

Editorial Team: Beata Surmacz (Director of ICE), Tomasz Stępniewski (Deputy Director of ICE), Agnieszka Zajdel (Editorial Assistant), Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, Jakub Olchowski, Konrad Pawłowski, Agata Tatarenko

No. 382 (79/2021) | 28.04.2021

ISSN 2657-6996
© IEŚ

Jakub Olchowski

35 years after Chernobyl catastrophe

After 35 years, the accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant still affects the public consciousness – and not only in Ukraine. The Chernobyl disaster remains a symbol of the political changes accompanying the collapse of the USSR, and it reminds us of the threats generated by the development of our civilization. It is still surrounded by legends and an atmosphere of mystery, as well as controversies over the fear of nuclear energy.

Reality. The accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, which took place on April 26, 1986, was not only one of the most serious technological disasters in history, but it also brought significant political, social, and cultural consequences. In the political (but also social) dimension, the catastrophe showed fossilisation, paralysis, and the hypocrisy of the Soviet Union, which was already declining towards collapse at that moment.

A state in which all spheres of life were permeated by the spirit of homo sovieticus revealed not only its incompetence, hypocrisy, and absurd bureaucratization, but also its gross disregard for human health and life, as well as its helplessness in a crisis situation. It is now quite commonly believed that the catastrophe accelerated the process of perestroika and the collapse of the empire, and was also a catalyst for the process of shaping the independence of Ukraine.

Legends. The Chernobyl drama also almost immediately spawned numerous myths and legends. The roots of these legends was the halo of mystery that surrounded and still surrounds nuclear energy. In 1986, the fear of an invisible and incomprehensible threat of radioactive radiation was reinforced by Cold War fears of a nuclear war. These fears were, in turn, compounded by the actions of the USSR authorities, who tried to hide the truth about the catastrophe at all costs. Moreover, in the vicinity of the Chernobyl power plant there was the Duga over-the-horizon radar (the so-called "Moscow Eye"), an isolated and secret object whose existence was in fact not a secret because of the characteristic signal it emitted. After the disaster, the presence of this installation in the vicinity of the power plant became a source of further speculation and fears.

Almost immediately after the catastrophe, there was also a rumour that the accident fulfilled the prophecy contained in the Book of Revelation of St. John announcing the end of the world as a result of the fall of a flaming star called Wormwood (Rev 8: 10-11) to the ground. The city of Chernobyl takes its name from the mugwort – чорнобиль (chornobil), a plant considered by the Slavs to be magical. Wormwood, in turn, is closely related to it, and appears many times in the Bible as a symbol of bitterness and misfortune. The rumour of a nuclear apocalypse spread around the world, and today biblical verses carved in a stone can be seen in the Chernobyl memorial. Countless myths and conspiracy theories spread stories about glowing mushrooms, mutations (human and animal), or the alleged selling of items from the contaminated and evacuated city of Pripjat in Polish markets. The "exclusion zone" (Ukrainian: Зона відчуження), which was established within a radius of 30 km around the power plant, became a subject of legends. It had a cultural context – in 1979 a philosophical film by Andrei Tarkovsky entitled "Stalker" was made, the heroes of which travel through a closely guarded unpredictable, dangerous, and contaminated 'Zone.' The film, in turn, referred to a famous novel by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, Roadside Picnic.

Consequences. As a result, the fear of radiation (i.e. radiophobia) deepened, worsening the fate of, in particular, several hundred thousand displaced people who also lost their material and social status as a result of the catastrophe and evacuation. There are still no complete and reliable data on the consequences of the disaster, not only because all information was kept secret, but also because the matter of collecting and investigating it was neglected. For example, there are no statistical data relating to the number of cancer cases before and after the catastrophe, and the fate of people scrubbing the consequences of the accident was not monitored in any way (there were approximately 800,000 "liquidators" in total). After 35 years, it remains difficult to this day to say unequivocally

how many people who came into contact with radiation in 1986 have died because of this contact and how many for reasons independent of the catastrophe.

Hence, there is the significant controversy as to the number of victims, both direct and indirect, and a constant search for those to blame continues. This was not changed by the process of publishing the KGB archives related to the disaster, initiated by Ukrainian state authorities in 2019. Even determining the scope and level of state aid for the victims of the disaster and evacuation in Belarus and in Ukraine remains difficult.

Currently, a significant part of the scientific community believe that the Chernobyl disaster did not bring as serious health effects as originally expected. This is confirmed by many reports prepared by international organizations (UN Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation, World Health Organization, International Atomic Energy Agency). However, these opinions are contradicted by many circles and institutions that are against the use of nuclear energy. Their scepticism is also, indirectly, a consequence of the Chernobyl disaster, which left its mark on the consciousness of society, especially in Europe, and contributed not only to the development of international regulations on nuclear energy and the tightening of security procedures, but also to the development of environmental movements and organizations that oppose nuclear energy. In Poland, the accident at the Chernobyl reactor contributed to protests against the construction of the nuclear power plant in Żarnowiec, and in the end, the construction was not completed.

Facts. Even though the 1986 catastrophe is one of the most famous events in history, in fact knowledge of it is incomplete and rather superficial, often limited to mutant legends or myths. It is not widely known that Belarus suffered severe damage as a result of the reactor explosion, absorbing about 70% of radioactive dust and also establishing a “zone” there (Polesie State Radioecological Reserve) that is almost the size of the Ukrainian one. The city of Chernobyl is actually almost 20 km from the power plant, and people still live there. The power plant itself was not closed after the accident, and it continued to operate until the last of the four reactors was closed in 2000 (such reactors are currently used only in Russia). Some areas of the “zone” are still highly contaminated with high radiation, but in many places it is only natural radiation, comparable, for example, to radiation in the centres of many European cities.

The abandoned city of Pripjat, lying next to the power plant and being one of the most iconic symbols of the disaster and its aftermath, is slowly falling apart and being absorbed by nature (it is estimated that it will practically cease to exist within the next 30 years). In the entire “exclusion zone,” in the absence of the largest predator, humans, has seen lush nature develop and no serious mutations have ever been found. Four nuclear power plants, including two within 200-300 km from the Polish border, are still operating in Ukraine, satisfying half of the country’s electricity demand.

Cultural influence. The Chernobyl disaster became not only the subject of many scientific works and a political and sociological phenomenon, but it also influenced popular culture. The events of 1986 became the subject or inspiration of hundreds of documentaries and fictional films (in this group there are works worth seeing, but most, especially those produced in Hollywood, are stereotypical stories about mutants). Many books and studies have been devoted to the catastrophe and its consequences (one of the most valuable items is „Chernobyl Prayer. A Chronicle of the Future” by Svetlana Alexievich), and there are more and more artistic projects commemorating the events (e.g. „Sounds of Chernobyl”). Chernobyl and the “exclusion zone” are also present in computer games, the most famous of which is the series „S.T.A.L.K.E.R.” created by the Ukrainian studio GSC Game World. Also, a smartphone application is available that provides information about the disaster and serves as a guide to the zone. Many institutions commemorate the event, with The Ukrainian National Chernobyl Museum in Kyiv and the memorial complex „Star Wormwood” in Chernobyl.

The “exclusion zone” attracts more and more tourists, and the Ukrainian authorities are planning to increase the tourist accessibility of the “zone.” The television series “Chernobyl”, produced by HBO, played an important role in disseminating knowledge about the disaster and attracting tourists. After its broadcast in spring 2019, the number of people willing to visit the plant and its vicinity increased by 40% within a few months.

The catastrophe at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant has become a multidimensional symbol of both the Cold War and the accompanying arms race (based largely on nuclear technology), of the fears related to the development of human civilization, of the decay and collapse of the empire, in some ways catalysing the latter. Ukrainian authorities intend to make efforts to place the “zone” area on the UNESCO World Heritage List as a kind of historical monument, but also an important symbol and point of reference in the development of civilization and the political consequences of human activities.