. They are to be moved to various parts of the republic, with the proviso followed in the past, that city dwellers should be moved to towns, and rural residents should be moved to the countryside; 400 apartments have been vacated "willingly" in Kiev for new evacuees. However, it appeared that some of the 59,000 residents living in this zone would be given the opportunity to buy 5,000 new homes outside the zone over the next two years. Obviously,

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Masyk agreed, the Ukrainian government had underestimated the scope of the problem from the outset, but he maintained that the chief fault lay with a "diktat" from the top, i.e., by implication, with Moscow-based ministries such as Power and Electrification, and Nuclear Power and Industry.

Slavutich

In 1986, construction began on a new city for nuclear plant operatives called Slavutich, about 40 miles to the northeast of the Chernobyl' nuclear power plant. The anticipated population was 30,000 for what was described as a "21st century" city, with all modern amenities and with an electric train service to the nuclear plant.⁶ The city was duly completed in foundations and today holds a population of around 20,000. However, when the republican governments of Belorussia and Ukraine published maps of radiation fallout in March 1989 (followed hastily by the all-Union authorities through "Pravda"), it was revealed that Slavutich itself lay in a radioactive patch. In the summer of 1989, a leading official at Kombinat (Pripyat) production association declared emphatically that this was not the case.⁷ But the fourth anniversary reports undercut this statement.

An interview was held with V. Zhigallo, Chairman of the city government, who noted that by next year, the population is scheduled to rise to 30,000.⁸ However, Slavutich had been located, it was reported, in the most contaminated area in the region and "no one can explain" how this occurred. The original location had been approved by S. Burenkov, USSR Minister of Health at that time, and by Yurii Izrael, and subsequently the feasibility of the site had been reconfirmed by Izrael and new health minister, E. Chasov. However, while scientists concurred that the town was safe, forest workers felt otherwise and began to set up notices warning the population to take precautions against radiation. In 1989, over fifty million rubles had to be expended in removing more than 200,000 cubic meters of irradiated soil in the town, but the surrounding forests remain heavily contaminated. The city population is living on emergency norms of 35 rems of radiation per person, and soil contamination of 40 curies per square kilometer.

Life for city residents is one of great uncertainty. It is possible to change one's residence, especially if one has been working in a zone of high contamination, but difficulties have arisen because of the unwillingness of outsiders to exchange present apartments for those in Slavutich. Each family member has been allocated 15 rubles a month to purchase noncontaminated food; an unspecified number of geiger counters are said to be

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available. But illnesses abound and though their origins are not made clear, there appears to be an extremely high proportion of problems in childbirth. Of the sixteen children born in the city in the first quarter of 1990, three were stillborn and five were seriously ill. There are thirteen cases of leukemia among city children. Added to such problems is the insecurity of 300 specialists and thousands of support staff who will be without jobs after 1995 if, as seems overwhelmingly likely, the Chernobyl' nuclear power plant is taken out of service.⁹

NOTES

1. *Robitnycha hazeta*, June 2, 1990.
2. Zhores Medvedev, draft copy of "The Legacy of Chernobyl" (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990). Publication date June 25, 1990.
3. *Pravda Ukrainy*, April 26, 1990.
4. See David Marples, "One Million Ukrainians Affected by Chernobyl'," *Report on the USSR* Vol. 2, No. 13, March 30, 1990.
5. *Pravda*, April 17, 1990.
6. An account of the construction of Slavutich is found in David Marples, *The Social Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1988), pp. 225-38.
7. Pavel Pokutnyi, Chairman of the International department of Kombinat, in an interview of June 14, 1989.
8. *Rabochaya trybuna*, April 26, 1990. Hotels and other facilities for the new international center being established at Chernobyl' are being built at the shift settlement of Zelenyi Mys, just outside the 30-kilometer zone. See "Robitnycha hazeta", May 30, 1990.
9. See *Radyans'ka Ukraina*, May 20, 1990; and *Robitnycha hazeta*, May 31, 1990.

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