

CHERNOBYL

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USSR -- CHERNOBYL REACTOR LACKED PROPER SAFETY SYSTEM, SAYS MEDVEDEV

LONDON, JUNE 6 (NCA/STUART PARROTT) -- A NEW BOOK WRITTEN BY EXILED SOVIET BIOLOGIST ZHORES MEDVEDEV SAYS THE NUMBER 4 NUCLEAR REACTOR AT CHERNOBYL RAN FOR MORE THAN TWO YEARS WITH AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT IN ITS EMERGENCY SAFETY SYSTEM FAULTY OR MISSING. HE ALSO SAYS SOVIET OFFICIALS COVERED UP THE OMISSION.

HE SAYS "THE ONLY SURPRISING THING IS THAT A MAJOR ACCIDENT DID NOT OCCUR SOONER."

MEDVEDEV MAKES THE CLAIM IN A BOOK, "THE LEGACY OF CHERNOBYL", WHICH IS SCEPTICAL ABOUT SOME ASPECTS OF THE OFFICIAL, NOW ALMOST UNIVERSALLY ACCEPTED, SOVIET ACCOUNT OF THE ACCIDENT.

MEDVEDEV, WHO NOW LIVES IN LONDON, SAYS: "I HAVE SOME KNOWLEDGE OF THE WAY PSEUDO-FACTS AND MISINFORMATION ARE CREATED IN THE SOVIET UNION TO SERVE POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL INTERESTS. I ALSO UNDERSTAND THE LIMITS OF GLASNOST."

NUCLEAR EXPERTS SAY THE NUMBER 4 REACTOR BLEW APART DURING AN EXPERIMENT TO IMPROVE SAFETY MEASURES IN THE EVENT OF A SUDDEN LOSS OF ELECTRICAL POWER NEEDED TO OPERATE ITS COOLING PUMPS AND OTHER EMERGENCY SYSTEMS.

THE SOVIET REPORT ON THE ACCIDENT, GIVEN TO THE INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY AGENCY (IAEA) IN VIENNA IN AUGUST, 1986, SAID THE TEST INVOLVED USING ENERGY CREATED BY THE PLANT'S ROTATING TURBINE TO PROVIDE AN EMERGENCY POWER SUPPLY.

BUT MEDVEDEV SAYS THE USE OF A BACK-UP POWER SUPPLY FROM THE TURBINE WAS BOTH A DESIGN REQUIREMENT OF RBMK REACTORS AND CONSIDERED ONE OF THEIR MAIN SAFETY SYSTEMS.

HE SAYS: "IF THIS IS A STANDARD FEATURE OF THE RBMK SAFETY SYSTEM, THE ENGINEERS COULD NOT HAVE WANTED TO I-M-P-R-O-V-E IT BUT TO INSTALL IT."

"IN OTHER WORDS, THEY MUST HAVE BEEN TRYING TO INSTALL A SAFETY DEVICE WHICH SHOULD ALREADY HAVE BEEN TESTED AND INSTALLED WHEN THE REACTOR WAS FIRST CERTIFIED FOR COMMERCIAL OPERATION IN 1984."

"HE SAYS: "WHY WAS SO VITAL A SYSTEM NOT PROPERLY TESTED AND INSTALLED FROM THE VERY BEGINNING?"

MEDVEDEV, WHO BASES HIS CONCLUSIONS ON ANALYSIS OF PUBLISHED DOCUMENTS AND NUMEROUS REPORTS IN THE SOVIET MEDIA OVER SEVERAL YEARS, SAYS THERE WAS A COLLECTIVE COVER-UP IN 1982-1984 OF THE FACT THAT IMPORTANT SAFETY TESTS HAD BEEN LEFT UNCOMPLETED.

HE SAYS THE SOVIET EXPERTS WHO PREPARED THE REPORT FOR THE IAEA MEETING IN VIENNA IN 1986 MUST HAVE BEEN AWARE OF THE COVER-UP.

HE SAYS THIS IS PROBABLY WHY THE REPORT CONCENTRATES ON HUMAN ERRORS THAT OCCURRED IN CARRYING OUT THE APRIL 26, 1986, EXPERIMENT WITHOUT OFFERING ANY EXPLANATION ABOUT WHY IT WAS REQUIRED.

HE SAYS THE 1986 REPORT TO THE IAEA GIVES THE "FALSE IMPRESSION" THE TEST WAS DESIGNED TO IMPROVE SAFETY STANDARDS WITH A NEW INVENTION -- A NEW VOLTAGE REGULATOR -- WHEREAS THE EXPERIMENT WAS THE COMPLETION OF TESTS LEFT UNCOMPLETED IN 1983 AND 1984.

MEDVEDEV SAYS: "FOR MORE THAN TWO YEARS REACTOR NUMBER 4 HAD OPERATED WITH ONE IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF ITS EMERGENCY CORE COOLING SYSTEM FAULTY OR ABSENT."

MEDVEDEV SPECULATES THAT THE NUMBER 4 REACTOR WAS RUSHED INTO COMMERCIAL OPERATION IN 1984 TWO MONTHS AHEAD OF SCHEDULE UNDER PRESSURE FROM MINISTERIAL AND PARTY OFFICIALS. HE SAYS: "IT IS LIKELY THAT THE DESIRE TO REPORT 'OVERFULFILMENT' (OF THE PLAN) LED TO CORNERS BEING CUT IN THE SCHEDULED PROGRAM OF TESTS."

HE SAYS: "THERE HAD BEEN DELAYS IN PUTTING MOST OTHER NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS INTO OPERATION AND THE 'LABOUR VICTORY' AT CHERNOBYL WAS THEREFORE PARTICULARLY WELCOMED."

"BUT IT APPEARS THAT THE SPECIAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION WHICH NORMALLY INSPECTS AND TESTS ALL NUCLEAR POWER SYSTEMS HAD NOT COMPLETED ALL THE NECESSARY TESTS. (PTO) BG/

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HE ALSO SAYS THOSE PEOPLE IN CHARGE PROBABLY MADE A "SIMPLE BUT IRRESPONSIBLE" DECISION TO POSTPONE THE NECESSARY TESTS OF THE ELECTRICAL PARTS OF THE PROJECT.

MEDVEDEV SAYS AFTER THE CHERNOBYL ACCIDENT THE PEOPLE OPENLY HELD RESPONSIBLE WERE LOCAL PLANT OFFICIALS AND ENGINEERS."

BUT THE GOVERNMENT COMMISSION THAT MUST HAVE BEEN CREATED TO SUPERVISE THE COMPLETION OF THE PROJECT, AND WAS OBLIGED TO CHECK ALL THE NECESSARY TESTS BEFORE SIGNING THE LICENSING DOCUMENTS, MUST HAVE CONSISTED OF HIGH OFFICIALS REPRESENTING VARIOUS BRANCHES OF INDUSTRY.

HE SAYS IT LIKELY INCLUDED OFFICIALS FROM THE STATE COMMITTEE ON ATOMIC ENERGY, THE MINISTRY OF POWER AND ELECTRIFICATION, THE STATE COMMITTEE FOR SAFETY IN THE ATOMIC POWER INDUSTRY AND THE MINISTRY OF MEDIUM MACHINE BUILDING RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DESIGN OF REACTORS.

MEDVEDEV, WHO FOR 10 YEARS LIVED AND WORKED IN THE NUCLEAR RESEARCH TOWN OF OBNINSK, WAS THE FIRST TO REVEAL THE EXISTENCE OF THE KYSHTYM ACCIDENT IN THE SOVIET UNION IN THE 1950'S. HE WROTE ABOUT IT IN HIS 1979 BOOK, "NUCLEAR DISASTER IN THE URALS."

HE SAYS: "UNFORTUNATELY, REVEALING THE TRUE STORY OF CHERNOBYL IS NOT IN THE INTERESTS OF MOST NUCLEAR ENERGY OR STATE OFFICIALS WHO KNOW, OR COULD DISCOVER, THE TRUTH. HALF-TRUTHS OR A PLAUSIBLE COVER-UP SERVE THEIR INTERESTS MUCH BETTER."

SINCE THE BOOK WAS WRITTEN THE IAEA HAS ANNOUNCED THAT THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT HAS INVITED AN INTERNATIONAL TEAM OF EXPERTS TO THE SOVIET UNION TO ASSESS THE HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE CHERNOBYL DISASTER. BG/