

CHERNOBYL AS THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF THE SOVIET UNION

by Johanna Lindbladh

“C ommunism equals Soviet power plus electrification of the entire country.” This was Lenin’s famous slogan, which referred to his plan to provide all of Russia with electricity. The so-called Goelro Plan was born in a land devastated by war, economic crisis, and starvation. It was presented by Lenin at the 8th Congress of Soviets, which took place in the unheated, scantily illuminated auditorium of the Bolshoi Theater in December 1920. When the half-starved and freezing delegates to the Congress had become acquainted with Lenin’s exciting and daring ideas, they unanimously approved the electrification plan.

Sixty-six years later, on April 26, 1986, the most extensive nuclear disaster the world had ever known struck the Soviet Union, this time an accident so devastating that it was impossible to conceal it from the world or from the Soviet people.¹ As a result of the explosion in reactor four at the Chernobyl plant in Ukraine, one of the main technological methods of electrification had proved to be fallible, and five years later, the communist ideology plus the whole of the Soviet Union had collapsed.

One year before the collapse, Paul R. Josephson, an American historian, specializing in the history of Soviet physics, observed that the inherently technicist nature of the Soviet system still remained a major force in the contemporary Soviet Union: “Atomic and space culture, which were built on forty years of achievements, are so deeply rooted in popular and scientific perceptions of Soviet leadership in space exploration and nuclear physics that it will take more than Chernobyl to shake this fact.”² Although the Soviet Union, only a year after Josephson’s article was published, did collapse, Josephson is able to confirm his earlier statement in an article from 2003 dealing with nuclear politics in Putin’s Russia. Unfortunately, Josephson writes, the technological hubris from the Soviet era still is dominant in Russia. One example of this is the revitalized nuclear program offered by the Ministry of Atomic Energy (MinAtom), which promises to build no fewer than 40 reactors before 2020.³ Today, more than 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this alliance between advanced engineering and state power is tragically illustrated in Putin’s Olympic games in Sochi 2014, when the whole world was able to observe Putin’s un-

scrupulous exploitation of the small man and the subtropical landscape in the Sochi region, taking his own powers for granted irrespective of moral, environmental, and economical consequences.

Katerina Clark supports Josephson’s view that Soviet ideology was founded on a belief in technology’s great potential, which was supposed to lead to a “total transformation of man and his environment”, and that this perception was “so intensified that it became the measure of advance toward communism”.⁴ This obsession with technology characterized not only the new power the Bolsheviks had after the October Revolution in 1917, but also their forerunners, namely the radical revolutionaries at the end of the 19th century, convinced of the need to destroy the old worldview in order to establish a new one. It is also important to note that the radical movement in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century went hand in hand with the Russian avant-garde movement, and that literature, art, ideology, and technology were tightly intertwined, and primarily focused on the potential of the new technology to deconstruct the old world order, its bourgeois language, culture and ideology, thereby paving the way for the “brave new world”.

In their book, entitled *The New Soviet Man*, Herschel and Edith Alt describe this pre-revolutionary, Marxist-Leninist intelligentsia’s image of the “new man”:

They saw him as a man of steel, the builder who overcomes all obstacles, practicing the self-denial of a saint but also the ruthlessness of a soldier in battle; one who unquestioningly follows the leader and fulfils the expectations set for him by higher authority. He must be at one and the same time a “superman” and an “organization” man.⁵

Given the fact that the Marxist-Leninist ideology had confidence in technology’s potential to create a communist paradise on earth, technology and the rational scientific method acquired a



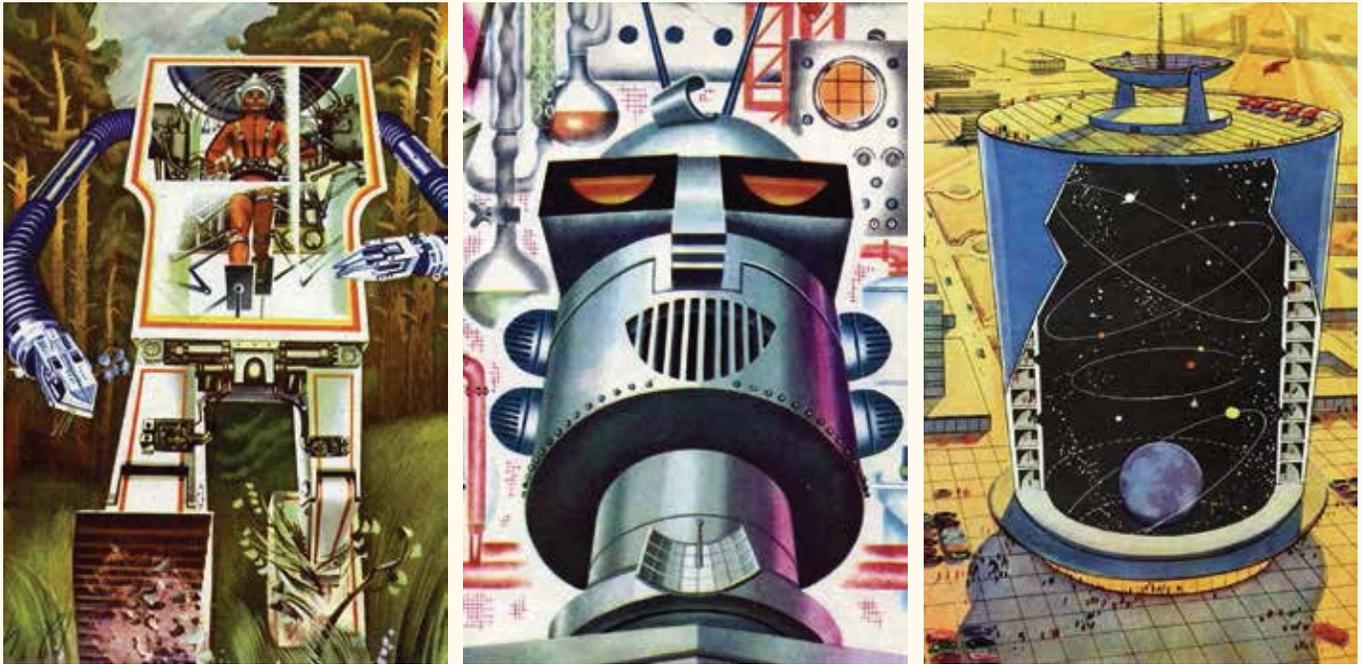
PHOTO: SOVFOTO/WIGGETTY/IMAGE

Laborers work on construction of the Soviet Union's Chernobyl nuclear power plant on July 1, 1975.



PHOTO: FLICKR/HENRIK/ISMARKER

Abandoned building in the city of Pripjat, Chernobyl, 2009.



Illustrations from *Tekhnika Molodezhi*, a Soviet magazine for youth that has been published since 1933. Its futuristic art melded science fiction and technological progress.

fundamental importance in the creation of the new Soviet man. The Soviet biologist Trofim Lysenko, director of the Institute of Genetics within the Soviet Union's Academy of Sciences under Stalin, claimed: "In our Soviet Union people are not born. What are born are organisms. We turn them into people – tractor drivers, engine drivers, academicians, scholars, and so forth".⁶ Thus, the scientific method and technology were not regarded solely as a means of increasing people's standard of living, but viewed as a fundamental device for creating the morally and ideologically perfect human being – the Homo Sovieticus, a product of the Marxist-Leninist laboratory.

Nuclear science was considered, along with the space program, to be the most important ideological symbol of the communist utopia. It not only was capable of defending the nation in a potential war against capitalistic countries, but also was an energy source with the potential to fulfill Lenin's dream of electrifying the whole country. The Soviet authorities were not slow to recognize the inherent symbolic value of this technology, capable of producing heat and light. Lenin's slogan thus soon became a metaphor for the enlightenment that would be spread throughout the country thanks to communism and electrification.

In his book *Red Atom*, Josephson describes the particularly important role that nuclear technology played in the formation of the Soviet ideology under Khrushchev. In his desire to avoid Stalin's relentless type of leadership, intimately connected with fear, destruction, and terror, it was crucial for him to connect his own leadership with modern technology, in particular with nuclear power, peace, and an optimistic faith in the future: "Nuclear technology was at the center of visions of a radiant communist future born during the Khrushchev era".⁷

It was also during the Khrushchev era that a new aspect of the nuclear atom was promoted, namely its "peaceful use", its

potential to produce energy, not a bomb. In her book *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters*, Kate Brown describes the construction of the world's first "civilian" reactor in the Soviet Union in terms of Igor Kurchatov's "pet project", leading to an emphasis on the Soviet "peaceful atom" (*mirnyi atom*).⁸ One example of the propagandistic use of this concept is the Soviet slogan "The peaceful atom in every home" (*Mirnyi atom v kazhdyi dom*), referring to the miracle that would bring light to Lenin's little lamp (*Lampochka Iliche*),⁹ illuminating the communist ABC book lying on every table in every cottage across the entire Soviet countryside, enlightening the Soviet people, finally turning them into New Soviet men and women.¹⁰

The question is: What happened to this ideologically loaded myth of the peaceful atom when reactor four at the Chernobyl plant turned out to be a threat to the lives and health of the surrounding population? A common standpoint, often put forward by Soviet and post-Soviet scientists, intellectuals, witnesses, authors, film directors, and politicians, is that the Chernobyl catastrophe became a harbinger of the upcoming fall of the Soviet Union. One example is the biologist and dissident author Zhores Medvedev, who in the forward to his book *The Legacy of Chernobyl* writes: We have known so little about accidents in communist countries because in the past even trivial problems were kept secret. [...] And true glasnost began to emerge gradually after the Chernobyl accident.¹¹

Another example is Alla Iaroshinskaia, who during Gorbachev's glasnost worked as a journalist. When the newspaper she had been working for banned outspoken reporting on Chernobyl, Iaroshinskaia became a dissident author, traveling secretly into radiation-contaminated areas. In her book, published in 1992, entitled *Chernobyl: The Forbidden Truth*, she is among the first to reveal top-secret reports of the Politburo of the Central Committee. During the first meeting of the Central Committee addressing the Chernobyl catastrophe, the highly important topic "kak davat'

The myth of the peaceful atom was also about a man-made utopia. Man overcoming God.

informatsiu” [how to distribute information] was discussed.¹²

Yet another example is Vladimir Gubarev, the chief editor of *Pravda* at the time of the catastrophe, who has written both testimonies and fictions depicting Chernobyl. In his drama *The Sarcophagus* (1987), Gubarev blames the accident on the Soviet system, a system in which people were incapable of making independent decisions. The character called “Bessmertny” (the immortal) says to the “Physicist”: “Who switched it [the emergency safety system] off? The *system* switched it off. The system which sees to it that nobody takes responsibility.”¹³ According to Gubarev, these and other negative aspects of the Soviet system were brutally uncovered in connection with the catastrophe, and it was therefore no longer possible to conceal them from the people.

The next question is: What technique do the authors use in order to represent Chernobyl as the major catalyst in relation to the fall of the Soviet Union? One recurrent strategy in the Soviet remembrance of Chernobyl is to invert the former positive connotations of nuclear power, symbolizing peace and the resurrection of a future, communist paradise, not seldom substantialized in Soviet, utopian nuclear cities.¹⁴ Instead of representing peace and a communist utopia, these authors transform the atom or the nuclear city into its opposite: an apocalyptic threat towards this very utopia, causing hardships for the people living close to the Chernobyl plant, similar to those experienced during a war. In a step that follows, this inversion of the peaceful atom becomes a most important device for highlighting the need for a political awakening in the Soviet Union during the five-year period between 1986 and 1991.

Before I come to the main analysis of this article, in which I interpret the way in which the nuclear town Pripyat is depicted in Liubov Sirota’s novel *The Pripyat Syndrome (Pripiatskii sindrom)*, and then conduct a brief study of contemporary online discussions, focusing on the toponymy and architecture of Pripyat before and after the catastrophe, I will take a brief look at post-Soviet culture today, in which it is very clear that the former connotations of the peaceful atom mentioned above have been inverted and turned into their binary opposite. One very clear example of this is the Russian contemporary artist Nikolai Kopeikin’s satiric picture *Mirnyi atom* [The peaceful atom], depicting a furious cartoon atom, standing on top of a globe with a dead dove of peace at his feet on the right-hand side, and three smoking reactors on his left, as he desperately waves an olive branch in his right hand. The whole picture cries out with the question: Could this really be called *peace?! No! Ergo* – the Soviet propaganda was a lie!

“NUCLEAR SCIENCE WAS CONSIDERED, ALONG WITH THE SPACE PROGRAM, TO BE THE MOST IMPORTANT IDEOLOGICAL SYMBOL OF THE COMMUNIST UTOPIA.”

Another example shows the way in which the Soviet slogan “The peaceful atom in every home” has been used recently in order to represent the opposite message, thereby constituting one of the most prominent slogans *against* nuclear energy. When repeated, for example, on motivators depicting the sarcophagus built over the collapsed reactor, or in slogans with the word “Chernobyl” added: “Chernobyl – The peaceful atom in every home”, it is crystal clear that its former Soviet content has been inverted, referring not so much to Lenin’s utopian electrification plan as to the radiation spreading over the whole country after the Chernobyl catastrophe. Actually, it is enough just to repeat the slogan without any additional information, thus relying merely on the ironic effects produced against the background of the Soviet collective memory of Chernobyl. Printed on T-shirts, for example, criticizing nuclear energy, the slogan becomes an unequivocal ironic statement in relation to its former Soviet message.

There is yet another dimension relating to the questioning of technology and the supremacy of the Soviet man after Chernobyl, namely the fact that anti-nuclear activism, during the late Soviet era, was used as a tool by Soviet republics for expressing their independence from Russia and the Soviet Union. In her book *Eco-Nationalism: Anti-nuclear Activism and National Identity in Russia, Lithuania, and Ukraine*, Jane I. Dawson describes this phenomenon in terms of “eco-nationalism”, which emerged in several regions within the Soviet Union after Chernobyl and Gorbachev’s reform program. Dawson comes to the conclusion that while this linkage between anti-nuclear activism and nationalism is very strong in, for example, Lithuania, it is weak in Ukraine and almost absent in Russia, something which she explains by the fact that Russia and Moscow constituted the center of power during the Soviet era: “In contrast to the other republics, however, activists were unable to translate this anti-Moscow feeling into a pro-Russia movement”.¹⁵

Notwithstanding the weakness or even absence of nationalistic traits within the Ukrainian and Russian anti-nuclear movement, it is still possible to associate both the Russian and Ukrainian Chernobyl experience with a strong anti-Moscow/anti-Soviet feeling. When Dawson states: “The poorly constructed and operated nuclear power stations were obvious symbols of Moscow’s disregard for the welfare of its member nations”,¹⁶ this is highly relevant in relation to both Ukraine and Russia, given the centralized Soviet power’s disregard for the welfare of all the *individuals* living in these nations, including Russia and Ukraine.

One frequently used symbol in the Soviet and post-Soviet memory of the Chernobyl catastrophe is that of the Revelation of St John, the last book in the Christian New Testament, and its depiction of Wormwood, the star named after the plant with a bitter taste, that falls down to earth, poisoning the rivers and pointing towards the approaching Apocalypse.¹⁷ One reason why this biblical motif occupies such a central position in the Slavic literature on Chernobyl is related to the star’s name in the Bible, and its connections with the wormwood plant. Actually, an *Artemisia* plant very closely related to wormwood (*polyn gorkaia*) – mugwort (*polyn obyknovennaia*) – is, in Russian/Belarusian, and also in Ukrainian, also called *Chernobylnik* or *chornobyl*.

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These etymological bonds between Chernobyl and the Wormwood star have contributed to the fact that the Chernobyl catastrophe has been so closely associated with Saint John's apocalypse in the Soviet collective memory. It is almost as if the star in the Russian translation of the Bible was not called Wormwood (*Polyn*), but Chernobyl (*Chernobylnik/Chornobyl*).¹⁸

One of the first to use Saint John's apocalyptic revelation in her interpretation of the Chernobyl catastrophe was the Russian émigrée author Julia Voznesenskaia, who, not in the Soviet Union but in New York, published her novel *The Star Chernobyl (Zvezda Chernobyl)* in 1987. The title of course refers to the star Wormwood (*Zvezda Polyn*), while the eschatological dimensions are projected onto the fatal decline of the Soviet people's trust in the Soviet system after Chernobyl. The plot of the book revolves around the lives of three sisters, among whom the eldest (a responsible Party member) is searching for her youngest sister, who is living in Pripyat at the time of the catastrophe. When the corrupt system withholds the truth from her, she gradually loses faith in the whole Soviet system. Eventually the Chernobyl experience and the desperate search for her sister lead her to a political truth: Irina becomes a dissident and returns her Party card. The Chernobyl catastrophe, in other words, is interpreted as an apocalyptic sign of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which actually became the truth four years after the book was published.

Aside from the etymological explanation of why Chernobyl has been interpreted in relation to the final apocalypse, the description of Russian culture by two semioticians, Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii, as a binary structure that winds its way through history by inverting “the existing system of relationships, changing pluses into minuses”, helps to explain this frequent use of apocalypse in the Soviet and post-Soviet description of Chernobyl.¹⁹ The two semioticians explain this duality of the Russian consciousness by referring to the fact that, contrary to the Western church, the Russian Orthodox Church does not include purgatory, and that this absence of a third, neutral zone between Paradise and Hell has contributed to a historical development within Russian culture distinguished by radical, binary changes – changing from “plus” into “minus” – instead of the successive development distinctive of Western countries. This binary structure can explain the fact that Russian culture is often described as apocalyptic, moving from one extreme pole – a paradisiacal utopia – into another – an infernal apocalypse.²⁰

One of the most obvious, apocalyptic outcomes of Chernobyl is what happened to the nuclear town of Pripyat located in the so-called “exclusion zone” (*zona otchuzhdenia*), which was established around the plant covering an area of 30 kilometers. The town is situated only 3 kilometers from the plant and at the time of the accident had nearly fifty thousand residents, mostly workers at the plant (*energetiki*) and their families. The binary structure of before and after the apocalypse becomes even clearer, because of the fact that this young town, only 16 years old at the time of the evacuation, was perceived before the catastrophe as an outstanding symbol of youth, modern technology, hard work, and happy

“ONE OF THE MOST OBVIOUS, APOCALYPTICAL OUTCOMES OF CHERNOBYL IS WHAT HAPPENED TO THE NUCLEAR TOWN OF PRIPYAT.”

family life in the name of communism, often depicted with its many mothers, pushing their prams along the straight lanes surrounded by beautiful flowerbeds. This paradisiacal nuclear city fits very well into what Kate Brown refers to as a “plutopia”, and when Pripyat was evacuated 36 hours after the catastrophe, it suddenly transformed into an apocalyptic ghost town; the binary opposite of the former, communist paradise.²¹

Another explanation as to why this eschatological theme is so deeply rooted in the Soviet collective memory of Chernobyl is related to the fact that the catastrophe was interpreted as God's and nature's revenge for mankind's hubris in general, and Soviet power's intention to electrify the whole country in the name of communism in particular. In fact, one wonders whether the memory of Pripyat may eventually evolve into a myth, comparable to the myth of St Petersburg, associated with Peter the Great's hubristic project of building a new city – “a window towards Europe” at the beginning of the 18th century, therewith transforming a more or less medieval, orthodox Russia into a rational, Westernized world power. During the first decades of the 19th century, that is, more than a hundred years after the birth of St Petersburg, this myth was already taking form in Russian literature, beginning with Aleksandr Pushkin's poem *The Bronze Horseman*, written in 1833. The title refers to the bronze statue of Peter the Great, raised on the initiative of Catherine the Great in 1784. The poem is partly inspired by the flood that took place in St Petersburg in 1824, depicted by Pushkin as nature's and God's revenge on Peter the Great and human hubris.

The parallels between St Petersburg and Pripyat become even more striking when we consider the fact that the symbol of the town of Pripyat was Prometheus, the Greek Titan who stole fire from Zeus and brought it to man. This was an unambiguous symbol of human hubris – to use technology to create paradise on earth. Before the accident, a heroic statue, depicting Prometheus, holding the powerful torch above his head, stood outside the *Kinoteatr Prometei* [Prometheus Cinema] in Pripyat. After the catastrophe, the statue of Prometheus was removed from the ghost town with the intention of preserving the monument, and today it stands at the memorial square in front of the main administrative building of the Chernobyl plant, right next to the memorial plaques, listing the dead liquidators and workers at the plant. The new position of this former symbol of human power and technology – in Pripyat used as a symbol for nuclear energy and communism's eternal strength – converts it into its opposite: a tragic reminder of the shortcomings of modern technology, and a

punishment for mankind's hubris. Another example of this kind of inversion of former symbols is made by the Ukrainian-American author Mary Mycio who, during one of her visits to the dead city of Pripyat, observes a Soviet sculpture of the Chernobyl plant, in which Lenin's light metaphor has lost all its former power, provoking instead associations with the apocalyptic star, Wormwood:

The Soviet-era sign read: "V. I. Lenin Chernobyl Atomic Energy Station", but I was stumped as to the monument's possible meaning. "It's a torch," Rimma explained. "It symbolizes the light that the Chernobyl plant produced." The Wormwood star also blazed like a torch, I recalled, although biblical symbolism doesn't get you far in understanding how the disaster happened.²²

On the website Pripjat.com, one of the organizers, Aleksandr Sirota, a former Pripjat resident and the son of the poet and novelist Liubov Sirota, whose novel I shall introduce below, does his best to promote this eschatological myth by distributing statuettes of Prometheus under the slogan *Simvol goroda Pripjati* [The symbol of the town of Pripjat]. The statuettes cost 27 dollars each, but for orders of more than 10 pieces, a considerable discount is offered.²³ Unlike the bronze statue of Peter the Great, this statuette is made of plastic, but you can choose between bronze and copper color, recalling both the actual statue of Peter the Great, still standing at the Senate Square in St. Petersburg, and the literal title of Pushkin's poem *Mednyi vsadnik* [literally: The Copper Horseman].

Considering that only 27 years have passed since the catastrophe, it is too early to decide whether the town of Pripjat will develop into a myth comparative to that of St Petersburg, but clearly it has the qualifications needed. One reason is that the town's binary structure between the past and present, paradise and hell, high technology and wild nature, human hubris and apocalyptic punishment, brings to mind the binary structure that is also at the heart of the St Petersburg myth, when the town in Pushkin's poem was imagined both as a proud chapter in the Russian history – "Metropolis of Peter, stand/Steadfast as Russia, stand in splendor!" – and as the victim of the flood of the Neva that raged against the antichrist Peter and his rational project.²⁴ The two "hubris towns" were, in other words, both haunted by a real catastrophe, and, in both cases, became the subject of apocalyptic interpretation by Orthodox believers in Russia. According to the Old Believers' doctrine of Moscow as the "Third Rome", Peter's nomination of St Petersburg as the capital of the Russian Empire would bring about the end of the world.²⁵ In fact, a similar argumentation has taken place in the wake of Chernobyl, and in her book *Wormwood Forest*, Mycio mentions one extreme measure to which this parallel between Chernobyl and Saint John's revelation has led:

Chernobyl's putative apocalyptic connection became so widespread,

combining fears of radiation with apocalyptic dread, that the state-controlled Soviet media took the highly unusual step of running interviews with leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church to debunk it, largely by arguing that no man could know when the end of time was near.²⁶

However, the only end provoked by Chernobyl, according to Mycio, is the collapse of the Soviet Union.²⁷

Another reason why Pripjat has the qualifications needed in order to develop into a myth is that, just like the city of Petersburg, it has become the battlefield for different political standpoints in contemporary post-Soviet society. Sarah D. Phillips draws attention to an interesting fight between state and private tour firms over Chernobyl, a fight that finally resulted in a state monopoly that "began with a series of strict rules imposed on tourists and private tour operators, and culminated in a legal challenge by the General Prosecutor and a temporary ban on all Chernobyl tourism".²⁸ The reason for this conflict is not only profit, Phillips claims, but also narratives, a claim which she substantiates with reference to the former liquidator Sergei Mirnyi, who started his company *Chernobyl Tour* in order to provide tourists with "life-changing" experiences. While the state tour focuses exclusively on Chernobyl's negatives, Mirnyi's company tries to present some of Chernobyl's positive dimensions: the disaster sped up the downfall of the authoritarian Soviet regime, and the nuclear power industry came under much needed, increased scrutiny, among other things.²⁹ Aleksandr Sirota, of Pripjat.com, also is taking up the fight against the state, underlining the need to defend the exclusion zone from both oblivion and exploitation. He has started a group at Pripjat.com insisting that the town will be re-opened for human habitation in the future. Phillips compares Sirota's and his counterparts' relationship to the dead city of Pripjat to the destiny of Snow White:

"Their" Pripjat is branded as a sort of post-Chernobyl Snow White: a poisoned and abandoned, but still young city that is not dead, but merely sleeping, and



People are scanned for radioactivity before evacuating.

PHOTO: SOVPOTO/IG/GETTYIMAGE

needs looking after until it is ready to re-awaken.³⁰

An important text describing people's experiences in Prip'yat after the Chernobyl catastrophe was written by Alexandr Sirota's mother, the poet and novelist Liubov Sirota. At the time of the catastrophe, she was a single mother living in Prip'yat with her then ten-year-old son Aleksandr. The first version of her novel *The Prip'yat Syndrome* was written at the beginning of the 1990s as a film manuscript, but due to the economic crisis at the time, the film studio did not survive, and the script was reworked into a novel.³¹

The Prip'yat Syndrome is based on Sirota's own experience of the Chernobyl catastrophe in April 1986 – from the first hours of rumors, speculations and neglect until the urgent evacuation, problems with accommodation and, not least, severe health problems, plus the difficulty of convincing the doctors that her and her son's health symptoms were of a physical and not psychological nature, hence the title *The Prip'yat Syndrome*. About 20 hours after the explosion in block four, Sirota's alter ego, Irina, walks home with her friend Sofia from *Dvoret's Kultury "Energetik"* [The Palace of Culture called "Energetik"].³² They see the festive illuminations in the streets paying tribute to Lenin, the united people and the Party. On the top of a nine-story high-rise block they see the four-meter-high letters in neon lights, presenting the Soviet slogan "Let the atom be a worker, not a soldier" (*Chai bude atom robotnikom, a ne soldatom*), originally a quote from Kurchatov. When a bit further down the street they see another slogan, "Long live Marxism-Leninism" (*Chai zhive Marxizm-Leninizm*) introduced with the Ukrainian words *Chai zhive* (long live) instead of *Chai bude* (Let [the atom] be), Irina says to Sofia: "Hey, Sofia, what do you think? Irina said with bitter irony, looking at the 'light'. Don't you think the same will happen with this 'Chai' as with our 'Let the atom be a worker, not a soldier!'"³³

Against the background of what has just happened at the Chernobyl plant, of which Sofia and Irina are already aware, the slogan "Let the atom be a worker and not a soldier", is loaded with highly ambiguous meaning. The "peaceful atom" is discovered to be anything but peaceful, and in fact, as this quotation indicates, threatens the whole ideology of Marxism-Leninism. It is also interesting that this ambiguity, associated with the once proud Soviet slogans following the catastrophe in Prip'yat almost thirty years ago, is still a subject of intense debate on the website Prip'yat.com. Today, these four-meter-high letters in neon lights have disappeared from the roof, and the question discussed is: What actually



Monument and reactor 4, Chernobyl.

PHOTO: TIIA MONTTO/WIKIMEDIA

happened to them? One version, probably a rumor, is that before the letters disappeared the Ukrainian letter "a" in the first word *chai* was changed to the Ukrainian letter "u", which transforms the first word into an invective, *chui* (cock). Another version is that the letters have been removed by hooligans, yet another that they have collapsed by themselves, and finally, that they have been removed in accordance with instructions from the state, a version supported by the user "Alfa". Referring to his/her personal chat with the user "Monstr", addressed as an *avtoritetnyi tovarishch* [credible expert], he/she claims regarding the destiny of this and other Soviet slogans in Prip'yat:

After the catastrophe, some Soviet slogans, which had acquired a highly ambiguous meaning, were taken down. In a town that had been evacuated just as in a war, the slogan "Let the atom be a worker and not a soldier" certainly looked suspect.³⁴

Interestingly, one of the most recurrent stylistic devices of *The Prip'yat Syndrome* is the depiction of Chernobyl as a war, which thereby ironically protests against the Soviet system. Below, I give some of the many examples in the novel whereby war-mapping is used as a protest against the old political system, but first it must be said that this frequent mapping is also a consequence of the fact that the experiences of the citizens' of Prip'yat had a lot in common with the experiences of war: evacuation, grief and loss, collective brotherhood, adventure, the opportunity to perform heroic deeds, war veterans. When, for example, Irina in the novel cries out: "Around us is peace, but we are in the middle of a war!" it is probably more an expression of what she actually experienced during those hours than a political protest.³⁵ The same could be said when an old lady on the train helps Irina, who is suffering from radiation sickness, and Irina draws her attention to some free seats, upon which the lady answers: "They are for war veterans", upon which Irina responds: "Okay, but what are we, if not war veterans?"³⁶

However, there are also examples where the parallel with war

Average life expectancy for soldiers in the Red Army was 3 months. What about the chances of survival in Prip'yat?

may be interpreted as a conscious inversion of the old system, pointing towards a new system yet to be born. For instance, it is hard to interpret Irina's and Sofia's absurd performance, acting like soldiers on the streets of Pripjat, as something other than an ironic play on the current war-like inferno through which they are living, and caused by nothing other than the so-called peaceful atom:

All of a sudden, Sofia straightened her back and commanded Irina with a loud voice: "Atten. . . tion! . . . Ready! . . . Front! Forward. . . march! One-two. . . ." And when the two friends had saluted, they firmly marched forward along the street.³⁷

Another example is when the well-known war song *Staraia soldatskaia pesnia* [The Old Soldier's song] by Bulat Okudzhava is quoted in the novel, slightly changed in order to fit the Chernobyl experience, and introduced with the cry: "Guys! If we have to die anyway, let us die with music! Okay, let's sing!"³⁸

There is also another song quoted in the novel, *My – mirnyi atom* [We are the peaceful atom], written by the former Pripjat resident Volodimir Shovkoshitnii, who worked at the plant starting in 1978 and later became a liquidator in the zone. Today, he is a poet, bard, author, politician, and prominent figure in the Ukrainian environmental movement. This song depicts Chernobyl as a war but certainly not a heroic one. Just as during the previous Brezhnev era, when, as Viktor Erofeev states in his article "A wake in memory of Soviet literature" (1991), no socialist realist writer believed in what he wrote, but simply wrote in order to receive fat royalties, this song states: "We are all heroes, as long as we are well paid".³⁹ But the song also shows that the Chernobyl experience did nothing to revive this already degenerate myth of heroism, depicting instead a "foolish" hero who becomes impotent: "Our wives tell us: you are no hero, but an impotent fool".⁴⁰ An anti-hero taking part in an absurd and meaningless war, fighting against one of the most sacred symbols of communism: "We are 'fighting' for our Great Country by receiving roentgens in our testicles", roentgens that emanate from the so-called peaceful atom, one of the cornerstones of Lenin's communism.⁴¹

The most striking result of a comparison of Chernobyl to a war is not the many similarities but rather the differences uncovered by such a mapping, leading to a questioning of the values of Soviet heroism and war culture. Svetlana Aleksievich, author of the book of interviews entitled *Voices from Chernobyl*, is one of the several writers who interpret the Chernobyl disaster explicitly as the end of Soviet war culture. In an interview to mark the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the catastrophe, she portrays her first visit to the zone as a kind of revelation of the absurdity of war:

A soldier with a rifle in his hand. Whom was he going to shoot at and whom should he defend? Should he defend his people from the physics, from invisible particles? Shoot at the contaminated earth or tree? [...]. This

was the image of war... It was the war culture that fell apart right in front of my eyes. I saw the pre-Chernobyl man transforming into the post-Chernobyl man.⁴²

By the concept "post-Chernobyl man", Aleksievich means a person more or less freed from the Soviet war culture and myth of heroism, the result of a cultural transformative process that eventually brought about the decline of the Soviet Union. The same ambivalence addressed by Aleksievich in her testimonial account above is present in Sirota's novel. On the one hand, it is *as if* the Pripjat residents in the novel are participating in a war, but on the other hand, this is a very strange kind of war. In contrast to a normal war, the enemy does not come from the *outside*, constituting a threat from an alien ideological and political system. Instead, the enemy is emanating from *within* the Soviet system, namely from one of its most sacred symbols, the *peaceful* atom.

According to Lotman and Uspenskii, the binary structure of the Russian culture does not only mean "a new system of values, replacing the old with the new" [*my italics*], but also that the old is *written* into the new, but "with a minus sign", as Lotman and Uspenskii note.⁴³ That is, the old system (the peaceful atom), is inverted into its binary opposite (the atom as a warrior), and then written, as the next step, into the new, but with a minus sign – thus *undermining* instead of *underlining* the Soviet communist system.

Bearing this in mind, the depiction of Chernobyl as a war becomes an effective device for making manifest political protest, ironically forcing former Soviet concepts to become loaded with their opposite value: "the peaceful atom" becomes a warrior against its own people, and Prometheus's utopian fire turns into an apocalyptic fire. This new value system, in turn, provokes existential doubt regarding the true nature of Soviet war culture and heroism: What does it actually mean to die for your country? What is a hero? Could it be called heroism to die in a "war" against one of the most sacred cornerstones of Soviet ideology? Or, is it more correct to address this as a senseless suicide?

Finally, this draws our attention to the fact that the people's mistrust of the Soviet system, enhanced by the Chernobyl catastrophe, was not only a consequence of technology's great impact on the ideological level, but also related to technology's close connection with the creation of the new Soviet man. And when reactor four at the Chernobyl plant exploded, it was not only the communist system that evaporated in the Soviet consciousness, but also the great myth of the new Soviet man, a heroic soldier and efficient worker, both in the name of communism. ✘

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references

- 1 Other nuclear accidents in the Soviet Union had occurred, but their disclosure was stifled by the Soviet authorities. The most severe among these was the Kyshtym accident at Mayak in 1957, a plutonium production reactor. The disaster was measured as a level 6 disaster on the International Nuclear Event Scale, making it the third most serious nuclear accident after the Chernobyl and Fukushima disasters, both measured as level 7 on the

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- INES. Zhores Medvedev, a biologist and dissident writer, who was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1973, was the first to report this and other Soviet accidents in his book *Nuclear disaster in the Urals* (1979).
- 2 Paul R. Josephson "Rockets, Reactors, and Soviet Culture" in *Science and the Soviet Social Order*, Loren R. Graham (ed.), (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990), 190.
 - 3 Paul R. Josephson "Technological Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century. Russia's Nuclear Future" in *History and Technology* vol. 19, no 3, (2003), 277-292.
 - 4 Katerina Clark "The Changing Image of Science and Technology in Soviet Literature" in *Science and the Soviet Social Order*, Loren R. Graham (ed.) (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1990), 259.
 - 5 Herschel and Edith Alt, *The New Soviet Man: His Upbringing and Character Development*, Bookman Associates, Inc. (1964), 19
 - 6 Lysenko is quoted from Mikhail Heller, *Cogs in the Wheel: The Formation of Soviet Man*, New York 1988, p. viii.
 - 7 Paul R. Josephson, *Red Atom: Russia's Nuclear Power from Stalin to Today*, New York (1999), 3.
 - 8 Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters*, New York 2013. Igor Kurchatov was head of the Soviet atomic bomb project (1943-1960), and is often addressed as the father of the Soviet atomic bomb.
 - 9 *Lampochka Ilicha* has its roots in Lenin's electrification plan and is still used (with irony) in Russia, referring to an ascetic light bulb without a shade, hanging from the ceiling.
 - 10 This propagandistic way of highlighting the atom's peaceful qualities also existed in Western countries such as the United Kingdom, France and the United States, which both Brown and Josephson state in their books (Ibid). However, due to the symbiotic relation between ideology and technology in the Soviet Union, the Soviet concept "peaceful atom" received a much more fundamental import in the Soviet society compared to other countries. For instance, Brown notes that even the Soviet bomb was ascribed peaceful purposes by the Soviet citizens: "Soviet citizens believed their bomb was not a weapon of destruction but a 'nuclear shield' against capitalist aggression" (Ibid, 133).
 - 11 Zhores Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, (Oxford 1990), x.
 - 12 In her latest book published in Moscow 2011, *Chernobyl': Bol'shaia lozh* [Chernobyl: The Big Lie], Iaroshinskaia comments on Gorbachev's decision to classify most of the information on Chernobyl as follows: "What about perestroika and the new thinking? It didn't affect the Chernobyl catastrophe. Maybe this is the main reason why Chernobyl became a catalyst for the collapse of the communist empire." (Iaroshinskaia 2011), <http://lib.rus.ec/b/429807/read>. *My translation*.
 - 13 Vladimir Gubarev, *Sarcophagus: A Tragedy*, New York, translated by Michael Glenny, (1987), 69.
 - 14 It should be noted that this utopian aspect of plutonium was not only used in the Soviet Union, but also in the United States. This is shown in Kate Brown's recent book *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters*, New York 2013, in which she studies the plutonium cities of the Hanford plutonium plant near Richland and the Mayak plant next to Ozersk in terms of utopian cities; a "plutopia".
 - 15 Dawson claims that the historically close connections between Russia and Ukraine can explain the fact that eco-nationalism was almost absent also in Ukraine. Dawson, Jane I. *Eco-Nationalism: Anti-nuclear Activism and National Identity in Russia, Lithuania, and Ukraine*, Durham, (1996), 121.
 - 16 Ibid, 163.
 - 17 The Book of Revelation, Chapter 8, verse 10 and 11.
 - 18 Another fateful interpretation of the plant's name Chernobyl draws attention towards its etymologic relationship with the words "black" (chornyi) and "legend" (byl').
 - 19 Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii, "Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture" in *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, Alexander Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky (ed.) (Ithaca and London, 1985), 34.
 - 20 See for example David Bethea's book *The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction* (Princeton, 1991).
 - 21 Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters*, New York 2013. The official information about the evacuation was distributed on local radio in Prip'yat at 10 am, Sunday, April 28, and four hours later, 1,100 empty buses arrived and transported the nearly 50,000 residents from the city. One reason why the evacuation of Prip'yat was possible to carry through in this relatively efficient way was that the Soviet authorities had informed the citizens that the evacuation was only for a couple of days. See for instance Liubov' Sirota's autobiographical novel *The Prip'yat Syndrome*, which I will get back to later in the text.
 - 22 Mary Mycio, *Wormwood Forest* (Washington, D. C. 2005), 9.
 - 23 http://vk.com/topic-42699175_27184827
 - 24 Alexander Pushkin "The Bronze Horseman" in *The Complete Works of Alexander Pushkin*. Volume Five, Norfolk, (2000), 299.
 - 25 "Third Rome" refers to the belief that Moscow and the Russian empire would succeed Rome and Byzantium Rome after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. At the beginning of the 16th century, the Russian monk Filofei stated his prophecy that Moscow is the Third Rome, and that there will never be a fourth Rome.
 - 26 Mary Mycio, *Wormwood Forest*, (Washington, D. C. 2005), 8.
 - 27 Ibid, 9.
 - 28 Sarah D. Phillips, "An Illustrated Guide to the Post-catastrophe Future" in *The Anthropology of East Europe Review*, vol. 30, no 1, (2012), 131.
 - 29 Ibid, 131.
 - 30 Ibid, 132.
 - 31 Thanks to financial support from the international public organization Prip'yat.com, it was finally published as a novel, first as a book (2009) and in 2011 electronically at the site Prip'yat.com, as a gift to the readers on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl catastrophe. The English translation of the book is published electronically at Amazon.com.
 - 32 Palaces of Culture (DK) were large community centers spread all over the country during the Soviet era. Each DK had its own name, and the one in Prip'yat was called "Energetik", meaning both "energetic" (vigorous, healthy) as well as "power plant worker".
 - 33 prip'yat.com/news/11-04-24/prip'yatskii-sindrom. All the quotations from Sirota's book are in my translation.
 - 34 <http://forum.prip'yat.com/showthread.php?t=2380>.
 - 35 prip'yat.com/news/11-04-24/prip'yatskii-sindrom.
 - 36 Ibid.
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 - 38 Ibid.
 - 39 Ibid.
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 - 42 Svetlana Aleksievich, "Zhizn' raspalas' na atomy" [When life fell apart in atoms], *Ogoniok* 17, 1-7 2006. <http://www.ogoniok.com/4942/27/>
 - 43 Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii, "Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture" in *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, Alexander Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky (ed.) (Ithaca and London, 1985), 34.

Title: Deconstructing the “Peaceful Atom” in the Soviet Collective Memory after Chernobyl’: The Beginning of the End of the Soviet Union?

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Abstract

In this article I analyse the Soviet collective memory of the nuclear catastrophe at the Chernobyl’ plant in 1986, expressed in fiction, testimonies and online discussions focusing on the nuclear town of Pripjat’, situated only 3 kilometres from the plant. I will argue that due to the emblematic political value of the so-called “peaceful atom” – one of the two cornerstones of Lenin’s communism – the explosion in reactor four at the Chernobyl’ plant became a traumatic blow to the Soviet people’s trust in the whole ideological system and its associated culture of war and heroism.

Keywords

Chernobyl’, Soviet collective memory, Pripjat’/Pripyat, peaceful atom, Sirota, Wormwood star, apocalypse, Homo Sovieticus, Marxism-Leninism

Presentation

Johanna Lindbladh has a Ph. D. in Slavic languages from Lund University (2003) and is currently working on a postdoctoral project, financed by the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, in which she examines the memory of Chernobyl’ in Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian film and literature.