The Wrath of God and Government: Remembering the Chernobyl Disaster

As rising pressure reached its zenith, an explosion rocked the spring air of northern Ukraine. The building housing the fourth reactor in the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded as out-of-control radiation overwhelmed the reactor's cooling systems, creating an immense buildup of high-pressure steam. The resulting dispersion of radiation would spell disaster for much of Eastern Europe, forcing mass relocations and mass death. The April 26, 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, as this event would come to be known, would be the largest nuclear meltdown in the history of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union's ideological cold war against the United States and its capitalist allies took place over many fronts, though few were more prominent than the development of nuclear technology. Nuclear prowess was signaled through both the development of nuclear weaponry that kept the war cold and through the creation of increasingly advanced nuclear power plants. Constructing a nuclear plant was a sign of wealth, advancement, and prosperity that could be flaunted against cold war adversaries. The technology, infrastructure, and citizen expertise necessary to build and run such a facility were insurmountably difficult and expensive to develop for all but the most powerful of countries.

The Chernobyl plant fit into this dynamic as the pride of the Soviet Union, providing mass amounts of power with the most advanced reactors in the Soviet Union (Kalmbach, 131). It was partially because of this that the plant's disaster was such a traumatic blow to the USSR. With the nuclear meltdown, Chernobyl was instantaneously turned from a symbol of Soviet advancement to a symbol of the nation's hubris and neglectful conduct. Beyond just mass death, cancer, and relocation, the Chernobyl meltdown caused a global shift in how the use of nuclear technology was discussed and even contributed to the fall of the USSR. The grandiosity and

internal cause of the Chernobyl catastrophe prompt an important question: What can the Chernobyl disaster reveal about how people respond to tragedies that were not caused by an outside, adversarial entity?

The internal negligence at the heart of the Chernobyl meltdown mixed with the fall of the USSR to form a simultaneously cynical and reverential memorial narrative within a landscape where pragmatic changes were far more impactful than memorialization efforts. This essay outlines the internal societal causes of the meltdown and the political fallout they wrought, the design and implementation of memorials within Chernobyl, and the Ukrainian legacy of Chernobyl built through popular memory and international policy changes. Framing discussion through the above progression effectively shows the development of memory and the memorialization process surrounding Chernobyl as the disaster's political and physical consequences unfolded. While there are other memorials, notably in Kyiv, that commemorate Chernobyl, the memorials built within Chernobyl itself display grassroots memory development in a way that most authentically portrays the memory of the tragedy.

The study of memorializing tragedies often focuses on instances where governments seek to direct discussion of tragic events in service of creating a usable past (Nora, 14). Memorials of the Chernobyl disaster thus stand out because of both the Soviet government's desire to suppress knowledge of the tragedy and the Ukrainian government's desire to construct a usable past from the tragedy years after the fact. The Chernobyl disaster's importance to the study of memory lies in this change in government motivation, showing how memorials channel public memory when constructed after grassroots, local interpretations of the disaster have already been crystallized within people's minds.

Scholarly research on the Chernobyl disaster is, in most areas, ample. The causes of the disaster, both technical and political, are well documented. The political consequences of Chernobyl are thoroughly discussed. The more personal aspects of the disaster, however, have seen less scholarly coverage. Individual accounts of Chernobyl survivors have a smaller scholarly presence, though researchers like Krista Harper and Thom Davies have produced scholarly work based on interviews of survivors. The memorials within Chernobyl, however, have virtually no scholarly footprint. Analysis of these memorials is best done by applying the insights of direct research on sites of memory to the design and implementation of the monuments in question.

Disaster and Fallout: Subverting Accountability

The Soviet Union's internal structure was designed in a way that promoted negligence and incompetence among high-ranking officials. The nation's overpowering bureaucracy caused observed merit to become an increasingly minor component of promotions and prestigious assignments. As historian Adriana Petryna states, party loyalty was a more integral component of promotional readiness than necessary competence in many instances (Petryna, 204). Bureaucratic favoritism became such an ingrained part of Soviet citizens' working lives that a culture of speaking half-truths and keeping information from superiors developed among workers (Petryna, 205). Delivering bad news to superiors, even if the information was accurate, may have been seen as a sign of disloyalty that precluded promotional opportunities. Higher ranking officials, facing this same incentive to lie to their superiors, would often blame their more expendable underlings whenever things went wrong in a way they couldn't hide (Geist, 121). This poorly designed incentive system caused Soviet bureaucracy to cover up its own

mistakes at every level, minimizing interdepartmental communication as department leaders jockeyed for greater access to the country's limited resources.

The Soviet nuclear power program was a victim of the culture of coverups, prioritizing public image over responsible advancement. The Chernobyl plant was a civilian nuclear reactor, controlled by a nonmilitary branch of government that focused on minimizing cost to the detriment of safety (Geist, 107). The country's acceptable risk doctrine prioritized keeping minor accidents secret for the sake of the country's reputation (Geist, 109). Small problems were often ignored altogether, as reporting such issues could damage plant managers' reputations and opportunities for advancement (Geist, 106). This caused a high rate of minor accidents, as lackluster transparency prevented the development of new designs and safety protocols. Technical faults were hidden from the public, protecting the image of Soviet technical superiority over the west (Harper, 119). The resulting environment was accident-prone and devoid of the necessary ability to coordinate and stop or prevent such accidents, setting the stage for the design faults and operational error that caused the Chernobyl meltdown.

Due to poor interdepartmental communication, response plans for large nuclear disasters were typically fragmented. The Grazhdanskia Oborona, or Soviet civil defense, were primarily responsible for clearing up damage on the ground in the wake of such events (Potter et. Al, 1038). Unlike the rest of the Soviet military defense branch, the civil defense force placed a low priority on keeping secrets from the public. This mismatch in priorities, combined with limited resources, meant the civil defense force's disaster response plans could not rely on help from other parts of the military. Power plants, which had final control over their disaster response plans, often ignored the civil defense force's plans and recommendations, preparing ineffective

responses to serious disasters (Geist, 110). Civil defense's job, in essence, was to try and save lives while most of the rest of the military worked to save face.

The fateful Chernobyl meltdown struck during a routine safety operation, as failure to follow protocol and design faults with the cooling system triggered an out-of-control chain reaction that over pressurized steam in the coolant system and blew up the rector housing (Kalmbach, 131). The resulting radioactive dust spread across Europe, far beyond the borders of the USSR. The plant managers' initial response was to deny the problem and protect their reputations, refusing to signal an emergency to the government or local civilians (Geist, 104). The managers' suppression delayed response until local media covered the incident a day later, at which point civil defense forces started a limited evacuation (Potter et. Al, 1038). Recommendations for widespread evacuation were intercepted and suppressed by the KGB before they could reach the public (Geist, 124). It was not until western coverage of the disaster, informed by the radioactive dust cloud, was heard by Soviet citizens over short-wave radio that the government properly responded (Larisa, 183). On May 14th, more than 2 weeks after the disaster, the Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev publicly addressed the disaster and ordered a full evacuation of the Chernobyl region. 350,000 civilians were forced to evacuate, as more than 600,000 liquidators were called in from across the country to contain the damage as the military finally mobilized in force (Kalmbach, 133).

The scale destruction caused by the Chernobyl disaster was immense. Radioactive dust blanketed over 2,000,000 square kilometers of land, primarily in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus, covering the permanent homes of roughly 270,000 people who were never evacuated (Ramana 2). Deaths from the incident have proven incredibly difficult to estimate, but Chernobyl radiation caused an estimated 4 percent of all deaths in irradiated land between 1990 and 2004

(Nesterenko et. al, 6). Liquidators fought for ten days to contain the reactor, exposed to lethal levels of radiation without relief because government officials did not want to admit the scale of the disaster (Geist 113). Tens of thousands of liquidators died due to radiation exposure, passing radiation-caused genetic defects on to their children in many cases (Nesterenko et. al, 67).

The Chernobyl disaster occurred one month after the announcement of glasnost, Gorbachev's promise of increasing government transparency. The government's obvious censorship and botched response called into question the legitimacy of glasnost and, through that, the legitimacy of the USSR altogether (Petryna, 196). The sarcophagus, built over the shattered reactor building to contain radiation, was used as a desperate political bid to appease the public. The name sarcophagus was chosen for this reason, echoing the sarcophagus that entombed Lenin (Petryna, 197). Failing to placate the public, the government's tactic quickly shifted back to suppression, blaming deaths on careless behavior and citing supposedly irrational "radiophobia" as the cause of nuclear skepticism (Kalmbach, 140). This tactic could not distract from the blatant irresponsibility and needless suffering surrounding the meltdown, solidifying public sentiment against the government and breaking the image that it was run by competent experts (Harper, 121). Citizens' shaken trust forced an acceleration of the glasnost policy and a breakdown in civil society that pushed the USSR ever closer to its eventual collapse in 1991.

In the days following the meltdown, western nations were afire with discussion. Many blamed lackluster Soviet technology for the meltdown, reinforcing narratives of western superiority (Kalmbach, 136). The disaster also contributed to a rise in anti-nuclear sentiment that remains strong to this day (Kalmbach, 145). The frightful state of Soviet disaster preparedness, kept largely hidden from the west until after the disaster, did not factor into discussions about the cause of the meltdown or the implications Chernobyl had for the further development of nuclear

technology. The sheer scale of the radiation cloud and subsequent health crisis pushed much of the west away from further nuclear development.

The Chernobyl meltdown was made substantially more destructive by the culture of negligence and secrecy fostered by the USSR, ultimately contributing to mass suffering, the collapse of the USSR, and a Western shift away from nuclear technology. Soviet bureaucracy directly incentivized the secretive and incompetent behavior at the core of the meltdown and subsequent response, drawing well-earned public ire and mistrust from all corners of the nation.

Biblical Tragedy: Memorialization within Chernobyl

After the fall of the Soviet Union, many monuments were commissioned across Ukraine and Belarus to memorialize the Chernobyl disaster. Freed from the Soviet Union's goals of suppression, post-Soviet governments sought to preserve the memory of loss, displacement, and liquidators' heroism through public works. While many such memorials were built, a trio of government-funded installations in the city of Chernobyl, sitting well within the initial evacuation zone, best show the totality of local memory of the disaster. The Monument to Those who Saved the World venerates liquidators' heroic actions, while the Chernobyl Memorial Walk records the pain and scale of displacement and the Monument of the Third Angel shows how residents have tried to understand the sheer enormity of the tragedy. The funding for all three of these memorials was minimal, contributing to their small scales and limited publicity.

The area surrounding the Chernobyl plant has, in itself, become a living site of memory. The area embodies what historian Maria Tumarkin describes as a traumascape: a place scarred by a tragic legacy of suffering and loss (Tumarkin, 20). The region's overgrowth and omnipresent signs of abandonment provide constant, enduring reminders of the tragedy that

occurred so many years ago. Historian Kier Reeves describes how powerful natural reminders of a tragedy can be, accentuating the feeling of tragedy in a way that emotionally resonates with visitors and residents alike (Reeves, 67). The tragedy of the Chernobyl meltdown has become an inextricable part of the land itself, as the scars of sudden abandonment and ceaseless decay silently memorialize the lives and communities lost to the release of radiation.

Fig. 1: Image of the Monument to Those who Saved the World (Yaroshinskaya, 1)

The Monument to Those who Saved the World, pictured above, is the simplest of Chernobyl's three key memorials. The monument venerates liquidators' heroic efforts and sacrifices undertaken while building the sarcophagus. The liquidators in question are shown heroically rushing towards the reactor, like soldiers charging valiantly into battle. Above the reactor, a skeletal rendition of a globe signals the global impact of their heroism. The solemn inscription, reading "Those who Saved the World" makes even more explicit the heroic role of the liquidators. Historian Thom Davies reinforces the idea that families of liquidators

remembered them like soldiers, keeping photos of those liquidators uniformed and adorned with awards for their bravery (Davies, 122). The cross at the zenith of the memorial paints the liquidators' actions in a heavenly light, as god's warriors fighting an apocalypse. The religious, warrior-like portrayal of liquidators hints at a reverence for their efforts inspired by the immense scale of the tragedy.

The monument, opened in 1996 on the 10th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, is the centerpiece of a deeply localized usable past. The religious iconography frames liquidators' sacrifices in a holy light, providing a sense of meaning to loved ones of liquidators who died or faced injury. The placement of the monument, outside the local fire station, connects the local fire service to their heroic counterparts. The memorial provides a focal point for all in the community to remember the heroism within the Chernobyl story. Tumarkin asserts the value of memorials that portray such narratives, acting as a tool for survivors to process their trauma and move forward in life (Tumarkin, 154). The Monument to Those who Saved the World offers a reverent, meaningful portrayal of the human contributors to the end of the Chernobyl disaster that contextualizes the immense suffering of the tragedy with individual heroism.

Fig. 2: Avenue of Villages, Chernobyl l Memorial Park (Wolfe, 1)

The Avenue of Villages, located in Chernobyl's Memorial Park, provides a starkly different memory of the Chernobyl disaster than the liquidators' monument. The walkway lists every village that was forcefully evacuated during the meltdown, providing a bleak and uncompromising image of the tragedy's scale. The design of the Avenue shows a substantial acquiescence to pragmatism. Naming individual dead or displaced would have required an unreasonable amount of money and space, alongside incurring the immense logistical challenge of tracking down every evacuee or liquidator who died due to their work at Chernobyl. Despite this, the monument embraces the importance of names by providing a tangible reminder of every community that died in the evacuations, preserving an echo of the region's now-defunct collective identities. Reeves asserts this sense of community is an impact of memorialization, as the memorial provides a sense of meaning and cohesion that allows trauma to unify a community's identity (Reeves 74). The walkway's focus on loss is also a deliberate contradiction of the USSR's dismissive Chernobyl narrative, defiantly asserting the importance of the dead communities so flagrantly dismissed by the government. The walkway, acting as a graveyard of communities, highlights the cost of Soviet failings and reinforces the region's anger at their former leadership. Memorials commonly reinforce dominant narratives with their imagery, appealing to the people that fund and support their construction, as argued by Historian David Glassberg (Glassberg 144). The walkway's bleak portrayal of loss complements the Memorial to Those who Saved the World's heroic message, mixing the veneration of heroes and the devastation of lost communities to form a more complete picture of the memory of Chernobyl.

Fig. 3: The Monument of the Third Angel (Wolfe, 1)

While the previous two monuments display a duality of veneration and mourning that characterize the memorialization of Chernobyl, the Monument of the Third Angel synthesizes those two aspects into a single, biblical narrative of the tragedy. Designed by artist Anatoly Haidamaka, the monument was built in 2011 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster (Wolfe, 4). The design of the memorial is hauntingly skeletal, a barren image reflective of the all-consuming impacts of radiation exposure. Despite this, the angel still stands proud, trumpet held aloft to signal an event of biblical significance.

The biblical inspiration for the monument is a passage from the book of revelation, stating:

> *"*And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from Heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter." (Revelation 8:10-11).

Chernobyl was named after the Ukrainian word for a type of wormwood plant that grows in the local region, leading many to associate the biblically described tragedy with the Chernobyl

meltdown. Within this context, the unified narrative behind the disaster becomes clear: Chernobyl was a biblical event, the radioactive hammer of God falling upon humanity for its hubris and unfaithfulness. The Soviet Union's negligence and incompetent governance are thusly framed as sinful, aligning with the region's anti-Soviet leanings. The biblical story imbues this memorial with far more meaning than just remembering the losses of Chernobyl, telling a larger narrative about humanity's hubris and the failings of the Soviet Union. This transcendence, as Reeves describes, is a product of a site of memory's emotional resonance which religious iconography is supremely effective at providing (Reeves, 71). The third angel is a herald of disaster, scarred by the same creeping radiation that scarred and killed so many people in the Chernobyl region.

The explicit religiosity of the Monument of the Third Angel is, in itself, a further expression of defiance against the USSR. Soviet policy heavily suppressed religion, associating Christian practices with pre-Soviet tsarism and inequality (Paul, 35). A state-funded monument as steeped in religion as the Monument of the Third Angel would have been impossible to build within the USSR. The monument's existence, therefore, acts as a symbol of post-Soviet freedom. The construction of the monument rides on the heels of a surge in religiosity that followed the collapse of the USSR (Paul 45). The passage in Revelation the monument hails from further supports this, describing god's wrath unleashed upon the unfaithful. The state support of this monument acts as both a symbol of respect for local beliefs and a development of Ukraine's anti-Soviet usable past, asserting Ukraine's superior freedoms.

The religious story of the Chernobyl disaster unites the veneration and mourning accentuated by the other two memorials. Liquidators become biblical heroes, fighting an apocalypse for the sake of saving lives. The tragedy and mass displacement become

consequences of god's infinite wrath, explaining the immense scale of what happened in an emotionally resonant way. Through this narrative, residents of the Chernobyl region lived through a biblical apocalypse that contributed to the fall of the USSR and, through that, a resurgence of Christianity. This fact lends a distinct cast of reverence to the Chernobyl disaster, as mere humans attempt to understand an event so much more immense than themselves.

Legacy and Cynicism: Chernobyl in the Modern Day

The legacy of the Chernobyl disaster is characterized by widespread cynicism and international government pragmatism. The Soviet Union and Ukrainian government consistently neglected to care for the citizens harmed by radiation from the disaster in an attempt to return to a form of "normalcy". The Soviet Union forced liquidators to underreport their radiation exposure, allowing them to deny responsibility for subsequent medical issues (Davies, 128). Ukraine continued this legacy, making efforts to stop the payments it distributes to compensate liquidators and maintain the Chernobyl site (Davies, 117). Neglectful government intent fits neatly within the local political narrative around the Chernobyl disaster, framing the Soviet Union's handling of the event as part of a long legacy of anti-Ukrainian oppression and neglect (Davies, 125). Within this narrative, Chernobyl stands alongside the Holodomor, Nazi Occupation, the current invasion of Ukraine, and several other events as an example of governments failing or oppressing the Ukrainian people. The Ukrainian government's desire to cut funding fits into this narrative as well, one more event in a long stream of malice and neglect. The grassroots narratives that contribute to Chernobyl's legacy are tinged with hopelessness, communicated through dark humor within Ukraine's cultural vernacular (Larisa, 182). The cynicism within the memory of Chernobyl is born from these reactions, as local Ukrainians bear the consequences of state neglect without substantial hope that conditions will change.

Governments have consistently failed Ukrainians, so Ukrainians have little reason to believe their mistreatment will end.

The most impactful legacy of the Chernobyl meltdown is its impact on the international nuclear power industry. News of the Chernobyl disaster prompted an international wave of anti-nuclear sentiment (Ramana, 1746). Chernobyl joins other nuclear accidents, primarily the ones at Three Mile Island and Fukushima, to form a narrative that frames nuclear power plants as disasters waiting to happen. Stories of death and suffering from lasting radiation at Chernobyl, alongside reports of children born shortly after the disaster having higher rates of health problems, have sparked trepidation among many members of the public (Harper, 116). The international response to increases in skepticism has been characterized by improvements in transparency and safety protocols. New standards have prioritized monitoring from objective third parties and immediate transparency after meltdowns (Ramana, 1745). These reforms, in concert with negative public sentiment, have caused a decline in the development of nuclear power around the world. Governments have highly emphasized public approval of potential plants before constructing them, leading to the decrease in construction (Ramana, 1746). Chernobyl's effect on global nuclear power development has been decidedly more impactful than the powerful yet distinctly local public works built to memorialize the disaster.

The Soviet Union's relationship to the Chernobyl disaster incentivized it to suppress the development of public memory until its collapse. Because of this, collective memory was fostered too little and too late to coalesce into a broader narrative that supported a Ukrainian usable past. Historian David Glassberg describes how the lack of state support caused local grassroots memory to become the main way people conceptualized the disaster (Glassberg, 143). Unsupported by the Soviet government, both the memory of Chernobyl and the memorials that

represent that memory are primarily important on the local level. By contrast, the Soviet government needed to solve its pragmatic issues immediately after the disaster to prevent similar events in the future. The rest of the world adapted as well, shifting standards and opinions in response to Chernobyl. This discourse was immediately backed by state resources, causing the substantial impact on the nuclear power landscape shown above. The internal cause of the Chernobyl disaster left the USSR with no way to use the memory the disaster for its own ends, prompting their suppressive attitude and forcing memory of Chernobyl to develop in strictly local contexts within the USSR.

Conclusion

The internal neglect that caused the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, compounding with the fall of the USSR, formed a deeply localized public memory characterized by both reverence and cynicism while causing impactful changes to global discourse on nuclear power. The internal cause of the disaster disincentivized the USSR from enshrining or amplifying the public's memory for the sake of preserving the government's reputation and stability. Since memory developed locally, the ways different communities enshrined that memory conformed to local beliefs and practices. Local religious beliefs in the Chernobyl region dictated the reverential yet apocalyptic symbolism of the Monument to Those who Saved the World and the Monument of the Third Angel, providing an appeal unique to the locals that would be somewhat lost upon those from other regions with differing beliefs or insufficient context to understand the local connection to Revelation. All the while, the world watched and learned from the disaster, remembering it through changes in personal beliefs and official protocols.

The Chernobyl disaster shows just how powerful a government's role in the development of public memory can be. Governmental support defines the scale and reach of a memorial by

determining the amount of funding and publicity it receives. Without a government focusing on a particular memorial to represent a unified and nationally resonant narrative, communities will develop more localized and fragmented memorial narratives that resonate with themselves specifically. If a government tries to weigh in after these narratives have developed, like the Ukrainian government did with Chernobyl memorials, that government has a diminished ability to craft a unified narrative. Despite the Ukrainian Government's funding and official recognition, the international impact of the three memorials this paper analyzes remains distinctly minimal. Chernobyl's main contribution to Ukraine's usable past was a negative image of the USSR, since that distaste was a common factor within the development of local memory. Any further interpretations and details may have contradicted certain local perspectives on the disaster, making them ineffective parts of narrative intended to unify. When a state steps in to influence the way people remember a tragedy in that tragedy's immediate aftermath, it can strike while the proverbial iron is hot and influence people as they are still processing the tragedy. Attempting to do so after people's perspectives have already formed, however, is far less effective as shown by the localized focus of the Chernobyl memorials. Memorials are powerful tools that help people understand tragedies, while being just as powerfully influenced by popular understandings of those tragedies at the time they are built.

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