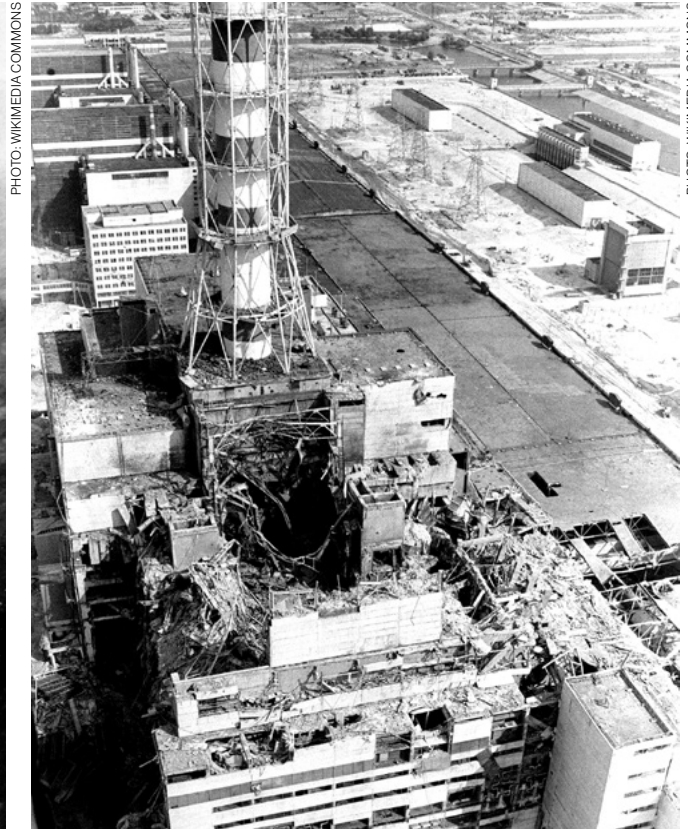


Hiroshima, August 6, 1945.



Chornobyl, April 26, 1986.

Writing the **disaster** from **Hiroshima** to **Chornobyl**

ATOMIC AND NUCLEAR TESTIMONIES AND THE AFTERLIFE OF DISASTERS

by **Florence Fröhlig**

abstract

This essay examines the memorialization of two pivotal nuclear catastrophes – the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945 and the Chornobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 – through the lens of testimonial writings and Maurice Blanchot's concept of "the disaster." Drawing on Japanese hibakusha testimonies and Chornobyl survivors' accounts, the essay contrasts political memory, which seeks closure and national integration, with cultural memory, which preserves trauma, ambiguity, and unresolved loss. Testimonial writings, rather than commemorating a concluded past, emerge from within the disaster itself, articulating a reality that defies assimilation into redemptive historical narratives.

KEYWORDS: Nuclear disaster, Maurice Blanchot, A-bomb literature, Chornobyl literature.

40 years ago, on April 26, 1986, at 1:23:58 at night a series of explosions destroyed reactor number 4 of the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant. 2026 also marks the 35-year anniversary of the collapse of the USSR. The two events are associated, and the accident at Chornobyl is often cited as the event that brought about the final collapse of the communist regime.¹

Another tragic nuclear catastrophe that has come to symbolize the end of an era is the dropping of the first atomic bomb over Hiroshima, a city of 350,000 inhabitants, at 8:15 in the morning on August 6, 1945, 80 years ago last year. President Truman's official release following the bombing proclaimed:

It is an atomic bomb. [...] The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East.²

The use of the atomic bomb has long been represented – particularly within the dominant American war narrative – as a necessary measure that hastened the end of the Second World War in Asia and thereby saved countless (American soldiers’) lives.

It is striking that both the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster have been interpreted in similar terms, as events that accelerated the collapse of existing political regimes, namely the militarist regime in Japan and authoritarian Soviet rule in Eastern Europe. In each case, the collapse has been framed as a historical turning point and celebrated as a return to (Western) civilization and values.

Both disasters became powerful cultural symbols. However, whereas the Hiroshima bombing has been iconized through photographs of the atomic mushroom cloud – demonstrating the military use of the atom and American supremacy – the Chernobyl nuclear accident has been iconized through images of the ubiquitous rusted Ferris wheel at Prypiat, symbolizing the dangers of civilian nuclear energy production and Soviet technological and political failure. Yet both these tragic events transcend national and cultural boundaries and have become embedded in the political memories of humankind.

IN THIS ESSAY, I share reflections on the memorialization of these two nuclear disasters and discuss the discrepancy between cultural and political memory. Cultural memory is understood here as the memory shared within a social group and mediated through texts, rites, monuments, and commemorative practices, whereas political memory refers to the memory conveyed and sustained by institutions, nations, and states.³ Both political and cultural memory, however, aim at a permanence of memory and are “founded on durable carriers of symbols and material representations”.⁴ Yet where political memory tends to stabilize meaning and integrate events into national narratives, cultural memory – particularly when shaped by testimonial voices – often preserves ambiguity, trauma, and unresolved loss. The tension between the two concerns not so much what is remembered but how the past is narratively organized: as closure or as an open wound.

This essay approaches Hiroshima and Chernobyl not primarily as historical events, but as instances of what Maurice Blan-

chot calls “the disaster”: an occurrence that exceeds the logic of eventfulness and unsettles the very continuity of time. Although both catastrophes have been politically framed as turning points that precipitated regime change and reopened the path toward a renewed historical order, such narratives risk assimilating destruction into a progressive teleology. Within a narrative of historical progress, destruction is cast as the precondition for renewal, and the disaster is retrospectively justified by the regime change it is said to have enabled.

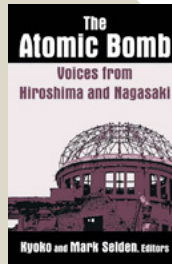
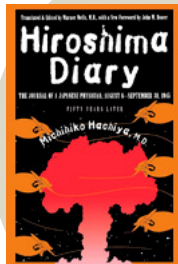
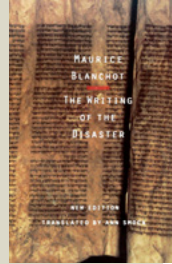
BY READING Japanese *hibakusha* writings and Chernobyl testimonies alongside Maurice Blanchot’s reflections in *The Writing of the Disaster*,⁵ I argue that these texts articulate a different temporality – not catastrophe as an event that passes, but catastrophe as an enduring condition.⁶ My argument is that testimonial writings resist precisely this logic of redemptive history. Testimony thus emerges not as commemoration of a concluded past, but as writing from within a disaster that does not end.⁷ In so doing, these texts shift attention from geopolitical transformation to existential rupture, thereby unsettling the political appropriation of catastrophe.

To contrast political memory with cultural memory in relation to both disasters, I examine four different testimonial writings. First, I draw on Hachiya Michihiko’s *Hiroshima Diary*,⁸ a personal account of the bombing by a Japanese survivor, a physician working at the Hiroshima Communications Hospital. The diary was not intended for publication but was eventually translated into English in 1955. The second text is an anthology, *The Atomic Bomb: Voices from Hiroshima and Nagasaki*,⁹ which documents the experiences of victims from diverse social backgrounds through memoirs, poems, novellas, drawings, and photographs.

FOR CHORNOBYL, I am relying on the poems written by Lyubov Sirota, a civilian victim and poet who lived near the Chernobyl power plant and witnessed the accident, and especially her poem “To Pripjat”, included in *The Chernobyl Poems* (1995).¹⁰ The second source is the well-known book *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* (2005), in which the Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich has gathered testimonies from survivors.¹¹



Maurice Blanchot.



“WITHIN A NARRATIVE OF HISTORICAL PROGRESS, DESTRUCTION IS CAST AS THE PRECONDITION FOR RENEWAL, AND THE DISASTER IS RETROSPECTIVELY JUSTIFIED BY THE REGIME CHANGE IT IS SAID TO HAVE ENABLED.”



In the immediate aftermath of both disasters, the survivors' voices were silenced, either overtly through censorship or indirectly through intimidation and implied threats. Moreover, most information was blacked out by the authorities, and reporters were barred from the disaster sites. American authorities in Japan and Soviet authorities in the Soviet republics of Ukraine and Belarus censored information and blocked publication not only of scientific papers, articles, and books, but also of reportage, short stories, or even poetry describing nuclear disasters and their effects.¹² All information about each accident was classified as secret, including not only data on the extent of radioactive contamination, but also the results of medical analyses. This initial silencing is crucial: political memory begins not as commemoration but as suppression. Only later, once the event can be narratively controlled, does it reappear as a symbol. Testimony therefore emerges not merely as recollection, but as counter-memory – as an intervention into the state's management of visibility and invisibility.¹³

ALTHOUGH WRITERS continued to bear witness to the bombings in Japan, their works were not publicly disseminated. This did not, however, prevent the emergence of a clandestine body of literature written by bomb survivors, the *hibaku-sha*. This so-called A-bomb literature (*Genbaku Bungaku*) was banned from public circulation – people read it by wrapping the books in a newspaper – and remains largely unknown in the West.

A similar pattern of suppression occurred after the accident at Chernobyl NPP, when the Soviet Union tried to conceal the accident and marginalize survivors' testimonies. In response, a distinct genre known as "Chernobyl literature" emerged. In her poem "To Vasily Deomidovich Dubodel" (a Chernobyl victim), Lyubov Sirota (1995) reflects explicitly on censorship and the silencing of the catastrophe:

But thousands of 'competent' functionaries
Count our 'souls in percentages, [...?]
They keep trying to write off.
Our ailing truths
With their sanctimonious lies.
But nothing will silence us!
Even after death,
From our graves



Lyubov Sirota.

We will appeal to your Conscience

Not to transform the Earth into a Sarcophagus!¹⁴

The testimonies were acts of resistance, not only against past governmental censorship but also against official narratives and the politicization of memory. They conveyed very private and intimate accounts of the catastrophe, offering an alternative to official memory.

Testimonial writings, usually composed in the first-person, arise from the eyewitnesses' urgent need to testify. They also reveal the difficulties the authors faced in finding adequate words/language to convey their experiences, and in identifying meaningful comparisons with which to describe the disasters. One of the survivors interviewed in Alexievich's book observes:

What I'm telling you, it's not coming out right ... The words are all wrong ... I'm living in a real and unreal world at the same time.¹⁵

Following Blanchot, the disaster destroys the very subject who might testify.¹⁶ Yet testimonies nonetheless persist; writing thus emerges from a place where language has already failed. In *hibaku-sha* or Chernobyl testimonies, survivors often say that what they experienced "cannot be described". Language falters before radiation, burned bodies, invisible contamination. This difficulty resonates strongly with Blanchot's idea that the disaster is precisely that which escapes experience even as it is being lived.¹⁷

The often-experienced lack of adequate words is further intensified by the affective nature of trauma, which "closely ties nuclear catastrophes' literature to the philosophical potential of poetic language".¹⁸ Testimonial accounts of the Chernobyl disaster bear witness to the efforts of eyewitnesses to address the uncanniness of radioactivity, thereby exposing the limits of cognition, as the two excerpts below show:

What had happened was something we didn't know about. A different kind of fear. This was something you couldn't hear or see. It had no smell, no color, and it changed us physically and mentally.¹⁹

We were preparing for war, nuclear war, building nuclear shelters. We wanted to hide from the fallout as if it were

shrapnel from a shell. But it was everywhere, in the bread, the salt ... We breathe radiation, we eat radiation.²⁰

Even if all eyewitnesses were confronted with the limits of representation, the atomic and nuclear disasters did not affect them in the same way. When reading the testimonies, I was struck by the disparity in how the atomic bomb and the nuclear explosion hit the populations.

THE HIROSHIMA testimonies are marked by excessive visibility: light, heat, mutilated bodies, and the overwhelming presence of death. The disaster appears as an instantaneous apocalypse, condensed into a single blinding flash. The atomic bomb killed people in three different ways: by heat rays, explosion blast, and radiation rays. The casualties were immediate and dramatic, and survivors' accounts attest to the same haunting images of nuclear destruction: first a stunning flash, followed by a colossal blast that tore away the clothing and peeled the skin of many victims, leaving them naked or semi-naked. The accounts convey a picture of apocalypse or hell: corpses "frozen by death while in the full action of flight! A dead man on a bicycle," youngsters huddled together awaiting death, mothers with dead children, infants with dying mothers, corpses without faces, and the abject smell of burnt bodies: "Burned people smell like drying squid or look like boiled octopuses," as one witness mentioned.²¹ And everywhere flies and maggots:

Maggots ... were lapping up blood and eating Yoko [...] What a clever fly! Wasting no time, it had procreated in the waste left by the destruction. The maggots swarming in Yoko's open wounds soon become flies, and it would be their turn to create new lives.²²

In Chernobyl, as all eyewitnesses stressed in their testimonies, the accident was initially invisible to most of the affected victims and their families. The event and the scale of the hazard it presented were initially hidden from the public. And therefore, in contrast to the bombing of Hiroshima, the consequences of the explosion of the nuclear reactor at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant appeared less immediate and spectacular:

It happened late Friday night. That morning, no one suspected anything. I sent my son to school; my husband went to the barber's. [...] I can still see the bright crimson glow; it was like the reactor was glowing. This wasn't any ordinary fire; it was some kind of emanation. It was pretty. I'd never seen anything like it in the movies. That evening everyone spilled out onto their balconies, and those who didn't have them went to

friends' houses. We were on the ninth floor; we had a great view. People brought their kids out [...] People came from all around on their cars and their bikes to have a look.²³

When reading the accounts of the Chernobyl disaster, we initially sense calm, contrasting with the noisiness and spectacularism of the burning bodies after the bombing of Hiroshima.

In the morning, I went out into the garden, and something was missing; the usual sounds were gone. Couldn't hear a single bee – not one! Eh? What was that about? And they wouldn't fly out on the second day. Nor the third. Later, they told us there was an accident at the power plant, which wasn't far off. But for good while [sic] we didn't know. The bee knew, but we didn't.²⁴

The noise and panic came several days later, when the army was sent to put out the fire and evacuate the neighboring population.

The planes are flying and flying. Every day. They fly real, real low right over our heads. They're flying to the reactor, to the station. One after the other. While here we have the evacuation. They're moving us out. Storming the houses [...] The livestock is moaning, the kids are crying. It's war!²⁵

While the consequences of the disaster at Hiroshima were directly related to wartime violence and had immediately visible casualties, it took some days for the residents of Prypiat to grasp the consequences of the catastrophe. Yet references to wartime life are common in Chernobyl testimonial accounts. Witnesses describe experiences of "evacuation, grief and loss, collective brotherhood, opportunities for heroic action, and even a sense of becoming war veterans", as Johanna Lindbladh notes.²⁶ The persistent recourse to war metaphors can be understood as a way of anchoring them in something to which witnesses can relate. However, this reveals a paradox: in order to render the unprecedented thinkable, witnesses resort to the familiar vocabulary of armed conflict. At the same time, these metaphors simultaneously fail, because radiation does not behave like an enemy that can be confronted or defeated. Unlike war, which presupposes antagonists, radioactive contamination is impersonal and omnidirectional. Thus, the metaphor both enables and limits comprehension. And the repeating pattern of trauma in the Chernobyl accounts emerges precisely from the shock the eyewitnesses describe upon realizing the consequences of radiation for their own bodies.

"THE RELATIONSHIP TO ANIMALS, FOOD, SOIL, AND THE MOST ORDINARY GESTURE OF SURVIVAL BECOMES CHARGED WITH ANXIETY AND MORAL HESITATION."

Besides physical harm, testimonial accounts address the emotional impacts of disasters on survivors' lives. The most poignant testimonies are those in which survivors describe witnessing the suffering and deaths of loved ones. In accounts of Hiroshima, the emotional trauma further encompasses the incapacity of rescuing a family member lying beneath the rubble of a house when the fire spreads, or the shock of seeing corpses eaten by maggots. The testimonies documented affective disorders and shifts in attitude toward life, with many witnesses from both disasters stating that they could no longer bring harm to animals.

Slugs were breeding there in swarms. My mother and Teiko diligently dropped them in a can of salt water. I looked in the can. They were half-melted, but not completely melted. [...] After once eyeing this sight, I had begun to suffer from an association. It was about human beings heaped up in a mound of death, half burnt but not completely melted, with no energy to show any sign of resistance.²⁷

Such moments indicate that nuclear catastrophe alters not only political belonging but also ontological orientation. The relationship to animals, food, soil, and the most ordinary gesture of survival becomes charged with anxiety and moral hesitation. The everyday world is no longer self-evident.

IN ALEXIEVICH'S WRITINGS, the most dramatic accounts are those of the liquidators' wives and of the liquidators who survived but witnessed the lingering deaths from severe radiation among their colleagues. Toward the end of his monologue, one soldier explains how his friends died: one got fat "like a barrel", another one skinny and black "like coal"; he then remarks that "I was in Afghanistan, too. It was easier there. They just shot you"²⁸. The comparison with Afghanistan is telling – conventional warfare, however brutal, offers a recognizable structure of violence: one is shot, one dies. Radiation, by contrast, produces a slow and disfiguring death that erodes the boundaries between the living and the dying. Testimony repeatedly returns to this prolonged temporality of suffering.

Even though the atomic and nuclear disasters did not affect the population in identical ways, these events clearly constitute a turning point in the lives of the eyewitnesses, who were pitched into a new reality that changed their perceptions and disrupted their sense of reality.

[...] in the space of one night, we shifted to another place in history. We took a leap into a new reality, and that reality proved beyond not only our knowledge but also our imagination.²⁹

Atomic as well as nuclear catastrophes represent an existential shock for the victims, and their consequences are "inherently irreversible".³⁰ Testimonial accounts consistently emphasize the disruptive character of such disasters on the lives of the narrators, bearing witness to lingering deaths, lifelong bereavement, physical harm from radiation, keloid scars, malformed children, and ceaseless psychological trauma among those who escaped immediate death. These testimonials further show how the disasters permeated their intimate lives, destabilizing their routines, relationships, and basic sense of orientation in the world.

Read alongside Maurice Blanchot's reflections in *The Writing of the Disaster*, nuclear catastrophe appears not merely as a historical event but as what Blanchot calls the disaster: that which exceeds the logic of occurrence and unsettles the very possibility of experience. The disaster, he suggests, "does not come" – it has always already taken place, undoing temporal continuity and leaving the subject exposed to an aftermath without conclusion.³¹ The testimonies from the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster repeatedly articulate this temporal dislocation: survivors speak from a present that is no longer fully present, from a world that continues

and yet has irrevocably ended. In this sense, nuclear catastrophe constitutes an apocalypse without eschatology – an ending without revelation or redemption.

Moreover, radiation itself seems to embody what Blanchot elsewhere describes as the neuter: an impersonal force that erodes distinctions between subject and object, life and death, war and peace. Invisible, odorless, and omnipresent, it escapes sensory cognition while penetrating bodies and landscapes alike.³² The disaster thus no longer belongs solely to the realm of the spectacular – the flash over Hiroshima – but persists as contamination, latency, and deferred illness. The witnesses struggle to articulate not only the horror of destruction, but also the experience of being dispossessed of mastery over perception and language. Their insistence that "the words are all wrong" enacts what Blanchot understands as writing from the disaster: a mode of testimony that arises where language falters and the speaking "I" is itself destabilized. Testimonial writing, then, does not restore coherence to the past; instead, it preserves the trace of an encounter with the impersonal, with a reality that resists assimilation into political narratives of progress or of the end of the disaster.

SEEN IN THIS LIGHT, the tension between political and cultural memory becomes even more pronounced. Political memory seeks to stabilize the disaster as a completed historical episode – a turning point that clears the way for a linear historical narrative. In contrast, the testimonial voices, writing from within what Blanchot calls the disaster, resist such narrative foreclosure. Their accounts do not commemorate an event safely consigned to the past; they articulate a persistence, an ongoing ex-



Svetlana Alexievich.



posure that continues to unsettle the present. Cultural memory, shaped by these testimonies, thus preserves the experience of living on in the disaster's interminable aftermath.

We drank juice from birch and maple trees. We steamed beans on the stove. We made sugared cranberries. And during the war, we gathered stinging-nettle and goose-foot. We got fat from hunger but didn't die. There were berries in the forest, and mushrooms. But now that's all gone. They don't let you eat the mushrooms or the berries. I always thought that what was boiling in your pot would never change, but it's not like that.³³

If testimonial accounts make visible the physical, emotional, and existential impacts of atomic and nuclear catastrophes, they also blur the boundary between the private and the public. The polyphony of voices conveys a shared memory and shapes the cultural memory of the events without creating any official history. In this way, the discrepancy between cultural and political memories becomes starker. Whereas political framings of such disasters foreground the collapse of allegedly undesirable and backward political regimes and promise a resumption of a "normal" (Western and modern) course of history, the testimonial writings evidence instead the collapse of the victims' lives, which are irreversibly marked by the events and will never return to normal. In line with Blanchot, disaster in the testimonial writing is not the end of the world, but life continuing after the end. The world goes on, but not as before: there is no return, nothing can be erased. In this sense, cultural memory, as articulated through testimony, rejects the logic of "after" on which political narratives depend. This contrasts with the theological apocalypse. Nuclear disaster does not culminate in transcendence; it leaves behind a "ruined time". For witnesses, there is no clean temporal break between past and present, no stable post-catastrophic order. The disaster persists not as a monument, but as a lived interruption. As Lyubov Sirota wrote:

Nothing can be erased, nothing subtracted, nothing cancelled, nothing corrected!³⁴ ❌

Florence Fröhlig is an Associated Professor in Ethnology, and the Director of Studies of BEEGS (Baltic and East European Graduate School) at CBEEES, Södertörn University.

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