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SOVIET PRESS COVERAGE OF THE CHERNOBYL ACCIDENT

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Anna Jo Keller

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M.A. degree in Journalism

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SOVIET PRESS COVERAGE OF THE CHERNOBYL ACCIDENT

By

Anna Jo Keller

A THESIS

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

SOVIET PRESS COVERAGE OF THE CHERNOBYL ACCIDENT

By

Anna Jo Keller

Soviet press coverage of the Chernobyl accident demonstrates the transformation the Soviet press underwent during glasnost in covering bad news. The Soviet press initially covered the accident according to the traditional means of Soviet Communist Party control over the reporting of bad news: a news blackout; a series of brief, official statements; and media support of Soviet ideology. These traditional means became less important in subsequent coverage of the accident. The Soviet press later covered the Chernobyl accident according to the role contemporary glasnost assigned for coverage of bad news: exposure of managerial and technological inefficiency in the interest of economic reform.

This hypothesis was supported through analysis of the historical framework of Communist Party control of the press; of glasnost at the time of Chernobyl; and of Soviet press coverage of the accident.

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This paper is dedicated to my family members for their support during my graduate studies, and especially to my mother for her help and encouragement.

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I would like to thank Stephen Lacy, William Cote and James Detjen for their assistance and guidance in the research and writing of this paper.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2	
HYPOTHESIS AND METHOD OF STUDY.....	5
HYPOTHESIS	5
METHOD OF STUDY.....	5
CHAPTER 3	
HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK OF IDEOLOGICAL CONTROL	
OF THE SOVIET MEDIA.....	10
CENSORSHIP AND PROPAGANDA.....	11
PROVISION AND DISSEMINATION OF POLITICAL MATERIAL	13
THE MEDIA'S ROLE IN BUILDING SOCIALISM.....	15
THE TREATMENT OF BAD NEWS	17
CHAPTER 4	
THE SCOPE OF GLASNOST AT THE TIME OF THE	
CHERNOBYL ACCIDENT.....	20
THE CREATION OF GLASNOST TO PROMOTE PERESTROIKA	22
THE INDELIBLE GOAL OF SOCIALISM	26
CHAPTER 5	
CHRONOLOGY OF THE CHERNOBYL ACCIDENT	
AND INITIAL MEDIA COVERAGE.....	29
THE NEWS BLACKOUT.....	31
THE INITIAL SERIES OF STATEMENTS	33
CHAPTER 6	
NEWSPAPER CONTENT OF THE COVERAGE OF	
THE CHERNOBYL ACCIDENT	46
ATTACKS ON THE WESTERN MEDIA	47
COVERAGE OF FOREIGN ACCIDENTS.....	51
STORIES OF HEROISM.....	56
"MANAGERIAL - TECHNOCRATIC RATIONALE"	66

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY75

CONCLUSIONS.....75

SUMMARY.....79

BIBLIOGRAPHY85

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Zhores A. Medvedev, a research biochemist on staff at the National Institute for Medical Research and who had been exiled from the Soviet Union in 1973,¹ said in 1990:

We have known so little about accidents in communist countries because in the past even trivial problems were kept secret. Accidents were covered up and unpleasant social phenomena were hidden from the public eye. But an artificial paradise, agitprop prosperity and Potemkin villages can only be maintained for a certain length of time. And true *glasnost* began to emerge gradually after the Chernobyl accident.²

Victor H. Winston represented the opinion of most Western observers in claiming glasnost "failed the test" of Chernobyl.³

Felicity Barringer, who wrote on the Chernobyl accident for *New York Times*, said in 1991 that "Chernobyl has become a symbol of how closed the openness really was."⁴

Vladimir Shlapentokh reported that Soviet officials and journalists admitted later either directly or indirectly that there was a cover-up.⁵

¹Victor H. Winston, *The Early Years of the Gorbachev Era: An Introduction*, eds. Ed A. Hewett and Victor H. Winston, *Milestones in Glasnost and Perestroika Politics and People* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1991), 6.

²Zhores A. Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell LTD., 1990), x.

³Winston, "The Early Years of the Gorbachev Era: An Introduction," 6.

⁴Felicity Barringer, "Chernobyl Five Years Later," *New York Times Magazine*, 14 April 1991, 36.

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⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

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Medvedev was widely quoted in the American and European presses in the days immediately after the accident as saying: "If the radiation had been contained within the Soviet Union, they would have preferred to keep silent."⁶

Serge Schmemmann agreed with Medvedev that the media's handling of Chernobyl illustrated the Soviet authority's effort to save "face before the world."⁷ He reported that diplomats considered the incident an embarrassment to Gorbachev, who had been fostering a more open, decentralized style with "more candor about failings."⁸

As striking as the accident itself, said Schmemmann, was the Soviet Government's enormous work to restrict information about it. It was a reflexive retreat into secrecy that again seemed to show the Kremlin loath to concede any failing before its people and a hostile world.⁹

Brian McNair called the initial handling of the Chernobyl accident:

. . . a period of ten anxious days during which the Soviet government, through the media, kept its own citizens, foreign guests, and the international community as a whole in virtual ignorance about a nuclear catastrophe of unprecedented seriousness.¹⁰

⁵Vladimir Shlapentokh, "Ecology and Nuclear Danger in Soviet Ideology and Public Opinion," ed. J. Mallory Wober, *Television and Nuclear Power: Making the Public Mind*, (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1992), 103.

⁶Philip M. Boffey, "Assessment of US, Intelligence Sources Say Accident Began Days Ago and Continues," *New York Times*, 30 April 1986, sec. A, p. 11.

⁷Serge Schmemmann, "The Soviet Secrecy," *New York Times*, 1 May 1986, sec. A, p. 13.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Brian McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 2.

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¹³Ibid

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McNair called Chernobyl the first challenge to the reforming approach to covering bad news.

The domestic dissatisfaction and international outrage provoked by the Soviet media's response to the disaster delivered a fatal blow to 'Brezhnevian' journalism, boosting the process of radical reform and restructuring of information policy which had begun one year earlier with the election of Mikhail Sergeyivich Gorbachov as General Secretary of the CPSU.¹¹

Isaac J. Tarasulo pointed out that after the enormous disaster of Chernobyl, the media found it much easier to publicize all manner of accidents, natural disasters and other problems.¹² The initial delay that occurred with publicizing Chernobyl was not repeated with subsequent catastrophes.¹³

Archie Brown argued in 1986/1987 that because Chernobyl achieved greater allowance for the coverage of bad news in the media, the Soviet population, suddenly inundated by unprecedented bad news in the media, associated Gorbachev with all the bad news.¹⁴

Nieves Bregante identified two stages of glasnost and considered the second stage as beginning with Chernobyl.

¹¹Ibid., 3.

¹²Isaac J. Tarasulo, ed., *Gorbachev and Glasnost, Viewpoints from the Soviet Press* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1989), xxi.

¹³Ibid., xxi-xxii.

¹⁴Archie Brown, "Soviet Political Developments and Prospects," *World Policy Journal* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1986-1987): 77.

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The information blackout eroded the image of the new Soviet openness Gorbachev was trying to sell to domestic and international audiences. Western distrust of Gorbachev and a terrified Soviet population -- who knew nothing about the consequences of the catastrophe -- precipitated the General Secretary's decision to fully apply cultural openness and transparency in the media.¹⁵

Winston later softened his declaration of the failure of glasnost under the experience of Chernobyl.

The disaster, frequently identified as a catalyst for change in the Soviet Union, shook the orthodox foundation of Marxism and Leninism by expanding the limits of, and introducing momentous substance to *glasnost*.¹⁶

A significant body of writing already exists on the Chernobyl accident, on the glasnost policy and on the relationship between the two. Previous research, however, has not systematically reviewed the content of Soviet newspaper accounts of the accident on the basis of the Soviet press' changing methods of handling bad news. The significance of this study will lie in its testing of the anecdotal observations of other researchers in a more systematic way.

¹⁵Nieves Bregante, "Nationalist Unrest in the USSR and the Challenge to the Gorbachev Leadership," ed. Susan L. Clark, *Gorbachev's Agenda Changes in Soviet Domestic and Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Col: Westview Press, Inc., 1989), 88.

¹⁶Winston, "The Early Years of the Gorbachev Era," 6.

CHAPTER 2

HYPOTHESIS AND METHOD OF STUDY

HYPOTHESIS

Soviet press coverage of the Chernobyl accident demonstrates the transformation the Soviet press underwent during glasnost in covering bad news. The Soviet press initially covered the accident according to the traditional means of Soviet Communist Party control over the reporting of bad news: a news blackout; a series of brief, official statements; and media support of Soviet ideology. These traditional means became less important in subsequent coverage of the accident. The Soviet press later covered the Chernobyl accident according to the role contemporary glasnost assigned for coverage of bad news: exposure of managerial and technological inefficiency in the interest of economic reform.

METHOD OF STUDY

This paper tested and documented its hypothesis by researching three major areas: the historical framework of Communist Party ideological control over the press; the scope

of glasnost at the time of the Chernobyl accident; and domestic Soviet newspaper coverage of the accident.

The function of the press in Soviet Communist Party theory and practice were reviewed first. Research in this area involved analysis of the approach to covering bad news during Soviet times. The progress glasnost had made by the time of the Chernobyl accident was then reviewed. This necessarily involved discussing glasnost as perceived in the West, as well as glasnost as perceived within the Soviet Union.

Examination of Soviet press coverage of the Chernobyl accident was carried out in order to assess the process the Soviet media underwent in its coverage of bad news. It was first determined whether the Soviet press adhered to the patterns traditionally employed in its coverage of bad news: a news blackout; a series of brief, official statements; and media support of Soviet ideology. It was then determined whether the Soviet press subsequently began to cover the Chernobyl accident according to the role contemporary glasnost assigned for coverage of bad news: exposure of managerial and technological inefficiency in the interest of economic transformation.

In order to study Soviet press coverage of Chernobyl, *Pravda* and *Izvestia* were chosen as representative of Soviet newspapers in 1986.

The Central Committee of the Communist Party published *Pravda* and thus in the mid-1980s, it was "the most authoritative media organ in the country."¹ Because *Pravda*

¹McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media*, 4

acted as the mouthpiece of the Communist Party, it represented the ideological vanguard of the entire Soviet Union. The CP tried out many theories and methods in *Pravda* that later became standards of Soviet journalism and mass communications.²

The Supreme Soviet Presidium and the USSR Council of Ministers jointly published *Izvestia*.³ As the publication of the all-union Government, *Izvestia* represented the non-ideological authority of the entire Soviet Union. The newspaper had more than ten million readers in 1990.⁴

Review of *Pravda* and *Izvestia* began with the issues published on 26 April 1986, the date of the accident. Review of these newspapers ended on 31 July 1986. Coverage of the Chernobyl accident had diminished sufficiently toward the end of July 1986 that the story ceased to appear on the front pages every day. These newspapers were reviewed as primary sources and read in their language of publication - Russian.

In reviewing the newspaper coverage of the accident, note was made of when coverage began, thus indicating the end of the news blackout. In subsequent review of coverage of the accident, note was made whether articles supported the hypothesis and excerpts were provided to document this support. All articles in *Pravda* and *Izvestia* concerning the Chernobyl accident were reviewed, first acknowledging those which

²Ibid., 31

³Leonid Vladimirov, *Soviet Media and Their Message*, (American Bar Association, Standing Bar Committee on Education About Communism, 1977), 18.

⁴Ibid., 32.

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delivered the official government statements and then those which mentioned any coverage of the accident. Special attention was paid to articles that fell into the traditional handling of domestic news by supporting Soviet ideology. The content of these articles suggested three types of ideological support: attacks on the Western media, coverage of accidents in foreign countries and stories of heroism.

In the category of official government statements, any article was reviewed that identified the source of that article as a USSR government council or ministry, TASS or a TASS Communique.

In the category of attacks on the Western media, any article was reviewed that mentioned the media in any non-Soviet bloc European country, Canada or the United States.

In the category of coverage of accidents in foreign countries, any article was reviewed that mentioned any accident in the nuclear power industry or nuclear weapons industry of any foreign country.

In the category of stories of heroism, any article was reviewed that mentioned any citizen response to the accident or citizen involvement in the clean up of the accident.

It is the hypothesis of this paper that techniques traditional to the Soviet press were followed in preliminary Soviet press coverage of Chernobyl and that these techniques were later overcome by glasnost. Techniques original to glasnost in Soviet press coverage of bad news include exposure of managerial and technological inefficiency. In subsequent review

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of *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, special note was made of articles that fell into these categories of coverage of the accident.

In the category of managerial inefficiency, any article was reviewed that mentioned responsibility for the accident, responsibility for the clean up effort or responsibility for the evacuation.

In the category of technological inefficiency, any article was reviewed that mentioned causes of the accident, assessment of the Chernobyl-type reactor or assessment of the nuclear power industry.

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²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK OF IDEOLOGICAL CONTROL OF THE SOVIET MEDIA

The citizens of Western liberal democracies uphold journalism's honored function as an independent and objective watch dog.¹

The Communist Party, claiming to speak on behalf of Soviet citizens, upheld a different standard for the role of journalism in the Soviet Union: "social control and engineering."²

According to Marx and Engels, the ruling class in any society solidifies and expands its dominance through the dispersion of its ideology via the media.³

Operating within the most extensive and complex media apparatus in the world,⁴ journalism in the Soviet Union, "targeted on the fulfillment of clearly-stated goals,"⁵ adhered to:

¹Brian McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 1.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*, 12.

⁴*Ibid.*, 1.

⁵*Ibid.*, 3.

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⁶Ibid., 1.

⁷Ibid., 49.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

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... the Party's insistence that the Soviet media should function as engines of ideological production; machinery of social knowledge, to be harnessed and consciously directed to solving the tasks of socialist construction.⁶

CENSORSHIP AND PROPAGANDA

The Party set media policy and general priorities for the media through the Politburo of the Central Committee.⁷ Various departments of the Central Committee Secretariat handled immediate responsibility for the mass media's activity. For example, the Ideology Department, with its Mass Media Sub-Department, held responsibility for the press, broadcasting and book publishing.⁸ The Ideology and Propaganda Departments controlled decisions on financing, staffing and content of the media.⁹ Senior media personnel and GLAVLIT (The State Committee for the Preservation of Secrets in the Press) handled the Secretariat's daily supervision of media content.¹⁰

GLAVLIT sat at the top of the Soviet censorship apparatus. Nothing could appear in the media without GLAVLIT's official approval. Theoretically, GLAVLIT operated to protect state and Party secrets, not to censor.¹¹ The organization, however, maintained a

⁶Ibid., 1.

⁷Ibid., 49.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹David Wedgwood Benn, *From Glasnost to Freedom of Speech, Russian Openness and International Relations* (New York: Chatham House Papers, 1992) 9.

permanent and regularly updated list of forbidden subjects, which included mention of GLAVLIT itself.¹² GLAVLIT's *List of Information Not To Be Published in the Open Press* also included comparisons between the standard of living in the Soviet Union and that in other countries.¹³

In order to direct the ideological component of Soviet journalism, the Communist Party implemented a "twin system of negative censorship and positive propaganda [that] existed continuously from soon after the Bolshevik Revolution down to the late 1980s."¹⁴

Propaganda in the Soviet Union, like all Soviet policies, followed a highly centralized organization. The Department of Propaganda of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) directed the propaganda apparatus.

The CPSU Department of Propaganda operated through the propaganda departments of the republics' Communist Party Central Committees. At each of the republic departments, one secretary had full-time responsibility for propaganda work and his own staff to assist. At the next level down, each district Party committee had its own propaganda secretary with a staff of instructors. One step below the republican level operated the level of primary Party organization: the Party committee of each factory,

¹²Ibid.

¹³"The Anatomy of Glasnost," eds. Andrei Melville and Gail W. Lapidus, *The Glasnost Papers, Voices on Reform from Moscow* (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1990), 29.

¹⁴Benn, *From Glasnost to Freedom of Speech*, 8.

construction project, office, institution and state and collective farm. At each of these organizations worked an individual whose responsibility included propaganda work.¹⁵

The Party built "an entire edifice"¹⁶ of omnipresent propaganda in order to maintain the domestic servility of 250 million people¹⁷ and to motivate them to work. Propaganda emerged as an important element of Party work as early as 1901 and 1905.¹⁸

The resources thereafter devoted to both press and broadcasting in the USSR bear witness to the early Bolsheviks' conviction, shared by all subsequent leaders of the CPSU, that the survival of the Soviet state depended to a large extent on the exploitation of the mass media's potential as an ideological instrument.¹⁹

PROVISION AND DISSEMINATION OF POLITICAL MATERIAL

The Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS) alone provided all of the international political material distributed to Soviet newspapers, journals, radio and television.

TASS maintained three foreign information departments, which together collected reports from the main Western wire services and the world's main newspapers, transcripts of broadcasts from several foreign radio stations, press reports and radio broadcasts from

¹⁵Leonid Vladimirov, *Soviet Media and Their Message* (Standing Committee on Education About Communism, American Bar Association, 1977), 9.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media*, 44.

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²¹Ibid.

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the Eastern European countries and the "third world," and reports from TASS correspondents stationed abroad. This material was translated if needed, and turned over to the Special Editorial Group.

The Special Editorial Group selected information to be included in the TASS daily bulletin. The Group edited items for pro-Soviet, pro-Communist content before submission.²⁰

Editors of the TASS daily bulletin of foreign information organized the material sent to them by the Special Editorial Board, made political and textual corrections, then passed the material on to a group of censors.

Special TASS editors [had] immense experience in reworking a text in this manner and at times they [could] operate with extreme finesse, seemingly rendering the entire contents of what [had] been said, while at the same time totally altering the inner meaning or deliberately ensuring a specific response on the reader's part.²¹

GLAVLIT employed the board of censors who looked over the material, which if approved was distributed in the daily bulletin. (GLAVLIT's enormous powers of preliminary censorship suffered under glasnost reforms and had diminished to mere formality by the time they were formally abolished on 1 August 1990.²²)

²⁰Vladimirov, *Soviet Media*, 15.

²¹Ibid.

²²Benn, *From Glasnost to Freedom of Speech*, 9.

TASS also maintained an apparatus to provide domestic news material. TASS correspondents provided all reporting from the provinces, territories and republics through the "Moscow filter"²³: the Main Editorial Board for Union Information.

With no competition (Lenin had banned all press other than the Communist newspaper in 1918²⁴ and foreign newspapers were prohibited in the Soviet Union), the Soviet Communist Party media distributed the only information available to the average Soviet citizen.

Until the 1980s the Party's near-monopoly of mass information was sustained with remarkably little public protest or dissent. Through lack of choice, knowledge, or interest in the few existing alternatives, the Soviet population consumed the official media in their hundreds of millions daily.²⁵

THE MEDIA'S ROLE IN BUILDING SOCIALISM

A most interesting question in the consideration of Soviet propaganda concerns what the actual message being delivered to Soviet citizens involved. If the Party sought to inculcate their beliefs into the Soviet population through the media, of what did this message consist? We may understand the primary concerns of the Party by analyzing the content of Soviet journalism, the Party's fundamental method of enculturating its citizenry.

²³Vladimirov, *Soviet Media*, 17.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 6.

²⁵McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media*, 3.

Inkeles determined from his classic 1965 study of the Soviet media that, during the Soviet era, social processes were considered news and newsworthy, not events. Events had news value only if they bore significant meaning for socialist construction.²⁶

As late as 1987 Gorbachev reminded the world: "To uphold the fundamental values of socialism is a tradition of our press."²⁷ Lenin himself, the founder of Soviet Marxism, had appointed the press this role in the beginning.²⁸ Even the Soviet Constitution provided for "freedom of speech in the interests of socialism."²⁹

The convictions that the Soviet Union is systemically better and that socialism will triumph over capitalism has been integral to Soviet culture and media since the Soviet Union began.³⁰ A central tenet of Marxism-Leninism proposes the inevitable struggle between socialism and imperialism, in which socialism will prevail.³¹ Soviet ideology taught its people to believe in the superiority of socialism³² and have confidence that

²⁶Ibid., 26.

²⁷Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika, New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 79.

²⁸Aleksandr Bovin, "Semi-Glasnost," eds. Stephen F. Cohen and Katrina Vanden Heuvel, *Voices of Glasnost, Interviews with Gorbachev's Reformers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 225.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Robert G. Kaiser, "The Soviet Pretense," *Foreign Affairs* 65, no. 2 (Winter 1986/87): 236.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

socialism would eventually prevail: that it was noble to endure hardship and sacrifice because the Soviet people were building a glorious society.³³

Robert G. Kaiser said in 1986/1987 that Soviet officialdom has traditionally emphasized the gloriousness of Soviet history with its victories and accomplishments while simultaneously ignoring any news that might cast doubt on Soviet socialism's equally illustrious future.³⁴

THE TREATMENT OF BAD NEWS

Moreover, millions of people are convinced that propaganda ought to draw its own picture, which is distinct from reality, saying 'What would happen if the newspapers suddenly started washing our dirty linen in public? Wouldn't the reader go out and hang himself in grief? We are used to them writing about our achievements and only criticizing isolated shortcomings. After all, life is one thing, the newspapers and radio are another - they all have their own job to do. . . .'³⁵

Nick Lampert said in 1989: "Dissemination of bad news flies in the face of one of the fundamentals of Soviet ideology - that is life is getting better."³⁶

Nick Lampert defined bad news as:

. . . information about events which might divert attention from, or appear to contradict, the main themes of Party propaganda and the image which it projected of peaceful, relatively unproblematic socialist construction . . .³⁷

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., 237.

³⁵Vladimirov, *Soviet Media*, 39.

³⁶Nick Lampert, "The Dilemmas of Glasnost," eds. Walter Joyce, Hillel Ticktin and Stephen White, *Gorbachev and Gorbachevism* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1989), 59.

The Communist Party considered downward social trends not easily correctable through political and administrative intervention to be ideological aberrations, and such information rarely made the press.

Many kinds of news never found their way into the Soviet media. An early all-union census revealed a lack of media coverage on such topics as crime rates, suicide, alcohol and narcotics use, data on ecological issues, migration, mortality, morbidity, income and living standards.³⁸

Isaac J. Tarasulo said that as late as 1985, the Soviet media did not discuss such topics as crime, homosexuality, drug abuse and train wrecks.³⁹

According to the Soviet media before glasnost, there were very few problems in the Soviet Union. Domestic news was always good. Events that would have dominated the news media for days had they happened in the West, were ignored by Soviet journalists as they focused their energies on the process of socialism-building.⁴⁰

The Communist Party possessed monopoly of the media within the Soviet Union, and so was able to block media coverage on events that seemed not to coincide with socialist progress. The Party could not, however, maintain such dominance with the

³⁷Ibid., 64.

³⁸Ibid., 58.

³⁹Isaac J. Tarasulo, ed., *Gorbachev and Glasnost, Viewpoints from the Soviet Press* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1989), xv.

⁴⁰McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media*, 64.

international media. Certain events, especially those involving foreign interests, precipitated demands for information from foreign governments and media organs.

McNair said the Soviet media provided such information only if foreign citizens were involved, and then only in the briefest form.⁴¹

Before *glasnost*, reporting of domestic disasters involving large-scale loss of life was limited to brief official statements which omitted details of casualties or causes.⁴²

As late as 1986, Serge Schmemmann found an example of this type of media behavior. Schmemmann likened the Soviet media's initial reticence on Chernobyl to its handling of the South Korean airliner disaster in 1983. Schmemmann maintained that Moscow took six days before admitting the plane had been shot down, and then gradually doled out information as it built its case that the plane had been on an espionage mission.⁴³

Media behaviour in times of crisis gives some idea of the true value of *glasnost*. Whenever taken by surprise by some unexpected serious event, the press has maintained a cautious silence or given a brief report while waiting for instructions from the top on how to proceed. This was the case with the Alma-Ata and Soumgait riots and also with Chernobyl.⁴⁴

⁴¹Ibid., 65.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Serge Schmemmann, "The Soviet Secrecy," *New York Times*, 1 May 1986, sec. A, p. 13.

⁴⁴Francoise Thom, *The Gorbachev Phenomenon, A History of Perestroika*, trans. Jenny Marshall (New York: Pinter Publishers, 1989), 35.

CHAPTER 4

THE SCOPE OF GLASNOST AT THE TIME OF THE CHERNOBYL ACCIDENT

In order to take full advantage of the media in furthering the Revolution (and in building socialism after the Revolution), Lenin proposed the following broad principles for the media: partiality; truthfulness and objectivity; links with the masses, or *narodnost*; and openness, or *glasnost*.¹

The principle of partiality refers to the ideological commitment of Soviet journalism to the Marxist-Leninist view of class and its open expression in the media.² "For Lenin, absolute freedom for journalists, as for other cultural workers, was a bourgeois myth."³ Lenin wrote his *Draft Resolution on the Freedom of the Press* soon after the Revolution. The *Resolution* described a new notion of freedom of the press that guaranteed freedom of expression to the majority.⁴ This meant freedom of expression for the working class, or rather for the Party (speaking for the working class), which meant freedom of expression of the Marxist-Leninist ideology.

¹Brian McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 18.

²*Ibid.*, 19.

³*Ibid.*, 20.

⁴*Ibid.*, 34.

Soviet ideology based the principle of truthfulness and objectivity on the doctrine that the Soviet Union employed a scientifically valid societal organization.⁵ Events were "truthfully and objectively" reported within the "conceptual framework" of the ideology.⁶

The principle of links to the masses, or *narodnost*, stipulated that the Communist Party remain open to the people.⁷

The *glasnost* principle of the media actually originated during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I in the middle of the nineteenth century when it referred to the bureaucratic exchange of views on social and economic transformation.⁸ Lenin first wrote on the need for *glasnost* in democracy and in the Party's conduct in his 1902 work *What Is To Be Done?*

In this writing, Lenin described the role of the media as publicizing the achievements of socialist construction.⁹

⁵Ibid., 20.

⁶Ibid., 23.

⁷Ibid., 24.

⁸Ibid., 28.

⁹Ibid., 29.

THE CREATION OF GLASNOST TO PROMOTE PERESTROIKA

Gorbachev reinvented Lenin's principle of glasnost in order to implement his perestroika program.

He envisioned an economic policy that would use different methods to make the contemporary system work more efficiently.¹⁰ Gorbachev's program sought to adjust the system in an effort to make that system viable. Adjustment meant dispensing with corruption and inertia within the Party, and instituting incentives to create greater economic efficiency, all under controlled conditions. Gorbachev's mission to reform the Soviet economy by introducing adjustments led to his naming the program "perestroika," which loosely translates into English as "restructuring."

Gorbachev planned to strengthen the Party's authority and leave ideology in place. He envisioned the goal of his program as providing "a convincing demonstration to the outside world of the inherent worth of socialism."¹¹

Development programs undertaken in industrial societies depend on energy. In the Soviet Union, Lenin emphasized electrification; Stalin and Khrushchev stressed hydroelectric energy; Brezhnev relied on Siberian gas and oil reserves. As the production

¹⁰Bill Murphy and Vladimir V. Kusun, "Is Gorbachev Another Khrushchev?" *RAD Background Report* 32, *Radio Free Europe Research* 11, no. 11, part 1 (Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, 14 March 1986), 2.

¹¹Ibid., 3.

of Soviet oil began its decline in 1985 and 1986, Gorbachev set his sights on nuclear energy to fuel the next stage of Soviet development, integral to the economic reforms he intended for the economy.¹²

The Soviet Union prided itself on its nuclear energy program. When its Reactor No.4 (in which the accident occurred) came on line in 1984, the Chernobyl nuclear power station "was on its way to becoming the largest nuclear reactor complex in the world."¹³

The Five-Year Plan adopted at the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress in February 1986 projected nuclear-generated electricity production to double from eleven to twenty percent.¹⁴

Plans for the nuclear energy program provided crucial support for overall economic development in the Five-Year Plan and in the long-term plan extended until 2000, as well as providing ". . . the cornerstone of plans to integrate the economies of the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe."¹⁵

Gorbachev needed public support for the nuclear energy program. He counted on nuclear energy bolstering industrial production and export revenue. Perestroika would not be possible without this contribution to the economy.

¹²Zhores A. Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990), 69.

¹³"Chernobyl Spews Out Fear," *Detroit Free Press*, 18 April 1996, sec. A, p. 10.

¹⁴Theodore Shabad, "Atom Power Gets Priority in Soviet," *New York Times*, 29 April 1986, sec. A, p. 10.

¹⁵Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, 40.

Gorbachev had little support for perestroika in the beginning, perhaps only Vladimir Vorotnikov. The majority of the Politburo consisted of old orthodoxy leftovers. These conservatives opposed Gorbachev's perestroika reform initiatives because they necessarily represented "the precursor of a purge aimed at the privileges and cronyism that made their lives comfortable . . ." ¹⁶

Therefore, in order to implement the full spectrum of perestroika reforms, Gorbachev sought to circumvent the traditional power machinery of the Party by mobilizing public support of perestroika through the media. This initially meant exposing managerial and technological inefficiency. The unprecedented public disclosure prompted Gorbachev to name his media policy "glasnost," which loosely translates into English as "openness."

Glasnost provided Gorbachev with a tool for consolidating his position within the Politburo.

. . . he has sought to use the media to shape the terms of debate over reform to his political advantage and to compensate for his relative weakness in the more traditional organs of power. ¹⁷

David Wedgwood Benn said that in the initial stages, 1985 - 1986, glasnost was used as an aid in the effort to revive the economy and "a weapon in the anti-corruption campaign" initiated by Yuri Andropov. ¹⁸

¹⁶Brian Moynahan, *The Russian Century* (New York: Random House, 1994), 277.

¹⁷Gail W. Lapidus, "Overview - The Role of Glasnost in Gorbachev's Reform Strategy," eds. Andrei Melville and Gail W. Lapidus, *The Glasnost Papers, Voices on Reform from Moscow* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990), 27.

¹⁸David Wedgwood Benn, *From Glasnost to Freedom of Speech* (New York: Chatham House, 1992), 12.

Nieves Bregante agreed:

In the early days of Gorbachev's tenure, *glasnost*' was designed to address system defects and disfunctions and was aimed at halting corruption and power misuse.¹⁹

... the national press [took] on with a vengeance its function as an instrument of central party pressure, mobilizing, criticizing, justifying the removal of some and giving warning to others.²⁰

As early as 1984, Gorbachev stated:

Extensive, timely and candid information is an indication of trust in people and of respect for their intelligence, feelings and ability to comprehend various events on their own ...²¹

Gorbachev said in his 1987 treatise on perestroika:

[Glasnost] makes it possible for people to understand better what happened to us in the past, what is taking place now, what we are striving for and what our plans are, and, on the basis of this understanding, to participate in the restructuring effort consciously.²²

Things will not start changing, however, if the political course is not pursued in a way understandable to the masses.²³

¹⁹Nieves Bregante, "Nationalist Unrest in the USSR and the Challenge to the Gorbachev Leadership," ed. Susan L. Clark, *Gorbachev's Agenda, Changes in Soviet Domestic and Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1989), 87.

²⁰Nick Lampert, "The Dilemmas of Glasnost," eds. Walter Joyce, Hillel Ticktin and Stephen White, *Gorbachev and Gorbachevism* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1989), 49.

²¹McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media*, 53.

²²Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika, New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 75.

²³Ibid.

THE INDELIBLE GOAL OF SOCIALISM

Gorbachev described glasnost as being imperative to the creation of a socialist democracy and a normal society.²⁴

There is no democracy, nor can there be, without glasnost. And there is no present-day socialism, nor can there be, without democracy.²⁵

This statement, issued by Gorbachev in 1987, reveals the primacy of socialism in his goals for glasnost. The controlled democratization of information allowed by glasnost was intended only to strengthen socialism and the Soviet system. It is important to note that glasnost never meant democracy, free speech or political reform. Despite its democratizing image in the West, glasnost did not embrace the ideal raised in the West of the public's right to know.

Gorbachev stated in a 19 June 1986 meeting with a group of Soviet writers:

There can be no implementation of democracy without glasnost. But, at the same time, democracy without limits is anarchy. That's why it's complicated.²⁶

From his earliest discussions of glasnost, Gorbachev declared that a better-informed public would act out of conscious will and more actively support the Party, its ideals and its program.²⁷

²⁴Benn, *From Glasnost to Freedom of Speech*, 13.

²⁵Gorbachev, *Perestroika*, 80.

²⁶Benn, *From Glasnost to Freedom of Speech*, 14.

²⁷ed. Isaac J. Tarasulo, *Gorbachev and Glasnost, Viewpoints from the Soviet Press* (Wilmington, Dele.: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1989), xxi.

It reflects a recognition that building support at home and abroad for major changes in Soviet domestic and foreign policy requires a less secretive approach to Soviet reality: a more candid acknowledgment of Soviet shortcomings and errors and an expansion of the boundaries of public discussion, although by no means an abrogation of its limits.²⁸

In order to build up a momentum for reform, the apparatus must be mobilized and criticism from below unleashed. Yet the apparatus as a whole is the foundation of the political system and there is a limit to the war that political officialdom can wage against itself.²⁹

Timothy Colton, a Toronto University professor, said that "Gorbachev's emphasis was less on the right to know than on the utility of an informed citizenry to the regime."³⁰

Gorbachev remembered the traditional Soviet socialist goal to guide the people to acceptable views, which should then manifest in action advantageous to the system. The ideological elite thus sought to mold citizen thought through the information it choose to disseminate.

Gorbachev wrote in 1987:

I want to emphasize that the press should unite and mobilize people rather than disuniting them and generating offence and a lack of confidence.³¹

J.B. de Weydenthal said in the wake of Chernobyl in 1986 that relations between the Soviet leadership and its people have always been characterized by "mutual distrust,"

²⁸Gail W. Lapidus, "Overview - The Role of Glasnost in Gorbachev's Reform Strategy," eds. Andrei Melville and Gail W. Lapidus, *The Glasnost Papers, Voices on Reform from Moscow* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990), 19.

²⁹Lampert, "The Dilemmas of Glasnost," 53.

³⁰Tarasulo, *Gorbachev and Glasnost*, xxi.

³¹Gorbachev, *Perestroika*, 79.

exacerbated by the leadership's "penchant for secrecy and exclusiveness": a tradition entrenched in a system guided by the principle of the communists' role of leadership and right to direct.³²

³²J.B. de Weydenthal, "Chernobyl and Eastern Europe," *RAD Background Report/ 64*, *Radio Free Europe Research* 11, no. 20, part 1 (Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, 16 May 1986), 2.

CHAPTER 5

CHRONOLOGY OF THE CHERNOBYL ACCIDENT AND INITIAL MEDIA COVERAGE

The accident began in the early hours of Saturday, 26 April 1986. During an unapproved and experimental safety test,¹ Unit No.4 of the V.I. Lenin Atomic Power Station in Pripyat, Ukrainian S.S.R. overheated, exploded and caught fire. The explosion ripped open the reactor and blew off the 1,000-ton cover.²

Senior engineers at the plant, not able to believe or adequately assess the situation, called the plant's director, Viktor Bryukhanov, and its chief engineer, Nikolai Fomin, and inaccurately informed them the plant had suffered an accident but that the involved reactor was intact.³ After an on-site inspection, Bryukhanov and Fomin still refused to believe the reactor had been destroyed and discounted radiation monitors within the plant indicating levels "off the scale."⁴

¹Zhores A. Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990), 20.

²"Chernobyl Spews Out Fear," *Detroit Free Press*, 18 April 1996, sec. A, p. 10.

³Felicity Barringer, "Chernobyl Five Years Later," *New York Times Magazine*, 14 April 1991, 34.

⁴Ibid.

By the time fire fighters arrived from Pripjat, the graphite core of the reactor was on fire, with flames reaching two hundred feet into the air.⁵ Leonid Shavrey, a member of the fire brigade connected to and charged with the permanent duty of covering the plant, reported in 1996 that the members of the brigade had never been instructed in how to work in radioactive conditions.⁶ He and the four other members of his squad were ordered to stand guard on the roof of the turbine room (of the ruined reactor): it was so hot, their boots stuck in the roof.⁷

Within three hours of the accident, 186 firefighters with eighty-one engines had extinguished all but the greater danger of the fire burning inside the reactor. Bryukhanov and Fomin passed along their inaccurate assessment to Moscow⁸ within five hours of the accident,⁹ when it was realized that fire brigades from the local area could not extinguish the reactor fire. Helicopters began to pour what would become thousands of tons of sand, boron and lead onto the fire in the reactor.¹⁰

⁵Brian Moynahan, *The Russian Century* (New York: Random House, 1994), 276.

⁶"After Meltdown, Unsung Heroes Talk of Rads, Duty and Vodka," *New York Times*, 21 April 1996, sec. 4, p. 7.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Barringer, "Chernobyl Five Years Later," 34.

⁹Zhores Medvedev, "Chernobyl: A Catalyst for Change," eds. Ed A. Hewett and Victor H. Winston, *Milestones in Glasnost and Perestroika, Politics and People* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1991), 20.

¹⁰Moynahan, *The Russian Century*, 276.

The commission that arrived from Moscow at the site of the accident by 10 AM Saturday morning apparently knew few details, including that the reactor core had been destroyed.¹¹

The civilian sector of the Soviet nuclear industry had no plan to handle an emergency of this scale and assessment of the situation took thirty hours.¹² "Bureaucratic confusion reigned."¹³

THE NEWS BLACKOUT

According to Felicity Barringer, Bryukhanov requested Shcherbina's assistant (Boris Y. Shcherbina, a Soviet Deputy Prime Minister from Ukraine, headed the investigative team) for permission to evacuate Pripyat. Shcherbina denied the request, saying "Don't start a panic."¹⁴

On that Saturday, which was sunny and pleasant, nineteen weddings took place in Pripyat (most of them outdoor affairs), and youth soccer league games went on as usual.¹⁵ ". . . children had played football and the open air swimming pool had been full of people enjoying the spring sunshine."¹⁶

¹¹Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, 51.

¹²Medvedev, "Chernobyl: A Catalyst for Change," 22.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Barringer, "Chernobyl Five Years Later," 34.

¹⁵"Chernobyl Spews Out Fear," sec. A, p. 10.

¹⁶Moynahan, *The Russian Century*, 276.

Late Saturday night, Shcherbina "gave way to the pleadings of civil-defense officers"¹⁷ and authorized the evacuation.

By Sunday the authorities had realized the seriousness of the accident. But they did not know that the cloud of radioactive particles billowing out of the reactor had crossed the Soviet border, making the accident an international issue.¹⁸ The monitoring system within the Soviet Union (handled by a "special secret department" of the State Committee of Meteorology, and operated by the military through a system of towers equipped with radioactivity counters¹⁹) had possibly not been able to detect the contours of the cloud nor predict its movement.²⁰

On Monday morning, 28 April, workers at the Forsmark Nuclear Power Plant in Sweden, seven hundred kilometers away from the Chernobyl accident, detected radiation levels at their plant that were four times above normal.²¹ At first, managers at the plant assumed they had a leak and evacuated their workers. But as similar readings came in from other areas around Sweden, and Finland and Denmark detected unusually high atmospheric radioactivity,²² they began to look elsewhere for the cause.

¹⁷Barringer, "Chernobyl Five Years Later," 34.

¹⁸Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, 54.

¹⁹Medvedev, "Chernobyl: A Catalyst for Change," 21.

²⁰Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, 54.

²¹Moynahan, *The Russian Century*, 276.

²²Serge Schmemmann, "Soviet Announces Nuclear Accident at Electric Plant," *New York Times*, 29 April 1986, sec. A, p. 1.

Meteorologists discovered that the winds carrying the radioactive particles originated in the Soviet Union. Swedish embassy officials in Moscow began to request information, but "ran into a wall of denial."²³ A Swedish Embassy official in Moscow reported calling the State Committee for Utilization of Atomic Energy, the Ministry of Electric Power and the State Committee for Safety in the Atomic Power Industry looking for an explanation, and receiving none.²⁴ The Soviet authorities responded to Sweden's urgent requests for information at one point by actually saying "they had no explanation."²⁵

THE INITIAL SERIES OF STATEMENTS

Once flushed from total secrecy, the Soviet Government's damage-control mechanism kicked in, and feverish work ensued to mold the situation to the benefit the Government.

At 9 PM Monday, 28 April, the main television news program in Moscow issued a brief report referring to an accident at the Chernobyl station.²⁶ The announcement came from the first official statement issued by the USSR Council of Ministers through TASS. TASS also distributed the statement in translation. (It read: "An accident has occurred at the

²³ Moynahan, *The Russian Century*, 276.

²⁴ Schmemmann, "Soviet Announces Nuclear Accident," sec. A, p. 1.

²⁵ John Tagliabue, "Moscow's Silence on Disaster Assailed in Europe," *New York Times*, 30 April 1986, sec. A, p. 10.

²⁶ Moynahan, *The Russian Century*, 276.

Chernobyl nuclear power plant as one of the reactors was damaged. Measures are being taken to eliminate the consequences of the accident. Aid is being given to those affected. A Government commission has been set up."²⁷)

Izvestia was the only newspaper in the capital to carry the statement, which appeared in the newspaper on 30 April. *Izvestia* provided no additional information or comment.

Serge Schmemmann said it was the first official disclosure of a nuclear accident ever by the Soviet Government.²⁸ The TASS dispatch was also the first official notification of the accident to foreign governments.²⁹ "But even this brief announcement occurred only because of pressure from Sweden, which was already covered by the radioactive plume."³⁰

Zhores Medvedev believes the initial delay in providing any information at all reflected Gorbachev's weak position in the Politburo at the time of the accident.³¹ Gorbachev and Vorotnikov may have been the only Politburo members who advocated cancelling the May Day celebrations and an open approach with information. The majority favored a news blackout, making it impossible for Gorbachev to make a public

²⁷"From the USSR Council of Ministers," *Izvestia*, 30 April 1986, p. 1.

²⁸Schmemmann, "Soviet Announces Nuclear Accident," sec. A, p. 1.

²⁹Pavel Polityuk, "Nuclear Legacy Continues," *Lansing State Journal*, 5 April 1996, sec. A, p. 6.

³⁰Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, 56.

³¹Brian McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 66.

announcement sooner that day. Later that day, when the radioactive cloud reached Sweden, a compromise four-sentence statement was all that the Politburo authorized.³²

Western pressure to release information continued. Readings all over Europe continued to show high radiation levels; Sweden reported levels in some areas measuring one hundred times the usual background radiation.³³ By 29 April, Swedish officials began to believe the evidence pointed to the Ukrainian Republic as the source of the radiation.³⁴

From 29 April, U.S. intelligence organizations began to photograph the site from its KH-11 military reconnaissance satellite. The photographs showed the graphite burning inside the reactor and the helicopters trying to extinguish the fire.³⁵ A Swedish company, in analyzing the photographs, thought two fires were burning at the site.³⁶ There was disagreement on this much-discussed possibility, which eventually proved an inaccurate assessment.

Pictures from the disaster area were published all over the world. Nonetheless, the Soviet government continued its blackout from the site. Limited information was released centrally in the form of brief daily statements. The disaster was treated as a minor incident.³⁷

³²Medvedev, "Chernobyl: A Catalyst for Change," 26.

³³Tagliabue, "Moscow's Silence on Disaster Assailed in Europe," sec. A, p. 10; and Steve Lohr, "Signs Point to a Meltdown, Scientists in Sweden Assert," *New York Times*, 30 April 1986, sec. A, p. 10.

³⁴Schmemmann, "Soviet Announces Nuclear Accident," sec. A, p. 11.

³⁵Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, 56-57.

³⁶Philip M. Boffey, "Fire Unlikely to Be Controlled Soon, US Experts Say," *New York Times*, 1 May 1986, sec. A, p. 11.

³⁷Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, 57.

By 30 April, Swedish and West German scientists believed a partial or complete meltdown was occurring. In planning for accidents, operators assume that, at worst, ten percent of the radioactive core will vaporize and so, releases from a small accident will include volatile elements like iodine and rare gases. Swedish experts had detected less-volatile cesium 134 and cesium 137 in their atmosphere, indicating a serious accident.³⁸ (This assessment was correct, as later information revealed a partial meltdown. Adolf Birkhofer, director of the West German Society for Reactor Safety, also correctly determined that Chernobyl represented a "design-basis accident," indicating inadequate safety systems.³⁹

Denouncements of Soviet reticence poured in from all over Europe and North America. A senior Soviet diplomat in Germany gave a televised interview in which he explained the Soviet Government had delayed in providing information to the West because no threat to the population existed.⁴⁰

Apparently in an attempt to repair some of the diplomatic damage, the Soviet Ambassador to Sweden, Boris D. Pankin, met with Swedish officials on 30 April and promised that the Soviet Government would provide European capitals with better information if the situation worsened.⁴¹

³⁸Lohr, "Signs Point to a Meltdown," sec. A, p. 10.

³⁹Tagliabue, "Moscow's Silence on Disaster Assailed in Europe," sec. A, p. 10.

⁴⁰John Tagliabue, "Requests for Technical Help Cut Short," *New York Times*, 1 May 1986, sec. A, p. 10.

⁴¹Steve Lohr, "Protests Are Sharp," *New York Times*, 1 May 1986, sec. A, p. 12.

Both *Pravda* and *Izvestia* carried the second statement by the USSR Council of Ministers; *Pravda* on 30 April and *Izvestia* on 1 May. The second statement reported that a Government commission, headed by Shcherbina, had been set up; indicated the location within the reactor of the accident; listed two deaths (the individuals were not named); mentioned the evacuation; stated that the radiation situation had stabilized; and reported that the radiation levels in surrounding areas were being monitored.⁴²

The statement failed to provide any information on how extensive the damage had become, to explain what had happened or to indicate the boundaries of the contaminated area.

The statement by the USSR Council of Ministers carried in *Pravda* on 1 May stated that work was continuing "to eliminate the consequences of the accident," claimed no chain-reaction fission was taking place in the reactor, that the radiation situation in the station and in surrounding areas had decreased, and that enterprise and the collective and state farms were operating normally.⁴³

These same farms, however, were evacuated within days of the accident.⁴⁴ And the ruined reactor was releasing two million curies per day of radionuclides in the form of gases and aerosol; the winds had changed direction, blowing the cloud directly toward Kiev.⁴⁵

⁴²"From the USSR Council of Ministers," *Pravda*, 30 April 1986, p. 2; and *Izvestia*, 1 May 1986, p. 2.

⁴³"From the USSR Council of Ministers," *Pravda*, 1 May 1986, p. 2.

⁴⁴Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, 59.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 57.

Traditionally a day of celebrating the Soviet Union's achievements, thousands of children participated in May Day parades in Kiev on 1 May 1986. Local "[a]uthorities had made no announcement of the explosion and the general public had no knowledge of it."⁴⁶ Meanwhile, apparatchiks had begun to quietly evacuate their children from Kiev within a day of two of the accident.⁴⁷

This third official statement also condemned Western "rumors" concerning high fatalities by confirming two deaths.⁴⁸ The statement additionally reported 197 people were hospitalized, 49 of whom were already discharged.⁴⁹

Schmemmann said that early official statements on the Chernobyl accident and accompanying television commentary "were couched in rebuttals to Western press allegations . . ." ⁵⁰

Because the Soviet Government restricted foreign access to the site of the accident and withheld pertinent information, the Western media answered with examples of "questionable news judgment" in the weeks following the accident.⁵¹

⁴⁶Gary E. McCuen and Ronald P. Swanson, *Toxic Nightmare, Ecocide in the USSR & Eastern Europe*, (Hudson, Wisc.: GEM Publications Inc., 1993), 16.

⁴⁷Vladimir Shlapentokh, "Ecology and Nuclear Danger in Soviet Ideology and Public Opinion," J. Mallory Wober, ed., *Television and Nuclear Power: Making the Public Mind* (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1992), 103.

⁴⁸*Pravda*, 1 May 1986, p. 2.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰Serge Schmemmann, "The Soviet Secrecy," *New York Times*, 1 May 1986, sec. A, p. 13.

⁵¹Peter McGrath, "Did the Media Hype Chernobyl?" *Newsweek* 107, no. 21, 26 May 1986, p. 31.

For example, many television broadcasts and newspapers in the West carried a United Press International report of 2,000 fatalities in the immediate aftermath. UPI had taken a report from a source in Kiev who said that by 30 April between 10,000 and 15,000 people had been evacuated from the region; eighty people had died immediately after the accident; an additional 2,000 people had died en route to hospitals; October Hospital in Kiev was full of radiation victims; and the dead were being buried in Pirogovichi, thirty miles south of Pripyat, where radioactive waste is often buried.⁵² UPI's foreign editor, Sylvana Foa decided to report the source's information, despite UPI's failure to find official confirmation, based on the source's consistent reliability in the past.⁵³ The Ukrainian Republic's Minister of Health, Anatoly Y. Romanenko, called these "imaginary figures."⁵⁴

The *New York Post* ran a headline, picked up from news reported in New Jersey's Ukrainian weekly, proclaiming "Mass Grave: 15,000 Reported Buried in Nuke Disposal Site."⁵⁵

ABC and NBC bought footage from a French source that allegedly documented the reactor fire at Chernobyl. Actually, it was later revealed to be footage of a fire at a cement factory in Trieste, Italy.⁵⁶

⁵²"UPI Says Toll May Pass 2,000," *New York Times*, 30 April 1986, sec. A, p. 10.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵McGrath, "Did the Media Hype Chernobyl?" 31.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

Peter McGrath conceded that the lack of official information and reliable reportage, fear-fueled imaginations and revenge created an exaggerated version of the few facts on the accident.⁵⁷

The USSR Council of Ministers statement carried by *Pravda* on 2 May inaccurately reported a decrease in the emission of radioactivity by one-third to one-half.⁵⁸ This statement also mentioned that work was being done to "carry out a set of technical measures," and decontaminate the immediate area.⁵⁹

Pravda also carried a USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement on 2 May. This statement reported that the Ministry had briefed officials from several Western countries "on the state of affairs with respect to the elimination of the consequences of the accident at the Chernobyl Atomic Power Station."⁶⁰

On 3 May, the Government released no information concerning the accident. Medvedev said that "the government did not know how to report [a recent] increase of radioactivity or the fact that the exclusion zone had been extended."⁶¹

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸"From the USSR Council of Ministers," *Pravda*, 2 May 1986, p. 2.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰"From the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs," *Pravda*, 2 May 1986, p. 5.

⁶¹Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, 59.

The 3 May issue of *Izvestia*, however, did carry a TASS report on the 29 April accident of a U.S. Navy nuclear-powered attack submarine. The report stated that the Atlanta had run aground in the Strait of Gibraltar, suffering debilitating damage that nonetheless did not result in leakage of radiation. The statement underlined that this was the second atomic submarine accident for the U.S. Navy in two months: the Nathanael Greene had sustained serious damage when it ran aground in the Irish Sea in March. The dispatch ended:

It is indicative that the Pentagon tried to keep this accident a secret, maintaining complete silence about it for a month.⁶²

A USSR Council of Ministers statement distributed by TASS and carried by both *Pravda* and *Izvestia* on 4 May recounted government commission work and reported:

. . . work to overcome the accident and eliminate its consequences [was] being carried out in an organized manner and with the application of necessary means.⁶³

Both newspapers also carried a TASS report on 4 May detailing "another incident"⁶⁴ at the Rainier Mesa Nuclear Proving Ground in Nevada. The statement reported that safety equipment failed in the underground test of a new nuclear device on 10 April 1986, damaging \$70 million worth of electronic equipment. According to the report, this

⁶²"US: The Atlanta Suffers an Accident," *Izvestia*, 3 May 1986, p. 4.

⁶³"Visit to the Area of the Chernobyl Atomic Power Station," *Pravda*, 4 May 1986, p. 2; and *Izvestia*, 4 May 1986, p. 2.

⁶⁴"Incident in Nevada," *Pravda*, 4 May 1986, p. 5; and *Izvestia*, 4 May 1986, p. 4.

followed a March 1984 accident at the same location during another underground explosion, resulting in fifteen injuries and one death.⁶⁵

Pravda carried another TASS report on 4 May recounting a speech delivered by Boris Yeltsin before the Eighth Congress of the German Communist Party. This statement provided another early example of the official response to Western coverage of the accident.

Yeltsin stated:

Our ideological opponents never lose an opportunity to instigate a new campaign against the USSR. Of what has bourgeois propaganda not accused us? . . . Here is the most recent example. Bourgeois propaganda is publicizing many cock-and-bull stories about the accident at the Chernobyl Atomic Power Station. The unreserved lie about 'thousands killed' in FRG newspapers - in today's issue of *Bild*, for example - can only arouse indignation. And all this in order yet again to whip up anti-Soviet hysteria in the hopes of impeding the Soviet Union's relations with other countries.⁶⁶

A TASS Communique appeared in *Pravda* on 5 May and in *Izvestia* on 6 May stating that the Soviet Government authorized TASS to report the Government wished to thank the many and various foreign states, organizations and private citizens for their sympathy and offers of thanks.⁶⁷

The statement contrasted this "wide background of sympathy and understanding" against "certain circles . . . attempting to use what happened for indecent political goals."⁶⁸

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶"In the Struggle for a Peaceful Future," *Pravda*, 4 May 1986, p. 4.

⁶⁷"TASS Communique," *Pravda*, 5 May 1986, p. 2; and *Izvestia*, 6 May 1986, p. 2.

⁶⁸Ibid.

Rumors and fabrications that go against fundamental moral norms are being fed into the propaganda mill. For example, cock-and-bull stories about thousands killed, about panic amidst the people Every normal person realizes that gloating over the misfortunes of others is an indecent thing.⁶⁹

On 5 May, *Izvestia* also carried a TASS report detailing accidents at U.S. nuclear facilities. This report stated that approximately 20,000 accidents and other problems had occurred at U.S. nuclear power stations since 1979,⁷⁰ and the occurrence of such incidents was increasing yearly. "In other words . . . dangerous incidents have taken place at American atomic power stations practically every day."⁷¹ The Three Mile Island Atomic Power Station, the Davis-Besse Atomic Power Station and the Tennessee River valley system were cited as examples of inadequate safety and "shortcomings in the management of enterprises."⁷² The report emphasized that this information had surfaced,

. . . at a time when a brazen anti-Soviet campaign due to the incident at the Chernobyl Atomic Power Station is being artificially instigated in the US, and the proposal that 'such a thing could not happen' in the US is being exaggerated in every way. However, the facts . . . suggest differently.⁷³

Official statements during this time period listed two deaths resulting from the accident. Kenneth L. Adelman, director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency,

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰"Accidents at Atomic Stations," *Izvestia*, 5 May 1986, p. 4.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

called the official death toll "preposterous."⁷⁴ U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz seemed to agree.⁷⁵

Yuri Spizhenko, the (independent) Ukrainian Health Minister, estimated that in the first week after the accident, between six thousand and eight thousand people may have died as a result of the accident in the Ukrainian Republic alone.⁷⁶

The short and misleading daily reports about Chernobyl were probably intended to prevent panic in Kiev and other towns near the reactor.⁷⁷

On 5 May, the release of radionuclides suddenly and inexplicable dropped sharply. On May 6, 150,000 curies of radiation escaped into the atmosphere: one hundred times less than on the day before.⁷⁸ The decline continued, but nuclear scientists did not really understand why.⁷⁹

Once the massive emission of radioactivity from the reactor had ceased, it was a timely occasion to end the news blackout.⁸⁰

The general public still knew little about the danger that had ended. But now that there was good news to report there was no further need for a news blackout.⁸¹

⁷⁴Serge Schmemmann, "2 Deaths Admitted," *New York Times*, 30 April 1986, sec. A, p. 1.

⁷⁵McGrath, "Did the Media Hype Chernobyl?" 31.

⁷⁶Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, 58.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid., 61.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid., 67.

⁸¹Ibid., 65.

And so a news conference was called for Soviet and foreign journalists on Tuesday, 6 May 1986.⁸²

Deputy Prime Minister Sherbina delivered the news conference in which he revealed the causes, consequences and scale of the accident. Medvedev reported Sherbina's statements actually lacked any real information or explanation. Medvedev found the news conference generally disappointing: only a small part was televised in Moscow, it was called at short notice and "very tightly controlled."⁸³ Soviet and Eastern European journalists could question extemporaneously, but Western journalist had to submit their questions in writing.⁸⁴

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid., 67.

⁸⁴Ibid.

CHAPTER 6

NEWSPAPER CONTENT OF THE COVERAGE OF THE CHERNOBYL ACCIDENT

The news conference organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 6 May was the turning point in the dissemination of news from Chernobyl.¹

Immediately following the press conference, the Soviet press began to publish reports from special correspondents in the area of the accident.²

Nick Lampert in 1989 said of this press coverage: "Chernobyl, after a painful silence, was massively covered by the Soviet press, albeit in a very directed fashion."³

On Chernobyl, the authorities' steps appear to have been designed, ultimately, to propagate their own interpretation of what occurred at the reactor site and afterword.⁴

¹Zhores A. Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990), 67.

²Zhores Medvedev, "Chernobyl: A Catalyst for Change," eds. Ed. A. Hewett and Victor H. Winston, *Milestones in Glasnost and Perestroika, Politics and People* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1991), 23.

³Nick Lampert, "The Dilemmas of Glasnost," eds. Walter Joyce, Hillel Ticktin and Stephen White, *Gorbachev and Gorbachevism* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1989), 57.

⁴David R. Marples, *The Social Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 126.

ATTACKS ON THE WESTERN MEDIA

When Boris Yeltsin illegalized the Communist Party in 1991, government decisions concerning information dissemination on Chernobyl became accessible for study. The Politburo's operational group on Chernobyl kept notes on its meetings and called their decisions "Secret Protocols."

At nearly all of the meetings [of the Politburo's operational group] a statement by somebody to the press, television, or at a press conference was examined. All these texts were approved and a definite publication date indicated.⁵

Secret. Appendix to Protocol No. 21 of 4 June 1986 in part read:

Indicate the unjust character of the claims and judgements made both by certain prominent personages and by the press from certain Western countries, which speak of ecological and material damage caused by the spread of small quantities of radioactive matter carried by air from the Chernobyl area.⁶

Shlapentokh calculated that not less than a third of all space in Soviet press articles concerning Chernobyl in the first month after the accident was devoted to condemning the Western media reaction.⁷

Twenty-five articles that mentioned Western media coverage were found in the issues of *Pravda* and *Izvestia* published between 6 May 1997 and 31 May 1997. All of

⁵Alla Yaroshinskaya, *Chernobyl: The Forbidden Truth*, trans. Michele Kahn and Julia Sallabank (Oxford: Jon Carpenter Publishing, 1994), 130.

⁶*Ibid.*, 122-123.

⁷Vladimir Shlapentokh, "Ecology and Nuclear Danger in Soviet Ideology and Public Opinion," ed. J. Mallory Wober, *Television and Nuclear Power: Making the Public Mind* (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1992), 103.

these articles judged Western coverage in a condemnatory manner and focused on this criticism.

These articles termed Western coverage an "anti-Soviet campaign," a "hate campaign" and "anti-Soviet propaganda." The articles called the nature of Western media reports of the accident "provocative," "sensationalist," and "obscene." Soviet writers criticized the Western media for employing "fabrications," "lies" and "cock-and-bull stories"; for "capitalizing on misfortune" and "gloating over failures." These articles asked how "human sorrow could be used so shamelessly for dirty propaganda games."⁸

These terms and variations on them appeared repeatedly in articles assessing Western media coverage of the accident. The term "cock-and-bull" provides an interesting example: Yeltsin originated the use of this term in relation to Western media coverage of Chernobyl in his speech before the Eighth Congress of the German Communist Party on 4 May. The term appeared in a TASS Communiqué carried by *Pravda* on 5 May and by *Izvestia* on 6 May. The term appeared in an article written by a correspondent and carried by *Pravda* on 6 May.

This article carried by *Pravda* on 6 May condemned the U.S. government and "and its obedient news media"⁹:

This administration is laying hold of any pretext to exacerbate an already tense situation, to create distrust and discord among peoples, and to poison the political atmosphere.¹⁰

⁸G. Arbatov, "Boomerang," *Pravda*, 9 May 1986, p. 4.

⁹Yurii Zhukov, "Involuntary Self-Exposure," *Pravda*, 6 May 1986, p. 4.

The article stated the U.S. media sought to divert attention from recent "criminal"¹¹ activities such as the bombing of Libya, undeclared wars in several countries, and especially its aggressive approach to the nuclear arms race and rejection of Soviet peace initiatives. It went on to say that White House and State Department officials were instituting a "new anti-Soviet campaign . . . for the spreading of distrust and animosity toward the Soviet Union."¹²

It was only some highly-placed individuals in Washington, as well as in the capitals of some other NATO states, who immediately seized upon the news of the accident in Chernobyl in order to employ it in their own hostile political goals. They sought to induce hysteria and panic. Cock-and-bull stories were made up about 'thousands killed' and about the peoples of Western Europe and even of the United States being affected by radioactivity as a result of the accident.¹³

The article went on to describe American and European television networks broadcasting the May Day celebrations in Kiev and Minsk. According to the article, these scenes of normalcy stunned Western viewers who had believed these cities lay in ruins. This caused reporters to demand explanations from the government. Consequently, the Director of the Environmental Protection Agency, was forced to admit that there existed no danger to Americans' health and Soviet casualty figures might be correct. Reporters tore the

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

Director to pieces,¹⁴ because the government had misled them: the article called the U.S. government's version of the Chernobyl story an "unappetizing soup of lies."¹⁵

The article quoted the *New York Times* as stating that American reconnaissance satellites and other monitoring devices had been unable to register the accident at the Chernobyl plant.

The article listed several Western nuclear accidents, emphasizing U.S. radioactive contamination of Mexico, and concluded:

Soviet people do not gloat over failures and accidents at American atomic power stations. . . . It is time that those entities who, blinded by anti-Sovietism and anticommunism, seeking to find any pretext to capitalize on the hardships of others, understood that in civilized societies, such antics deserve only condemnation.¹⁶

An article in *Pravda* on 9 May criticized the "psychological warfare"¹⁷ employed by the U.S. and its NATO allies.

This might have been done even before the accident at Chernobyl. They had long been waiting for a pretext to unleash a new anti-Soviet campaign.¹⁸

Another article carried by *Ivestia* on 9 May condemned the Western response:

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷G. Arbatov, "Boomerang," p. 4.

¹⁸Ibid.

It is impossible to find a common language with them. They do not have a tongue, but rather a poisonous sting that has been demonstrated often enough in the past few days. They have been especially zealous overseas, spreading frightening rumors and fabrications and using them to fill any vacuum.¹⁹

On 16 May, *Pravda* expressed disappointment with the American response to the accident.

It consists of shameful speculation on the accident and shameless attempts to exploit what occurred to discredit the entire policy of the Soviet Union and to breed distrust of its peace-loving initiatives.²⁰

COVERAGE OF FOREIGN ACCIDENTS

In discussing revisions of the *List of Information Not To Be Published in the Open Press* after Khrushchev's downfall, the leadership developed a confidential initiative to admit that the country still had some isolated difficulties, but to always make clear that life was worse in the West.²¹ This initiative manifested in a policy of media coverage of accidents in foreign countries every time a similar accident occurred within the Soviet Union.

After limited coverage of a major earthquake in Soviet Central Asia the previous autumn (coverage that never included casualty figures,²² the newspaper *Sovetskaya Rossiya*

¹⁹A. Illesh, "In a Difficult Hour," *Izvestia*, 9 May 1986, p. 6.

²⁰"M.S. Gorbachev Meets with A. Hammer and R. Gale," *Pravda* 16 May 1986, p. 1.

²¹Leonid Vladimirov, *Soviet Media and Their Message* (Standing Committee on Education About Communism, American Bar Association, 1977), 21.

²²Philip Taubman, "Soviet Keeps Lid on News Coverage," *New York Times*, 30 April 1986, sec. A, p. 11.

published a reader's letter in January wherein the reader asked why the Soviet press had given greater coverage to an earthquake in Mexico and a volcanic eruption in Colombia, than to the domestic earthquake.²³

Instead of providing information about the Chernobyl accident, said Schmemmann, the Soviet press focused on other disasters such as the accident at Three Mile Island. The first Soviet statement was followed on the TASS teletype machine by a longer item concerning Three Mile Island and other nuclear accidents abroad.²⁴ The TASS accident report issued on 30 April was followed by three items about radioactive waste; two of which described Western disposal methods derogatorily, and the third of which lauded Soviet disposal methods.²⁵

Review of the issues of *Pravda* and *Izvestia* published between 6 May 1997 and 31 May 1997 revealed four articles that focused on accidents at foreign nuclear power facilities and perceived inadequate safety standards at such facilities. Articles detailing these accidents and standards often tied in with commentary on Western media coverage of the Chernobyl accident.

An article carried by *Pravda* on 6 May focused on the U.S. government and media response to the accident, but also dealt with nuclear accidents in the U.S. and Britain.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Serge Schmemmann, "The Soviet Secrecy," *New York Times*, 1 May 1986, sec. A, p. 1.

²⁵Ibid.

According to the article, gratuitous coverage of the accident in the U.S. media and questionable conclusions drawn by the U.S. government had caused Americans to take a look at the safety of their own atomic power stations.²⁶

On this point, a really distressing picture was revealed, one that the authorities have carefully concealed up until now.²⁷

The article quoted figures from an apparently confidential and newly-published report by the General Accounting Office of Congress that indicated 151 accidents at nuclear power facilities in 14 countries between 1971 and 1984.²⁸ The report concluded that most of these accidents, all of which resulted in substantial releases of radioactive contamination, had taken place in the United States, but their occurrence was concealed by the authorities.²⁹ Actually, these figures seem much lower than those reported in a TASS dispatch published in *Izvestia* the day before. TASS reported 20,000 accidents and other problems occurring at U.S. nuclear power stations between 1979 and 1986.³⁰

The article also stated that in 1985, the United States suffered its greatest number of "dangerous accidents"³¹ at nuclear power stations since 1979 when the accident at the Three Mile Island Atomic Power Station in Pennsylvania occurred.³²

²⁶Yurii Zhukov, "Involuntary Self-Exposure," *Pravda*, 6 May 1986, p. 4.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰"Accidents at Atomic Stations," *Izvestia*, 5 May 1986, p. 4.

³¹Zhukov, "Involuntary Self-Exposure," p. 4.

This article reported that ten percent of all U.S. nuclear power facilities registered incidents in 1985 "replete with terribly dangerous consequences."³³ The Davis-Besse Station in Ohio and the Rancho Seco Atomic Power Station in California were mentioned as particularly dangerous.

The secretary-general of Mexico's Amalgamated Union of Workers in the Nuclear Industry was quoted as stating that the United States regularly carried out nuclear test explosions sixty kilometers from the Mexican border.³⁴ The source said this, along with 2,300 incidents of an unspecified nature at U.S. nuclear facilities during 1985 alone, contributed to radioactive contamination of Mexico.³⁵

Lastly, the article briefly mentioned an accident occurring at the Dungeness Atomic Power Station in County Kent, Great Britain on 31 March 1986.³⁶ This accident had been carefully detailed in the TASS report the day before in *Izvestia*.

Pravda carried an article on 7 May 1986 titled, "Auto Accident - Who Needed to Remove Karen Silkwood?" The article reported that a film had been made and a book written telling the story of Karen Silkwood's orchestrated murder for her protesting of the

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

Kerr-McGee Company's "total disregard for established safety norms"³⁷ in processing nuclear energy. The article stated that the Kerr-McGee Company continued to violate safety standards; and that its main client, a nuclear weapons production facility, had been spreading atomic pollution for forty years.³⁸ The article claimed,

She was murdered so she would not make public the frightening facts on how Americans, unsuspectingly and unknowingly, have become victims of the wheeler-dealers in the atomic energy industry.³⁹

According to this article, the occurrence of accidents at nuclear energy and weapons facilities is regularly concealed. The article stated that one such incident at the Kerr-McGee Company in January 1986 led to toxic emissions and a death. The article concluded Silkwood's murder "was engineered by big business, which is trying, using every means, to conceal its disregard for violating human safety norms."⁴⁰

Pravda carried an article on 9 May, the primary focus of which segued from condemnation of the American and NATO response to the accident to the topic of accidents at atomic power stations in the US and Britain:

... sometimes even the most tested and reliable, the most sophisticated equipment does not work. It is in vain that some of our ill-wishers are now trying to say something to the effect that the cause was the Soviet Union's supposed lag in technology.⁴¹

³⁷V. Gan, "Auto Accident - Who Needed to Remove Karen Silkwood?" *Pravda*, 7 May 1986, p. 5.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹G. Arbatov, "Boomerang," *Pravda*, 9 May 1986, p. 4.

The article pointed out that the International Atomic Energy Agency had deemed that the RBMK-1000 reactor (the type at Chernobyl) "surpassed the best Western models in reliability."⁴² The article stated that numerous accidents in the West, using Western technology and not Soviet technology, proved this point. The article further evidenced the inferiority of Western technology with such incidents as the Challenger tragedy; recent mishaps with Titan and Delta rockets; the accident in Bhopal, India in which thousands of people were killed due to toxic emissions; acid rain and polluted waterways caused by "carelessness or to save a few pennies"⁴³; pollution of the oceans; and lastly, the possibility of nuclear annihilation.

STORIES OF HEROISM

The ten-day news blackout about Chernobyl harmed the reputation of the Soviet government and its new policy of *glasnost*. But it did not surprise anyone who lives and works in the Soviet Union. *Glasnost* was new. It had not yet become a trend that could be trusted . . . The government probably thought it would be easier to persuade people to help if they did not know the extent of the danger.⁴⁴

In all, between 200,000⁴⁵ and 600,000⁴⁶ people came from all over the Soviet Union to participate in the clean up over two years.⁴⁷ Thousands of miners from the Donbass,

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Zhores A. Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990), 65-66.

⁴⁵"Chernobyl Spews Out Fear," *Detroit Free Press*, 18 April 1996, sec. A, p.11.

⁴⁶Gary E. McCuen and Ronald P. Swanson, *Toxic Nightmare, Ecocide in the USSR & Eastern Europe* (Hudson, Wisc: GEM Publications Inc., 1993), 37.

metro-workers from Moscow and Kiev, fire fighters and servicemen all participated.⁴⁸ They wore cotton masks and lived in contaminated areas, all the while complaining of classic symptoms of radiation sickness.⁴⁹ It has been estimated that thirty-one people died during the clean up (mostly fire fighters due to acute radiation sickness).⁵⁰

The first reports of fighting the fire were published in Soviet newspapers ten days later, by which time almost every local fire fighter had been admitted to the Moscow radiological hospital. "Readers were, of course, proud that the firemen had been ready to make such great sacrifices to prevent new tragedies . . ." ⁵¹

Military pilots flew as many as eighty helicopters and airplanes over the burning reactor core, dumping retardants to extinguish the fire in the reactor core. Military test pilot Anatolii Grishchenko died recently in the United States: he had repeatedly flown over the reactor trying to fit a containment dome over the burning structure. Only later was he informed of how much radiation he had absorbed.⁵²

⁴⁷"Chernobyl Spews Out Fear," sec. A, p. 11.

⁴⁸Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, 58.

⁴⁹McCuen and Swanson, *Toxic Nightmare*, 58.

⁵⁰"Chernobyl Spews Out Fear," sec. A, p. 10.

⁵¹Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, 58.

⁵²"After Meltdown, Unsung Heroes Talk of Rads, Duty and Vodka," *New York Times*, 21 April 1986, sec. 4, p. 7.

In early May, it was feared the weight of the material that had been dropped into the reactor core would collapse the floor of the reactor into the ground underneath and spread the contamination.

A decision to strengthen the foundation under the reactor by freezing the ground with liquid nitrogen went into effect. Simultaneous draining of the bubbler pool under the reactor commenced in order to prevent another steam explosion and subsequent additional releases of radiation. TASS carried a story written by Evgenii Velikhov (vice-president of the Academy of Scientists, director of the Kurchatov Institute of Atomic Energy, co-founder of the International Foundation for the Survival and Development of Humanity, full Central Committee member and a leader in the effort to handle Chernobyl) explaining that three divers had gone into the radioactive water of the reservoir in order to open slide valves at the bottom of the pool.⁵³

Vladimir Khrebtovich, then a Russian Army officer, said many considered participation in the clean up "a great patriotic deed... Morale was very high. Everyone wanted to go."⁵⁴

Felicity Barringer, who served as a Moscow correspondent to the *New York Times* from 1986 to 1988, described press accounts after the accident as being characterized by patriotism and heroism.

⁵³John Greenwald, "Gorbachev Goes on the Offensive," *Time* 127, no. 21, 26 May 1986, 32.

⁵⁴"Chernobyl Spews Out Fear," *Detroit Free Press*, 18 April 1996, sec. A, p. 10.

Those were days of martial metaphors, harking back to the suffering and triumphs of World War II. Radiation was the enemy: insidious, invisible, stubborn, powerful. But the firemen who extinguished the blaze, the helicopter pilots who dropped sand, lead and boron to smother the reactor, the soldiers who cleaned up the territory and the scientists directing the activity were a powerful army. People had to be moved - about 135,000 from what came to be known as the Zone, the area within an 18-mile radius of the reactor. But their health would be monitored. They would be safe.⁵⁵

Secret Appendix to Protocol No. 21 of 4 June 1986 instructed the press:

When giving information on the progress of the clearing-up operation: demonstrate the efficient execution of large-scale technical and organisational measures which have no parallel in practice world-wide, to deal with the consequences of the accident and to prevent harm being caused by radioactivity; note the high level of mass heroism in the carrying out of the aforementioned work.⁵⁶

The main theme of these reports [after the 6 May press conference] was the heroism and courage which had been demonstrated: there was no word yet about responsibility or negligence. The disaster was treated as if it had been the eruption of a volcano, a natural force out of control.⁵⁷

Vladimir Shlepentokh said that "Soviet propaganda also attempted to exploit the Chernobyl disaster for . . . the praising of the altruism, heroism and friendship of the Soviet people."⁵⁸

⁵⁵Felicity Barringer, "Chernobyl Five Years Later," *New York Times Magazine*, 14 April 1991, 30.

⁵⁶Alla Yaroshinskaya, *Chernobyl: The Forbidden Truth*, trans. Michele Kahn and Julia Sallabank (Oxford: Jon Carpenter Publishing, 1994), 132.

⁵⁷Zhores Medvedev, "Chernobyl: A Catalyst for Change," eds. Ed A. Hewett and Victor H. Winston, *Milestones in Glasnost and Perestroika, Politics and People* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1991), 24.

⁵⁸Vladimir Shlapentokh, "Ecology and Nuclear Danger in Soviet Ideology and Public Opinion," ed. J. Mallory Wober, *Television and Nuclear Power: Making the Public Mind* (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1992), 103.

Twenty-one articles that commented on heroism and courage demonstrated during the accident and the subsequent clean up were found in the issues of *Pravda* and *Izvestia* published between 6 May 1986 and 31 May 1986. These articles tended to recount long and detailed descriptions of individual acts of heroism.

On 6 May 1986, *Pravda* carried an account of the immediate containment of the accident. The article stated that the Communist Maj. Leonid Telyatnikov (so titled), who organized the initial effort, "was an example of selflessness and a model of the performance of one's official duties."⁵⁹

The article also lauded the response in Kiev when news of the accident reached them: "many people went to the enterprizes where they work to offer their assistance, despite the fact that it was a Saturday."⁶⁰ Drivers were gathered to begin the evacuation from Pripjat and when offered the opportunity to refuse because of the danger of contamination, the article stated that every one of the drivers wanted to go and help. In the evacuation effort of several thousand people, no one panicked, everyone worked tirelessly and the evacuees were "met with concern and heartfelt sympathy everywhere."⁶¹

The article thanked several people by name for their "selfless labor"⁶² in containing the accident, ministering to the injured and aiding the evacuation. Even the evacuees were

⁵⁹V. Gubarev and M. Odinetz, "The Station and Around It," *Pravda*, 6 May 1986, p. 6.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹*Ibid.*

⁶²*Ibid.*

complimented: they apparently began to work immediately upon being resettled, thus helping enterprises to attain planned goals well ahead of time.

Izvestia carried an article on 7 May 1986 that focused on the containment of the fire. This article also ascertained the courage and selflessness of the general population, naming certain individuals for special feats. The article commented:

People are willing to go wherever necessary and whenever necessary, are offering their assistance, are willing to tackle any job.⁶³

The article quoted the Chernobyl station's medical director recounting his visit to a local hospital soon after the accident:

The patients who were there for medical treatment showed a surprising understanding of the situation, and the greatest tact and honor. Those whose ailments were not as serious asked to be discharged from the hospital. They gave their places to others who had suffered especially severe effects from the accident at the atomic power station.⁶⁴

The article concluded that teams of emergency workers continued laboring in the clean up and that their work "without exaggeration, be equated with a heroic effort."⁶⁵

On 9 May, *Pravda's* article on the clean up quoted the Kiev Province Party Committee First Secretary:

⁶³ A. Illesh, "The Situation Is Under Control," *Izvestia*, 7 May 1986, p. 6.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

... we never doubted our people. We turned to them - and we met with complete understanding and a willingness to help, to share everything they have. The overwhelming majority of people are working courageously - I would call it selflessly - these days. They come to the district Party committees and Soviet executive committees with only one question: 'How can I help?' Many of them, paying no mind to the time involved or to the difficulties, are themselves helping with the evacuation effort.⁶⁶

The official went on to discuss various examples of the population's response to the crisis and concluded:

... there are hundreds of examples of heroism. But, I repeat, no one ever doubted the courage and the selflessness of our people. ... They are working courageously and selflessly.⁶⁷

An article in *Izvestia* on 9 May concentrated on the humanism of the Soviet people in dealing with the Chernobyl accident:

Familial sympathy with those who suffered. Kindred unity with those who were forced to leave their homes. Admiration of the courage of those who, in risky conditions, are eliminating the consequences of the accident and stamping out the still-smoldering embers of this disaster. There are situations in which doing one's duty is tantamount to a heroic exploit. The people who have remained at the Chernobyl Atomic Power Station are in such a situation.⁶⁸

Pravda carried an article on 13 May that referred to the telegrams, letters and money orders it was receiving from people willing to help in overcoming the accident. According to the article, many people wished to invite workers from the Chernobyl station to stay with

⁶⁶V. Gubarev and M. Odinets, "A Spring of Anxiety and Courage," *Pravda*, 9 May 1986, p. 6.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

⁶⁸Stanislav Kondrashov, "Thinking About Chernobyl," *Izvestia*, 9 May 1986, p. 5.

them in the Caucasus, the Kuban, along the Volga, and in Moscow and Leningrad. The article said workers would be accepted as their hosts' "loved ones."⁶⁹

On 15 May 1986, both *Pravda* and *Izvestia* carried articles detailing Gorbachev's first televised address about the accident. Gorbachev spoke of the Communist Party and the Soviet Government as receiving "thousands and thousands of letters and telegrams from Soviet people . . . that express sympathy and support for the victims."⁷⁰ Gorbachev reported that many Soviet families had offered to take in evacuees and had offered material assistance. He also said that many had requested to be sent to the area affected by the accident in order to assist. "I will say right out that people have acted heroically and selflessly and are continuing to do so."⁷¹

On 16 May, *Pravda* carried an article that recounted a press conference attended by Robert Gale (an American physician who assisted with medical aspects of the accident), Armand Hammer and A.I. Vorobyev of the USSR Academy of Medicine. Vorobyev offered that fire fighters had suffered most severely in the containment of the accident. Encouraging an empathetic response in his audience, Vorobyev praised the fire fighters by

⁶⁹V. Gubarev and M. Odinets, "The Battle Continues," *Pravda*, 13 May 1986, p. 6.

⁷⁰"M.S. Gorbachev's Address on Soviet Television," *Pravda*, 15 May 1986, p. 1; and *Izvestia*, 15 May 1986, p. 1.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

saying "they were saving your life and mine."⁷² Hammer said of the multinational group of physicians involved:

I was deeply touched by this joint humanitarian action by doctors, by their heroic efforts that have made it possible to save many victims.⁷³

In another article on 16 May, *Pravda* detailed the actions of Aleksei Lelechenko during the accident, as told by two of his co-workers. The two survivors described Lelechenko's behavior as "true heroism."⁷⁴ "He was an example to others. . . . Lelechenko was thinking about people's safety. He was thinking about everyone but himself."⁷⁵ Lelechenko apparently had handled safety measures necessary to minimizing the extent of the danger himself instead of assigning subordinates to do this.

And then, barely able to stand up, he noticed the condition we were in - from the expressions on our faces - and he suddenly began to tell jokes.⁷⁶

One of *Pravda's* articles concerning the accident on 18 May called Soviet people "models of calm courage for the entire world during these days."⁷⁷

⁷²"The Nuclear Age: The Measure of Danger," *Pravda*, 16 May 1986, p. 4.

⁷³*Ibid.*

⁷⁴V. Gubarev and M. Odinetz, "The Chernobyl Atomic Power Station - Days of Heroism: Communists Were in the Front Ranks," *Pravda*, 16 May 1986, p. 6.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

⁷⁷Boris Oleinik, "Echo of the Events at the Chernobyl Atomic Power Station: The Main Guarantee," *Pravda*, 18 May 1986, p. 1.

Izvestia's article of 19 May eulogized six fire fighters who died battling the initial fire at the facility. The newspaper's lengthy article detailed work containing the fire and provided photographs of the deceased.⁷⁸

An article in *Pravda* on 20 May praised those who worked in the initial clean up.

... heroes of the first hours and days of the struggle, those who performed feats of valor while risking their own health in order to save the lives of thousands of others.⁷⁹

The article quoted Col. V. Shkriba, a local military commissar:

To a degree perhaps unprecedented since the end of the war, the Soviet people have shown exceptional awareness and understanding of the task that faces them. . . . Nowhere did I see or hear even a hint of cowardice, faintheartedness or obstinacy. On the contrary, self-control, a high sense of responsibility, and determination to complete the task as quickly as possible - these are the qualities that stand out in the work of everyone taking part in eliminating the consequences of the accident.⁸⁰

Pravda carried an article on 23 May that contrasted the heroism of some against its antithesis in others. The article stated:

[The Chernobyl accident] . . . sorted people into their proper places - into the places they had merited before that last Friday in April. Children became several years more adult, heroes became heroes, cowards became deserters . . ."⁸¹

⁷⁸ Andrei Illesh, "Report From the Area of the Chernobyl Atomic Power Station," *Izvestia*, 19 May 1986, p. 6.

⁷⁹ A. Gorokhov, "Battlefield Operations," *Pravda*, 20 May 1986, p. 6.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ V. Yavorivskii, "The Zone of Truth and Conscience," *Pravda*, 23 May 1986, p. 6.

MANAGERIAL-TECHNOCRATIC RATIONALE

During June and July, very few articles that fall into the categories of attacks on the Western media, coverage of foreign accidents and stories of heroism appeared *Pravda* and *Izvestia*. Their occurrence dropped sharply as May turned to June. Approximately one article in each category was found between the two newspapers during the last two months of the period under review.

From the first of June, the tenor of press coverage of the accident changed. Articles began to address the effort to explain the accident. Nick Lampert said the Communist Party employed the Soviet press in a "managerial-technocratic rationale"⁸² to cover the accident after this point.

On the managerial side, by emphasizing the role of the station's design and construction teams, and of the station's engineers and managers, the media brought Chernobyl into the debate on bureaucracy.

For several months after the Chernobyl accident the Soviet nuclear establishment as generally successful in promoting a cover-up story about the test of an entirely new safety device. The accident thus appeared to be the result of a concern for safety which, because of the negligence and incompetence of local operators and administrators, had terrible consequences.⁸³

Perestroika in 1986 dealt heavily with the elimination of weakness and corruption in bureaucratic management. During this early stage of glasnost, Gorbachev intended the

⁸²Nick Lampert, "The Dilemmas of Glasnost," eds. Walter Joyce, Hillel Ticktin and Stephen White, *Gorbachev and Gorbachevism* (Boulder, Colo.: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1989), 59.

⁸³Zhores A. Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 34.

policy to mobilize public support for perestroika partly through the exposure of inefficient management.

The reporting on disasters served the imperative positive function of social control on those people who have the means, through their actions, to contribute to the occurrence of said disasters.⁸⁴

Review of *Pravda* and *Izvestia* during June and July revealed five articles discussing managerial inefficiency regarding the Chernobyl accident.

On 3 June, *Pravda* carried an article reporting on a meeting in which officials from the power station district made known to the central government commission on the accident a number of complaints concerning the clean up and evacuation. A special complaint was issued against the director of the USSR Ministry of Power and Electrification's Chief Workers' Supply Administration, who was in charge of providing clean up workers with necessities.⁸⁵ The article continued:

Officials from Pripjat and from the Chernobyl District told us that the Ministry of Power and Electrification's inattention to people's housing, consumer services and meals is greatly hampering things.⁸⁶

Izvestia carried an article on 15 June that provided a lengthy and detailed account of the clean up and evacuation. The article included particulars of a meeting of various

⁸⁴Brian McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 65.

⁸⁵M. Odinets, "The Chernobyl Atomic Power Station - A Chronicle of Events," *Pravda*, 3 June 1986, p. 3.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*

Belorussian ministries, during which the chairman of the Board of the Belorussian Republic Union of Consumer's Cooperatives answered to concerns about available goods. He assured others that the products were in the stores but that "our locals employees have shown unforgivable carelessness and laxity."⁸⁷

Pravda's article on 15 June concerning the clean up noted:

Every day brings new evidence of people's heroism and courage, and sets a new example of organization and discipline. But now and then, a lack of proper responsibility is seen on the part of those who are called upon to lead the people forward.⁸⁸

The article reported that the Chernobyl station's director and its chief engineer (Bryukhanov and Fomin) were fired from their positions. They were judged:

. . . unable to provide the proper firm leadership and necessary discipline, and [they] showed irresponsibility and lack of administrative capability. They were not able to assess what had happened in the accident nor to take measures to organize efficient work in the aftermath.⁸⁹

The article named three deputy directors of the station in additional cases of cowardice, irresponsibility and insensitivity toward workers.⁹⁰ The article also reproached the behavior of the station's Party committee during the accident: this behavior consisted of

⁸⁷N. Matukovsky, "There Are No Trivial Concerns Here," *Izvestia*, 15 June 1986, p.3.

⁸⁸V. Gubarev and M. Odinets, "I Want to Work at the Station," *Pravda*, 15 June 1986, p. 1.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*

⁹⁰*Ibid.*

infringing on the prerogative of station managers by taking action under their own direction.⁹¹

Pravda carried an article on 17 July that discussed the various concerns and activities of the new director of the Chernobyl station. The new director emphasized the technical and organizational measures he would take in order to meet the new requirements for nuclear safety that would be set when the government commission made its final assessment on the causes of the accident. The article assured readers:

The strengthening of the leadership of the Chernobyl Atomic Power Station, the new attention to detail, the heightening of discipline and the critical analysis of the situation are evident in all areas.⁹²

Pravda's issue on 20 July publicized the results of the government investigation into the causes of the accident. The article reported that the government's commission found the accident happened "as a result of a whole series of gross breaches of operation regulations on the part of power station employees."⁹³

According to the article, the power station's directors and specialists had carried out experiments with the turbo-generators' operating schedules with neither official authorization nor proper precautions. These individuals then failed to adequately monitor the experiment and to observe appropriate safety measures.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 6.

⁹²O. Ignatev and M. Odinets, "Management Has Changed," *Pravda*, 17 July 1986, p. 6.

⁹³"In the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee," *Pravda*, 20 July 1986, p. 1.

Furthermore, the commission concluded that the USSR Ministry of Power and Electrification and the State Committee for Atomic Power Safety had not supervised the station, its employees nor its safety standards as it was commissioned to do.

The article condemned the "irresponsibility, negligence and indiscipline" that led to the accident.⁹⁴

They noted that criminal proceedings had begun against those deemed responsible; named several individuals as dismissed from their positions (chairman of the State Committee for Atomic Power Safety, USSR deputy minister of power and electrification, first deputy minister of medium machinery and deputy director of a research and design institute); stated the director of the station (Bryukhanov) had been expelled from the Party; and suggested an additional (named) minister be dismissed from his position.⁹⁵

On the technical side, French and West German newspapers described Chernobyl as resulting in part because of a bureaucratic penchance for secrecy and a failure to allow open debate on nuclear issues.⁹⁶

Review of *Pravda* and *Izvestia* during June and July revealed five articles regarding technological considerations of the Chernobyl accident.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Flora Lewis, "Moscow's Nuclear Cynicism," *New York Times*, 1 May 1986, sec. A, p. 27.

Ten plants similar to the one at Chernobyl operated in the Soviet Union at the time of the accident. All of the RBMK-1000 reactors at these plants (like those at the Chernobyl station) likely shared Chernobyl's design flaws. Yet they supplied nearly sixty percent⁹⁷ of nuclear-generated electricity in the Soviet Union.⁹⁸

Jan Vanous, the research director of PlanEcon (an economic service specializing in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe), estimated that the Chernobyl plant alone represented one-seventh of Soviet nuclear power generating capacity.⁹⁹ The RBMK reactor design constituted half of the program for nuclear energy production until 2000.¹⁰⁰

Publicizing the extent of the damage caused by the Chernobyl accident seemingly posed a threat to public support of the nuclear energy program,¹⁰¹ and thus to perestroika.

But by allowing discussion on the causes of the accident, the problems presented by managing the operation of RBMK reactors could be approached for resolution.¹⁰² Soviet social scientists had used this rationale in the past in an effort to obtain greater access to government data.¹⁰³

⁹⁷Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, 35.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Theodore Shabad, "Area Around Plant Varies Widely," *New York Times*, 30 April 1986, sec. A, p. 11.

¹⁰⁰Medvedev, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, 70.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 40.

¹⁰²Lampert, *The Dilemmas of Glasnost*, 59.

¹⁰³Ibid.

Indeed, greater publicity for shortcomings and problems - ranging from the shoddy construction of nuclear power plants to the spread of drug addiction - is an indispensable precondition for addressing them successfully.¹⁰⁴

Pravda carried an interview with Valerii Alekseevich Legasov, an academician serving on the government's accident commission, on 2 June. Legasov set the tone for support of atomic power by calling the production facilities "the pinnacle of power-engineering's achievements."¹⁰⁵

They are not only economically advantageous in normal operations, in comparison with thermal stations, and they are not only ecologically cleaner, they are also preparing the base for the next wave of technology. The future of civilization is unthinkable without the peaceful use of nuclear energy¹⁰⁶

Izvestia reported on 4 June that readers' concerned letters prompted their correspondent to interview the Academician Vladimir Evgenevich Sokolov on the question of what lessons were to be learned from the experience of Chernobyl.

Sokolov replied:

Reviews by experts as a part of the process of designing new atomic power stations must be stepped up from the standpoint of these exceptional situations. Reviews by ecological experts should play a most important role in this. After all, we are talking about people's health and lives.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴Gail W. Lapidus, "Overview - The Role of Glasnost in Gorbachev's Reform Strategy," eds. Andrei Melville and Gail W. Lapidus, *The Glasnost Papers, Voices on Reform from Moscow* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990), 24.

¹⁰⁵V. Gubarev, "Pain and Lessons from Chernobyl," *Pravda*, 2 June 1986, p. 7.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷Kim Smirnov, "Letters on the Study and Protection of Nature," *Izvestia*, 4 June 1986, p. 3.

Pravda carried an article on 15 June that focused on the decisions and actions of station managers, but also made the statement:

... faith in the future of atomic energy has not been shaken. It is necessary, of course, to manage power stations better, but most people would never question their need.¹⁰⁸

Pravda's 20 July review of the government commission's evaluation of the accident stated:

... the accident at the Chernobyl Atomic Power Station is a serious lesson from which ministries, departments, research and design organizations and economic, Soviet and Party agencies should draw exhaustive conclusions.¹⁰⁹

Pravda carried an interview on 31 July with the chairman of the USSR State Committee on the Use of Atomic Energy, A.M. Petrosyants.

Petrosyants discussed how sites are chosen for nuclear power stations. Readers had expressed concern over why stations are often located in populated areas. Petrosyants explained the various considerations in choosing sites, including the need for employees and a somewhat developed infrastructure to support them, the availability of water and proximity to population areas needing to be serviced by the station.

Petrosyants also touched on the subject of safety standards observed at atomic power stations. He itemized some of the various safety concerns, emphasizing the reasons for the Chernobyl accident:

¹⁰⁸V. Gubarev and M. Odinets, "I Want to Work at the Station," *Pravda*, 15 June 1986, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹"In the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee," *Pravda*, 20 July 1986, p. 3.

... experiments were conducted on the turbine without coordination of atomic power specialists, the scientific supervisor, the chief designer and the chief project planner. In short, things were done in the way some power engineers have become accustomed to working.¹¹⁰

He went on to say that the new Ministry of Atomic Energy would take responsibility for improving this situation. "Plans have been made for a sharp increase in training simulators, instruction and refresher courses for atomic power station employees."¹¹¹

Lastly, Petrosyants spoke on the need for more reliable equipment in order to improve general safety levels at stations.

¹¹⁰A. Pokrovsky, "The Fate of Atomic Power Stations," *Pravda*, 31 July 1986, p. 6.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

CONCLUSIONS

This paper attempted to support the following hypothesis:

Soviet press coverage of the Chernobyl accident demonstrates the transformation the Soviet press underwent during glasnost in covering bad news. The Soviet press initially covered the accident according to the traditional means of Soviet Communist Party control over the reporting of bad news: a news blackout; a series of brief, official statements; and media support of Soviet ideology. These traditional means became less important in subsequent coverage of the accident. The Soviet press later covered the Chernobyl accident according to the role contemporary glasnost assigned for coverage of bad news: exposure of managerial and technological inefficiency in the interest of economic reform.

Historical analysis of the function of the press in Soviet Communist Party theory and practice revealed that the Soviet press traditionally handled bad news with a news *blackout* and with brief, official statements. Furthermore, the Party avoided publication of *bad news* in the press in favor of using the press to promote Soviet socialist ideology.

Analysis of the progress of the glasnost policy by the time of the Chernobyl accident *revealed* that glasnost functioned at that point only to promote perestroika. The press was

used to mobilize public support for economic reform by exposing managerial and technological inefficiency.

This paper reviewed coverage of the Chernobyl accident in the newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestia* from 26 April 1986 until 31 July 1986 in order to determine whether Soviet press coverage of the accident demonstrates the process the Soviet press underwent in covering bad news: from traditional Party control to contemporary glasnost.

Review of *Pravda* and *Izvestia* indicated that the Party first instituted a news blackout in the press lasting from 26 April until 29 April. During this period, no information was released concerning the accident. The Party then released a series of brief, official statements in the press; these statements provided the only information about the accident in the press. This period lasted from 30 April until 6 May.

From 7 May until approximately 30 May, press coverage of the Chernobyl accident indicated that the Party used the opportunity of the accident to support Soviet ideology in the press. Press coverage of the accident during this period suggested three types of ideological support: attacks on the Western media, coverage of accidents in foreign countries and stories of heroism. It should be noted that while a preponderance of articles condemning the Western media and recounting stories of heroism appeared during this period in *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, considerably fewer articles covering accidents in foreign countries appeared in these newspapers.

Review of *Pravda* and *Izvestia* indicated that these traditional means of using the press to support Soviet ideology became less important in subsequent coverage of the accident. From approximately 1 June until the end of the time period under study, 31 July, very few articles appeared in *Pravda* and *Izvestia* supporting Soviet ideology according to the traditional patterns. From 1 June, *Pravda* and *Izvestia* began to cover the Chernobyl accident according to the role contemporary glasnost assigned for coverage of bad news: exposure of managerial and technological inefficiency in the interest of economic reform. During June and July, press coverage of the accident was characterized by articles that explored the causes and ramifications of the accident according to managerial and technological considerations.

It should also be noted that fewer articles concerning the accident were found as the time period under study progressed. As stated, a great number of articles concerning the accident were found in May's issues of *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, and the content of these articles followed the patterns traditional to Soviet ideological support. During June and July, the accident received considerably less coverage in terms of the overall quantity of articles. The great majority of these articles followed patterns new to glasnost. These types of articles tended to be longer in comparison with previous patterns.

Coverage of the Chernobyl accident in *Pravda* and *Izvestia* did tend to support the hypothesis. Press coverage of the accident during the three-month period under study

demonstrated the process from the traditional means of covering bad news to those means assigned by glasnost.

An initial news blackout was followed by a period in which brief, official statements were the only information released in the press concerning Chernobyl.

This period preceded a period in which press coverage of the accident was characterized by support of Soviet ideology: in this instance, attacks on the Western media, stories of heroism, and to a lesser extent, coverage of accidents in foreign countries.

Then followed a period in which press coverage of the accident was characterized by the goals of contemporary glasnost: exposure of managerial and technological inefficiency in explanation of the accident.

The purpose of this paper was to demonstrate, within one significant event, the Soviet press' changing methods of handling bad news. Systematic review of Soviet newspaper accounts of the Chernobyl accident was carried out in order to test the anecdotal observations set forth in the existing literature. The hypothesis of this paper advanced theoretical linkages that had been suggested by these anecdotal observations, but had not been drawn together in such an extensive manner as stated by the hypothesis. The *significance* of this paper was its ability to support the hypothesis and thus, to systematize *these* theoretical linkages.

SUMMARY

Andrei Melville and Gail W. Lapidus described glasnost in 1990:

[It is] not a condition but a process. It is a continual movement forward, the conquest of new bridgeheads of truth. It is a movement ahead - for now a difficult and painful one - to an ever more truthful and deeper comprehension of problems, from the most general and principle to the most concrete and particular, which earlier were closed to discussion.¹

Zhores A. Medvedev claimed that had the contamination remained within the Soviet borders, the leadership would have sought to maintain the news blackout.² Considering the nature of the Soviet media apparatus, with all press organs serving the Communist Party's interests and following its directives, it is imaginable that the accident would have suffered either a news blackout, or coverage consisting exclusively of brief, official statements.

The contamination from the accident did cross the Soviet border, however, bringing Chernobyl into the consideration of foreign governments and foreign citizens enculturated by Western journalistic standards and entertaining the belief that "glasnost" meant "openness." The demands for information from the Soviet leadership and independent news coverage in the West resulted in the Party realizing it had no choice but to make information available.

¹Andrei Melville and Gail W. Lapidus, eds., *The Glasnost Papers, Voices on Reform from Moscow* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990), 36-37.

²Victor H. Winston, "The Early Years of the Gorbachev Era: An Introduction," eds. Ed A. Hewett and Victor H. Winston, *Milestones in Glasnost and Perestroika, Politics and People* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1991), 6.

Analysis of the history of Communist Party control of the press and review of two Soviet newspapers, *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, revealed that the Soviet press did at first cover the Chernobyl accident in the same manner as it had traditionally treated bad news that threatened socialist development: an initial news blackout, followed by a series of brief, official government statements.

In June, *Pravda* and *Izvestia* began to release a preponderance of stories that allowed the Communist Party to forward the traditional ideals of socialism. Through articles that presented attacks on the Western media, coverage of similar accidents in foreign countries and stories of the heroic efforts of the clean up workers, the Soviet press provided the Communist Party with a venue in which to propagate the presumed superiority of socialism.

Press coverage of the heroic clean up effort suggested to its readers that Soviet socialist culture had nurtured a people that responded with compassion and selflessness to the misfortune of others. Lengthy and detailed articles in the Soviet press described citizens offering their homes to evacuees, citizens disregarding their own safety to contain the effects of the accident, displaced citizens bravely carrying on with their lives in new areas and themselves helping in various ways. The Soviet Union, these articles illustrated, was peopled by true heroes. As always before in the development of socialist society, people showed themselves willing to labor and sacrifice in order to overcome tragedy.

These stories of heroism premised the contrast between the compassionate Soviet response and its antithesis in Western society. Numerous articles in the most influential Party and government newspapers reported alleged Western exaggerations of the damage, Western gloating over Soviet misfortunes, and Western claims to systemic superiority. These articles offered ample explanation for what they considered the Western media's gratuitous behavior: a desire to undermine Soviet relations with other countries. These articles allowed the Party to reestablish ideological priority in the Soviet house after the pitiless exposure of the accident by the Western media.

Articles condemning Western media coverage of the accident sometimes set the stage for articles exposing nuclear accidents that had occurred, and had been covered up, in the West. This type of press content allowed the Party to emphasize the humanity of socialism, while providing examples of the flagrant insensitivity of the West.

The Soviet people do not gloat over failures and accidents at American atomic power stations. They understand that the development of atomic energy is a relatively novel and complex undertaking. It requires professional cooperation among scientists, specialists and engineers in all countries.³

These articles suggested the superiority of a system that openly dealt with such problems in the press; and the inferiority of a system that violated safety norms and hid accidents in the interest of "big business."⁴ When accidents happened at Western nuclear power facilities, the articles claimed, Western governments concealed their occurrences.

³Yurii Zhukov, "Involuntary Self-Exposure," *Pravda*, 6 May 1986, p. 4.

⁴*Ibid.*

The Soviet leadership, journalists pointed out, was willing to examine the Chernobyl accident in the open media.

Once the press had set up this systemic dichotomy, it had to follow through. Analysis of the progress the glasnost policy had made by the time of the accident and again, review of *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, revealed that Soviet press coverage of the Chernobyl accident adjusted to the demands of contemporary glasnost. By July, the Soviet leadership found a way to publicize the Chernobyl disaster that, to a certain extent, met Western demands for openness, the Western interpretation of glasnost. At the same time, exposing certain aspects of the accident allowed the Soviet leadership to support its own interpretation of glasnost.

At the time of the accident, glasnost still functioned only to promote perestroika; glasnost in the spring of 1986 had nothing to do with actual freedom of information in terms of an independent press, as presumed in the West. On the contrary, the leadership intended to control the media in its coverage of the Chernobyl accident as thoroughly as it ever had, and with the same goal: The goal of perestroika and thus, of glasnost: to strengthen socialism.

"Silence about bad news [was] then inimical to the project of moral mobilization."⁵

⁵Nick Lampert, "The Dilemmas of Glasnost," eds. Walter Joyce, Hillel Ticktin and Stephen White, *Gorbachev and Gorbachevism* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1989), 58.

Gorbachev created an opportunity out of the disaster of Chernobyl. He had assigned responsibility for economic stagnation to managerial and technological inefficiency; perestroika, therefore, demanded reform in these areas. The accident provided an excellent example of managerial inefficiency, and its exposure in the popular press demonstrated to the Soviet people the need for managerial reform. More likely the result of technological inefficiency, the accident initiated discussion of technological reform.

The coverage of Chernobyl reflected Soviet journalism's restructuring of its "organisational functions"⁶ to acknowledge "the social role of disaster news in improving the organisation of public services and eliminating weaknesses."⁷

Soviet press coverage of the Chernobyl accident demonstrates the process the press underwent in exposing bad news. The Soviet Communist Party and government leadership had historically considered public recognition of bad news as damaging to the image of socialist evolution. The Chernobyl accident represents the first example of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Soviet government employing the public recognition of bad news in order to build socialism. The function perestroika elected for glasnost in 1986 made this possible.

A year later, Gorbachev wrote in *Perestroika, New Thinking for Our Country and the World*:

⁶ Brian McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media* (London: Routledge, 1991), 65.

⁷ Ibid.

We want more openness about public affairs in every sphere of life. People should know what is good, and what is bad, too, in order to multiply the good and to combat the bad. That is how things should be under socialism.⁸

⁸Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika, New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 75.

67

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