

Chernobyl and Its Political Fallout: A Reassessment

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Two technological disasters stunned the world in 1986. On January 28, the U.S. *Challenger* spacecraft blew up minutes after launch as the nation watched in horror. Three months later on April 26, a nuclear reactor at the Chernobyl power plant in Soviet Ukraine exploded, spewing radiation across Belorussia, Poland, the Baltic states, and northern Europe.

Responding to the *Challenger* catastrophe, President Reagan cancelled plans for the State of the Union speech that had been scheduled for the same night of the explosion. Within hours, he addressed the nation on television with a message of condolence and determination that U.S. space exploration would continue. In the Soviet Union, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, who for months had been preaching openness in his nation's affairs, lapsed into an eighteen-day silence before addressing the nation about the Chernobyl disaster.

What accounts for this silence from the father of *glasnost*? Was fear of creating a panic the main factor that restrained the Soviet leadership and Gorbachev, or were there other considerations? Was the machinery of government so ineffectual that it could not act and needed to cover up this failure? Within governmental circles, was the flow of information adequate? In the end, did the Chernobyl catastrophe bolster or hinder *glasnost*?

Insights into these questions may be gleaned from declassified Politburo documents,¹ memoirs of key participants, and a plethora of books on Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika*. The *glasnost* literature can be conveniently divided into two groups: works that deal with the challenge that Chernobyl posed to Gorbachev's new openness policies and those that examine what went wrong technologically.

Dr. Joseph Gibbs, a journalist and associate of the Davis Center for Russian Studies at Harvard University, assesses Soviet transparency in his volume *Gorbachev's Glasnost: The Soviet Media in the First Phase of Perestroika*.² Gibbs draws on memoirs and interviews he conducted with former Soviet editors. He devotes a section to the handling of the Chernobyl crisis. Unfortunately, he has

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not studied the Politburo documents on Chernobyl, which were declassified in 1994 in connection with the trial of the Communist Party.

In *The Gorbachev Factor*,³ Professor Archie Brown paints a thorough picture of Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power and his thinking as secretary general of the Soviet Communist Party. This well-known British scholar makes use of memoir material available in the mid-1990s, as well as transcripts of interviews with major actors in the Chernobyl crisis. Although he gives a critical account of *glasnost*, he does not delve into the handling of Chernobyl in as much detail as Gibbs.

A very valuable source is the television series *The Second Russian Revolution: The Battle for Glasnost*, produced for the BBC, the Discovery Channel, and NHK by Brian Lapping Associates. Angus Roxburgh, a former University of Glasgow scholar on Soviet subjects, conducted interviews with key players such as Gorbachev, Yakovlev, Dolgikh, and Ryzhkov for the series. The unedited transcripts, which contain useful comments (not all of which were used in the TV series), are held in the "2RR" Collection of the archives of the London School of Economics. The TV series inspired Roxburgh's book *The Second Russian Revolution: The Struggle for Power in the Kremlin*.⁵

Dr. Yevgeny Velikhov, a top nuclear scientist who participated in the clean-up operations, submitted to an interview for Stephen Cohen and Katrina vander Heuvel's volume *Voices of Glasnost: Interviews with Gorbachev's Reformers*.⁶ However, his views in "Chernobyl Remains on Our Minds" are disappointingly uninformative on the Kremlin's reaction.

Several books written in the early years of *glasnost* give a good description of the limits of the new transparency, but provide only modest insight into the Chernobyl catastrophe. Among those are *Dismantling Utopia: How Information Ended the Soviet Union*,⁷ by Scott Shane, a Moscow correspondent for *The Baltimore Sun*; *Uncovering Soviet Disasters: Exploring the Limits of Glasnost*,⁸ by James Oberg, a space scientist; and *The Awakening of the Soviet Union*,⁹ by Geoffrey Hosking.

Zhores Medvedev's chapter "Chernobyl: A Catalyst for Change," in *Milestones in Glasnost and Perestroika*, edited by A. Hewett and Victor H. Winston, provides a useful summary of the event, but without benefit of much inside information.

Among scientific studies, the work of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in dissecting "the most serious accident" in the history of nuclear power is essential. Between April 8 and 12, 1996, the IAEA held a ten-year review conference, detailing radiation damage, health consequences, and the physical state of the entombed reactor. The initial Soviet report of the disaster submitted by the USSR State Committee on the Utilization of Atomic Energy in August 1986 was hailed as very forthcoming. However, in 1996 it was described as "full of errors." The IAEA has compiled an extensive bibliography of works dealing with Chernobyl. The doctoral dissertation of Dr. Alexander R. Sich, an MIT researcher, is particularly helpful.

Grigory Medvedev, a Soviet nuclear expert who visited Chernobyl after the accident and interviewed eyewitnesses, has produced a valuable account in *The Truth about Chernobyl*.¹¹ Medvedev was given access to the transcripts of the trial of the Chernobyl managers, which have not been generally released.

Canadian expert Dr. David Marples's work *The Soviet Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster*¹² provides an excellent description of the explosion and its social consequences. Professor Richard Wilson of Harvard University's Jefferson Laboratory edits a journal titled *Radiation & Risk*, which periodically reports on the effect of the Chernobyl radiation on public health in the immediate area.

This article examines the declassified Politburo documents from microfilm copies at Harvard University's Lamont Library and the Hoover Institution in Stanford, California. Unfortunately, these papers do not represent the full documentary record—they do not contain verbatim transcripts of Politburo discussions, but present general summaries of decisions taken.

This article also makes use of more than a dozen memoirs by participants in the drama. Some of these materials were published as recently as 1999 and 2000 and were not available to either Brown or Gibbs. Memoirs however, must be used with caution because some authors are misled by faulty memories¹³ or seek to enhance their role in history.¹⁴

The Chernobyl accident unfolded through a series of human errors as operators were performing an experiment at the end of the shutdown for routine maintenance of reactor number 4. They sought to determine how much electricity could be produced to run emergency systems by a free-spinning turbine disconnected from its power source, the nuclear reactor.¹⁵

The reactor shutdown began early on April 23, 1986. The operators reduced power slowly to avoid thermal stress on the components. At about 2:00 PM, the electricity dispatcher called for a delay in the shutdown and requested a hold at half power because he needed the electricity.

By 11:10 PM on Friday, April 25, the process resumed, and power was low enough to begin the experiment. But the reactor was now wavering and the operators sought to stabilize it. At 1:23:04 AM on Saturday morning they disconnected the turbine from the reactor. The turbine's kinetic energy was fed into four of eight water-cooling pumps.

However, because of an operator's error, power from the reactor suddenly fell precipitously to 1 percent. This caused one operator to try to bring the reactor back up to power. The pumps, now operating on the dwindling energy from the disconnected turbine, were unable to circulate cooling water adequately. At 1:23:24 AM the reactor began heating up dangerously and its power increased rapidly.

The operator pushed the emergency shutdown button, but to no avail. In the next four seconds, the reactor's output leaped to one hundred times its full power, putting enormous stress on the reactor vessel, cooling pipes, and associated systems. Canadian expert Dr. David Marples described several explosions that occurred at 1:23:44 AM:

The power surge put a sudden burst of heat into the uranium fuel, and it broke up into little pieces. The heat from these pieces caused a rapid boiling of the cooling water, and a number of pressure tubes burst under the strain. The steam escaped from the pressure tubes, burst the metal container around the graphite, and lifted the concrete shield on top of the reactor.¹⁶

The force of this explosion blew off the top of the reactor, which, in turn, blasted a large hole in the roof and surrounding walls of the plant. This released a plume of radiation that rose twelve hundred meters into the air and began drifting north-west. The Chernobyl reactor, unlike Western nuclear power stations, was not enclosed in a reinforced concrete containment designed to capture any radiation leaks. The KGB had criticized severely the construction of the Chernobyl plant as far back as 1979.¹⁷

Within fifteen minutes, local firefighters were at the scene. Reinforcements of military firefighters arrived about an hour later. At 3:00 AM, the director of the plant, Viktor P. Bryukhanov, contacted Vladimir V. Marin, the official in charge of nuclear matters of the Communist Party at his Moscow home to report the accident and assure officials that the situation was under control.¹⁸ In the morning Alexei N. Makukhin, Soviet first deputy minister of energy, sent an urgent message to the Central Committee apparatus based on Bryukhanov's initial reports. The message dated April 26, 1986, and classified *Secret* stated in part:

By 3:30 AM the fire was liquidated.

Measures are being taken by personnel of the plant to cool the active area of the reactor.

In the opinion of the Third General Directorate of the Ministry of Health of the U.S.S.R., the need for special measures, including evacuation of the population from the city are not needed.

Nine persons of the plant and 25 members of the militarized fire squad have been hospitalized.

Steps are being taken to liquidate the consequences and determine what happened.¹⁹

As it turned out later, this information was seriously inaccurate. Because of a lack of radiation counters, officials had difficulty determining whether a radiation release had occurred. Bryukhanov, who apparently did not want to believe the worst, sought to create the impression in Moscow that he had the situation under control.

Word of a problem at the Chernobyl nuclear plant reached political, military, and scientific officials in Moscow within a few hours. At 2:20 AM the duty officer of the general staff telephoned Sergei F. Akhromeyev, chief of staff marshal, who dressed and reported to the central command center.²⁰ At 6:00 AM, Energy Minister Anatoly I. Mayorets telephoned Premier Nikolai I. Ryzhkov and informed him of the explosion.²¹ Ryzhkov, in turn, called General Secretary Gorbachev who scheduled an "emergency" Politburo meeting for Monday, April 28, two days hence.²² Dr. Yevgeny P. Velikhov, vice president of the Academy of Sciences, learned about the explosion from scientific colleagues on Saturday morning.²³ By Saturday afternoon, Politburo member Heidar A. Aliyev learned something was wrong but was unable to get details.²⁴

Surprisingly, Foreign Minister Eduard A. Shevardnadze, who would play an important role in explaining the situation to the world, remained uninformed until Monday morning and even then had difficulty getting answers to his questions.²⁵

From the start, the military played an important role, even before the top political players became engaged. This fact may have contributed to the overall reluctance to release information in the early stage of the catastrophe. In his memoir, *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata* (Through the Eyes of a Marshal and a Diplomat), Marshal Arkhromeyev reports that the call he received at 2:20 AM already asserted that radiation had been released—something that plant manager Bryukhanov simultaneously was denying. By 3:30 AM, when Akhromeyev arrived at the General Staff headquarters, no new information yet had developed and he began issuing orders:

I contacted the Civil Defense chief Gen. A.T. Altunin. I ordered him to activate on an emergency basis the civil defense regiment deployed near Chernobyl and its radiation detection equipment (mobile unit) and move it to the scene of the accident. I alerted, on an emergency basis, the special mobile unit for combating accidents at nuclear plants which was deployed in the Volga Military District near Kuibyshev, and ordered military transport aircraft to move radiation detection equipment of this unit to the scene.²⁶

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At 6:00 AM, Col. Gen. V. V. Osipov, commander of the Kiev Military District, reported to Moscow that the fire appeared to have been extinguished. He also reported a release of radiation.²⁷ At 9:00 AM, Mayorets informed Ryzhkov that the situation “seems serious.”²⁸ At about 10:00 AM Akhromeyev telephoned Gorbachev, warning him that the situation might be worse than originally estimated and reporting what was being done.²⁹ There is no evidence that these reports caused Gorbachev to consider advancing the Politburo meeting to a time earlier than Monday.

Meanwhile, a departmental task force of experts had been assembled and had departed from Moscow for Kiev without publicity at 9:00 AM, seven-and-a-half hours after the explosion. At 11:00 AM Premier Ryzhkov signed a document creating a high level government commission led by Deputy Premier Boris Y. Shcherbina.³⁰ Shcherbina would arrive in Kiev from Siberia later in the day.

Among the first to leave for Chernobyl were Valery Legasov of the Kurchatov Institute, one of the designers of the reactor; K. K. Polushkin and Yu. N. Cherkashev from the reactor design team; and V. Ya. Prushinsky, chief engineer of the Soyuzatomenergo agency. As they departed, they were given a misleading briefing based on Bryukhanov's erroneous report that only the emergency cooling tank had exploded—that the reactor was intact and no radiation leaks had been detected. Also they were told that two plant employees had been killed in the explosion.³¹

This initial assessment would be challenged in the next few hours by Anatoly A. Sitnikov, a plant engineer who incurred fatal radiation to observe the reactor

vessel at close quarters with this own eyes. He reported flatly that the reactor had been destroyed. His report was rejected by Bryukhanov, who did not attempt to view the reactor.³²

About 2:30 PM, Polushkin and Prushinsky joined a small group that was ferried by helicopter over the atomic power station. Flying at an altitude of 200–400 meters, they hovered over the area of destruction. Peering out of the helicopter, they could see that an enormous hole had been blown through the roof. They noted that the top of the reactor had been cracked open. A dosimeter in the helicopter told them that they were flying in the middle of the radiation plume.³³

Less than eight hours after the explosion, the Soviet leadership could have acknowledged the disaster and issued an initial report of the radiation danger with some important details. An experienced public relations operation could have emphasized the quick reactions of the military, and provided a reassuring statement on efforts to contain the disaster. The *glasnost*' policy, still in its infancy, did not meet this initial challenge.

Leonid N. Dobrokhotov, a high Communist Party official, later stated that the press handling in this case "was traditional." He explained, "We had to play down the catastrophe, to prevent panic among the people, and to fight against what was then called bourgeois falsification, bourgeois propaganda and invention."³⁴ Such a reaction was predictable. In April 1986, the Soviet leadership still employed Glavlit, the censorship system created in 1922 to control the media. It was not abolished until the end of the Gorbachev era in December 1991.³⁵

Aleksander N. Yakovlev, chief of the Central Committee's propaganda department and one of Gorbachev's closest advisors, commented on the way information was handled in his own memoir *Omut Pamyati* (Whirlpool of Memory):

I was not a member of the Chernobyl Commission, but I participated in the meetings of the Politburo and Secretariat which discussed the tragedy. Strange as it seems, the Propaganda Department was excluded from the information loop on Chernobyl. For reasons which are still not clear to me, we were pushed aside. Apparently, there were some details not for strangers' ears. The military took charge of information in conjunction with the appropriate departments of the Central Committee.³⁶

By Sunday morning, April 27, a high drama was unfolding at Chernobyl. Local authorities had, at last, acknowledged that the accident was producing high levels of radiation. A local radio broadcast at noon began urging the population to remain inside and announced an evacuation that had been approved after consultation with Moscow. Initially, it was expected to last for three days, using one thousand buses of forty thousand residents.³⁷

The next day, April 28, Politburo and Secretariat members, accompanied by experts, convened in Gorbachev's office for the "emergency" meeting. Vladimir I. Dolgikh, party secretary for nuclear matters, reported on what was known of the catastrophe. This meeting authorized the Shcherbina commission to intensify clean-up operations and determine what had gone wrong. They also created a Politburo Operations Group (*operativnaya grupa*) headed by Premier Ryzhkov to meet as often as twice a day to oversee the situation.³⁸

A division of opinion on the issues concerning the release of information appeared immediately. The elder Politburo members—the traditionalists—wanted to avoid panic by maintaining tight control over the media. The reformers, on the other hand, wanted to acknowledge promptly what had happened.

Confusion reigned. There was concern a second explosion might occur.³⁹ Political leaders were on a learning curve, trying to grapple with unfamiliar details for the first time. Many were not well informed about nuclear matters and the hazards of radiation fallout.⁴⁰ Reports from the scene were in conflict and, annoyingly, did not confirm each other. “The military went in at one point and gave one story. With the scientists it was a totally different story,” Yakovlev recalled.⁴¹ Gorbachev became wary of what he was being told: “During the first few days he understood that the information was not accurate, and that many people lied to him.”⁴²

The session finally agreed on a cautious announcement that was broadcast that Monday evening at 9:00 PM (1800 GMT) by the national news program *Vremya* and published in *Izvestiya* and Ukrainian newspapers. It was attributed to the Council of Ministers, although it was probably drafted by Yakovlev and approved by Politburo members who had taken on the role of managing editors:

From the Council of Ministers of the USSR:

An accident has occurred at the Chernobyl nuclear power station; one of the four atomic reactors has been damaged. Measures are being taken to eliminate the consequences of the accident. Victims are being helped. A government commission has been created.⁴³

This news bulletin and the ensuing efforts to distract attention from the issue were reminiscent of the Kremlin's posture after the September 1, 1983, shooting down of Korean Airlines flight KAL007. On that occasion, the TASS news agency reluctantly acknowledged that a foreign plane flew over Soviet territory but then headed off towards the Sea of Japan. The communiqué said nothing about a shoot-down or a crash.

On April 29, the Politburo met for a second time at 10:30 AM to hear a more complete report by Dolgikh and to authorize the continued dumping of sand, boron, and other elements to extinguish the smoldering reactor. On the same day, U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission Richard Combs relayed an offer of medical and technical assistance from President Ronald Reagan to Gorbachev. The offer was declined, apparently for reasons of national pride, even though the needs were many.

Ryzhkov's operations group held its first meeting on the evening of April 29. Vitaly I. Vorotnikov, one of its members, noted the pitiful state of affairs in his memoir *A Eto Bylo Tak* (The Way It Was):

There is not equipment or materials. You cannot get up to the zone of serious nuclear pollution. There is no means of protection. The situation and method of work of people is not sufficiently well checked.⁴⁴

On Wednesday, April 30, Foreign Minister Shevardnadze (who was now better informed) held a briefing for foreign ambassadors about the accident. In a

secret memorandum to the Central Committee, he described the Western reactions and urged that Moscow at least express its thanks for the offers of help.⁴⁵ From a crisis management point of view, the initial efforts by Russia were insufficient. Politburo members had no idea of the energy and imagination needed to handle a disaster of this magnitude.

Meanwhile, foreign correspondents were coming under severe pressure from their editors to scoop up whatever details were available from any source. Luther Whittington of UPI telephoned a Ukrainian woman in Kiev whom he had met in Red Square during one of his first days in Moscow a few weeks before. He understood her to say that two thousand people had been killed in the explosion. The *New York Post* picked up the UPI report on Tuesday, April 29 and splashed it across its front page: "'2,000 Die' in Nukemare; Soviets appeal for help as N-plant burns out of control."⁴⁶

Journalists in Moscow and abroad were scrounging around the world for any information, verifiable or not. Roma Hadzewycz, editor of the *Ukrainian Weekly* of New Jersey, reported that an oil technician in Ukraine, contacted by telephone, claimed that fifteen thousand people may have died.⁴⁷ A Dutch radio amateur monitored a conversation between a Japanese radio operator and a Kiev radio ham who claimed there were "many hundreds of dead and wounded."⁴⁸ A U.S. intelligence source was quoted as saying that two thousand to three thousand were dead or injured.⁴⁹

KGB Chief Viktor M. Chebrikov sought to counter these exaggerated reports. He sent a memorandum on April 30 to the Central Committee apparatus titled "Reaction of Diplomats and Correspondents to the Announcement about the Accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant." He named four correspondents, including Steven R. Hurst of AP (later of CNN), who had sought to interview refugees from Chernobyl arriving at the Kiev railroad station, and at Domodedovo and Vnukovo airports. Chebrikov noted, "According to a statement by UPI correspondent Whittington, [Hurst] received an assignment from his office to gather urgently all information about the nuclear power plant accident because in the United States the event is viewed as having special significance."⁵⁰ This was a perfectly normal journalistic explanation, but Chebrikov apparently suspected a Western conspiracy and decided to protect himself and his bureaucracy against future criticisms. He concluded:

Measures are being taken by the Committee on State Security to control the behavior of foreign diplomats and correspondents, limiting their opportunities to collect information about the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear plant and to break up their efforts to use it for mounting an anti-Soviet campaign in the West.⁵¹

Throughout the crisis, differing views split the leadership. Politburo documents currently available do not include verbatim transcripts of the discussions, so the dynamics of who influenced whom remain incomplete. However, it seems clear that of the twelve full Politburo members, only Aliyev, Ryzhkov, and Shevardnadze gave strong support to Gorbachev for releasing details promptly.

Three other Politburo members seemed to have occupied a middle position. Yegor Ligachev, the Party's number two man, has asserted that he was willing to

go along with Gorbachev, although some reformers have accused him of excessive caution.⁵² Former Foreign Minister Gromyko, now Soviet president, favored giving the Socialist countries a candid briefing, less to Washington and London, and even less to the rest of the world.⁵³ Vоротnikov, in his day-by-day notations, makes scant reference to the issue of releasing information, other than noting that Yakovlev was assigned to work up press releases.

Shcherbitsky, a hardliner from the Ukraine, was probably the leading traditionalist and insisted on going through with the traditional May 1 celebration in Kiev as if nothing had happened. Similarly, Chebrikov aligned himself with this group as demonstrated by his efforts to counter what he viewed as an "anti-Soviet conspiracy" abroad. The position of the three remaining Politburo members—D. A. Kunayev, M. S. Solomentsev, and L. N. Zaikov—is unclear. However, Kunayev's memoir *Ot Stalina do Gorbacheva* (From Stalin to Gorbachev) suggests the Kazakhstan party chief would have opposed full disclosure.

The traditionalists favored minimum disclosure. There was much to cover up. The nuclear industry had not paid sufficient attention to safety and was woefully unprepared for this crisis. Responders lacked appropriate radiation counters. Protective anti-radiation suits were unavailable. The Soviet Union possessed no self-propelled robots to scoop up radioactive debris. Military personnel were called on to drop thousands of tons of sand, clay, lead, dolomite, and boron on the damaged reactor to smother the radiation stream, often without adequate protection. Top nuclear scientists such as eighty-year-old A. P. Alexandrov, president of the Soviet Academy of Science, minimized the harmful effects of radiation.

The policy of *glasnost*' failed its first major challenge. Railing against the obstinacy of the Politburo traditionalists, Shevardnadze, in his memoir *The Future Belongs to Freedom*, stated:

It was profoundly absurd from the standpoint of common sense. How can you conceal something that can't be hidden? How could people complain about "washing dirty linen in public," when it was radioactive and had slipped out in spite of us? From the standpoint of morality, it was outrageous. How can you hide from millions of people the truth about a threat to their lives and health, when the criminal suppression of the facts about the impending danger would leave whole nations in the dark and deprive them of a chance to take preventative measures? From the standpoint of politics, it was outright sabotage at the highest level of the principles of the new thinking and of the hard-won domestic and international trust in the Soviet leadership's new course.

Shevardnadze was coming under increasing pressure from several quarters for more information. Moscow ambassadors were pressing for every available detail. Soviet envoys abroad were warning the foreign minister of the negative impressions being created by Moscow's reticence. Foreign governments such as Japan, France, Italy, the Scandinavian countries, and the United States were expressing frustration over Soviet prevarication. As the days wore on, Shevardnadze pressed harder for openness and outlined steps to take:

Urgently increase information about what is going on at Chernobyl, giving it maximum specific details, and specifically publishing the level of nuclear radiation in absolute figures. Consider the question of the possible publication every day of an

information bulletin from the Government Commission investigating the Chernobyl nuclear plant.⁵⁴

On May 1, 1986, Moscow held the traditional May Day parade in Red Square, televised throughout the land. Would Gorbachev use the opportunity to refer to the accident and stress the nation's positive achievements while offering condolences as Reagan had done on the day of the *Challenger* disaster? He said not a word. Unseen by the outside world, on May 1 important decisions that would improve the flow of information were made.

By May 1, Premier Ryzhkov's operations group was growing increasingly dissatisfied with the reports coming from Chernobyl on how the radiation victims were being treated. Ryzhkov and Ligachev decided to fly to the scene the next day and investigate for themselves. This was another potential opportunity for Gorbachev. He could have traveled to Kiev and Chernobyl with his colleagues, to express sympathy for the victims. Instead, he remained silent in the capital. Ryzhkov, in his *Desyat' Let*

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Velikikh Potryasenii (Ten Years of Great Shocks), expressed surprise over Gorbachev's lack of political sensitivity:

Honestly speaking, I expected that he—the chief of the party and government—would also want to come with us. But he didn't express the slightest desire. Not even as a possibility.

At the risk of going off on a tangent, I ask myself: why did Gorbachev display such a strange, personal passivity? Why did he not go to burning Chernobyl? Why was it that he never visited the hot spots when they became such? Neither Karabakh, nor Tbilisi, nor Sumgait, nor Baku, nor Vilnius . . . ?⁵⁵

A similar criticism was voiced by Valery I. Boldin, Gorbachev's chief of staff:

Having created the Chernobyl Commission with N. I. Ryzhkov at its head, M. S. Gorbachev shed all the Chernobyl worries from his shoulders. It seems that the tragedy of millions of people, the unimaginable material losses—none of this elicited a cry from the heart of the GenSek; during these difficult days he did not visit the site of the accident.⁵⁶

The May 1 Politburo subcommittee made another important decision. The group decided to send a party of trusted Soviet journalists to the scene “with the aim of preparing materials for press and television, revealing the normal working/living activities of these regions.”⁵⁷ They also decided to confront the issue of foreign correspondents who, like the ambassadors, were pressing hard for fuller information. The subcommittee agreed in principle to hold a major press conference at which Boris Shcherbina, chief of the Government Commission, and Anatoly G. Kovalyov, deputy foreign minister, would appear.⁵⁸

The fruits of these decisions came May 6 when *Pravda* published a lengthy story giving the first detailed account of what had happened eleven days before. Although the story reported that an explosion set off a raging fire, damaged the reactor, and released radiation, it showed some understanding of public relations by placing major emphasis on the heroism of the firefighters. This kept with the Politburo's editorial instructions. The *Pravda* article was given major distribution around the world by TASS shortly after midnight (Moscow time) on the night of May 5–6. Because of the eight-hour time difference with the United States, it arrived in time to be summarized on the front page of *The New York Times* on May 6.

What was left unsaid, however, were the troubling points that the visiting Soviet journalists ran into. *Pravda's* science editor Vladimir S. Gubarev, who visited Chernobyl May 4–9, was so appalled that he wrote a confidential memorandum to the Central Committee.⁵⁹ He stated that local authorities failed to give aid to the victims speedily because they waited for orders from Moscow—orders that were slow in coming or did not come at all.

Panic was actually encouraged by speculative information from abroad and by the failure of Soviet authorities to make the latest facts available at the scene. Word of radiation contamination was beginning to spread, even though the Ukrainian Communist Party held the May Day celebration as if nothing at all had happened. The *Pravda* science editor noted in his memorandum:

Word about the visit of comrades Ligachev and Ryzhkov to the area of the power station had a positive effect. However, "the silence" of the Republic leadership in the ensuing days, in my opinion, again precipitated panic, especially when it became known that the children and families of leading officials are being evacuated. More than one thousand people were lined up outside the cashiers' windows of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party. Naturally, in town everyone knew.⁶⁰

Gubarev also wrote that the civil defense system seemed paralyzed during the crisis. He added that the USSR Ministry of Energy had low construction standards for nuclear plants and had allowed the use of inflammable materials, despite the disastrous experience of a major factory fire in Bokhara in the 1970s. Gubarev did report on the obvious upbeat notes, including the heroism of the firemen.

The lengthy *Pravda* article on May 6 laid the groundwork for the first major press conference, held that same morning at the Foreign Ministry's press center. This was probably the most heavily attended press conference since the meeting in September 1983 to give the Soviet version of the shooting down of the Korean airliner.

The conference was opened by Deputy Foreign Minister Kovalev, who acknowledged the seriousness of the tragedy but tried to dampen criticisms from Japan and boost Soviet nuclear disarmament proposals. In the most defensive part of his presentation, Kovalev reflected that same ideological foreboding that Chebrikov signalled to the Politburo on April 30. The foreign minister alleged a massive organized anti-Soviet campaign was being waged from the West. He said, in part:

[C]laims are being made with regard to the incomplete character of the information we provide. We cannot accept such an argument because at the very moment information was available to us we made it public.

The experience of recent days shows one very unpleasant thing. Another hysterical campaign is being organized from the same center, the United States, and clearly along an already established line.

Deputy Premier Shcherbina and other officials struck a milder tone, acknowledging that local officials had been confused at first. They acknowledged that the radiation danger had not been recognized immediately and that the evacuation had been delayed needlessly for thirty-six hours. Unlike the 1983 press conference, which went on for several hours, this meeting was cut short at the one hour mark, despite the fact that many foreign correspondents were still seeking to ask their questions. On May 7 *The New York Times* ran an analytical sidebar titled "At Moscow News Session: Brief and Not to Point."⁶¹

Nonetheless, as the result of internal and external pressures, the Gorbachev group in the Politburo overrode the usual censorship guidelines on minimizing catastrophes and began releasing increasing amounts of information. The May 6 press conference was followed two days later by an important statement by Velikhov of the Academy of Sciences on the difficulties of containing the situation. On May 8, a small group of foreign correspondents was allowed to tour Chernobyl and Reuters news agency sent back an on-the-spot report. On May 9, Hans Blix, director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, visited Chernobyl and held a news conference in Moscow the same day. He disclosed that the Russians intended to encase the damaged reactor in a massive structure dubbed a "sarcophagus."

Finally on May 14, Gorbachev broke his eighteen-day silence and addressed the nation. His twenty-five-minute speech on the 9:00 PM national news program was carefully thought out and covered much ground. Writing the Gorbachev address was clearly a difficult job in which Alexander N. Yakovlev, former ambassador to Canada and Gorbachev's idea man, probably played a key role.⁶²

At the time, Gorbachev was trying to improve the Soviet economy, break the bureaucracy's secrecy, reduce the bankrupting arms race, and put U.S.–Soviet relations on new footing. The Chernobyl tragedy proved to be a major distraction. It had occurred only one year after Gorbachev became general secretary, when his grasp on power was not complete. Gorbachev was fighting hard for reform and alienating the party hardliners who wanted to minimize the tragedy.⁶³ Furthermore, Gorbachev felt betrayed by his top nuclear scientists and administrators, who had assured him that Soviet nuclear power was eminently safe and environmentally sound.⁶⁴

Gorbachev defended Soviet reactions, but he did not downplay the damage. In this sense, *glasnost* eventually did win. Gorbachev disclosed that nine persons had died (seven from radiation) as of May 14 and called for ways to improve the exchange of warning information to the international community. He also denounced what he saw as an American-inspired anti-Soviet campaign, despite official offers from Western leaders to assist in the cleanup. Gorbachev's aide Georgii Kh. Shakhnazarov perhaps exaggerated a bit in declaring:

You could say that Chernobyl delivered a decisive blow against the mania of secrecy, convincing the country to open up to the world. And that it finally happened, nobody doubted after the earthquake in Armenia.⁶⁵

Gorbachev's statement was a victory for *glasnost*, and it opened up the possibility of much greater freedom of expression in the future, more details of Stalin's crimes, and the disclosure of Lenin's complicity in the murder of Czar Nicholas II. Throughout the crisis, Gorbachev had engaged in a delicate "balancing act," according to his English language interpreter, Pavel Palazchenko:

It was not the first time in his career, nor the last. Unfortunately, he had to do it again and again, and he sometimes continued to balance even when it was time, as they say, to fish or cut bait.⁶⁶

Several conclusions emerge from the Chernobyl drama:

First, why was Gorbachev so silent after the explosion? Clearly in the beginning, a majority of the Politburo restrained his instincts for openness. Several factors reinforced caution. Initially, the Politburo received inaccurate information as to what had happened. Gorbachev recognized this and believed that he was being told lies. Concern was heightened by the fear that a second explosion might occur. Soviet leaders were anxious not to add to panic. They did not recognize at first that they undermined their own credibility by failing to match information coming from the West.

One also can argue that Gorbachev, unlike Reagan in the *Challenger* case, lacked the political sensitivity to override the Politburo caution and speak to the Soviet people immediately. This may seem strange, given his willingness to empathize with ordinary people during his celebrated walk-arounds in Leningrad, Kiev, and Vladivostok. Addressing the nation on television, however, is different from responding to people on the street. On television, the speaker must have plenty of imagination to sense what troubles the people without being able to speak to them directly.

Second, the crisis highlighted a long-standing problem with internal Kremlin communications. Initial reports from the scene were skewed to deflect blame from the management of the Chernobyl power plant. Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, a key player, was slow to be informed. He received details only forty-eight hours after the explosion. This may have been because the secrecy-obsessed military played the lead role at first, and international consequences were not understood immediately. In the Soviet Union, critical information was so prioritized that political leaders were occasionally among the deprived, especially on military matters. The catastrophe pointed out the need for greater openness in Soviet society. In the end—but not at first—Chernobyl bolstered *glasnost*.

Third, Chernobyl revealed that a large industrialized society will suffer from being isolated from the advanced technology of the Western world. Because of the breakdown in communication with Western scientists during the Reagan administration, Soviet experts were denied easy access to Western science and colleagues. That probably contributed to the failure to develop a sufficient culture of safety at nuclear plants. When the crisis occurred, antiradiation suits were unavailable, radiation counters were in short supply, and the country possessed no remote controlled robots to clean up nuclear debris. National pride prevented early acceptance of foreign help.

Fourth, the attitudes of several influential leaders were influenced heavily by the bureaucracies they represented. During the cold war, both the KGB and the Foreign Ministry viewed the West with hostility, believing that its democratic countries were determined to sabotage the Soviet system. KGB chief Chebrikov, a Brezhnev-era professional, proposed active countermeasures to prevent foreign observers from obtaining details. Like Chebrikov, Shevardnadze also recognized a mounting “anti-Soviet campaign” from the West, but unlike the KGB chief, he was sensitive to the human tragedy. Pressure from the West helped push him toward full disclosure.

Finally, the tragedy obscured one element about which the Kremlin should have been proud. Local firefighters immediately jumped into action regardless of the fatal radiation doses they would receive. The military responded quickly, too, even though the political leadership was slow to grasp the extent of the tragedy. If Gorbachev had possessed an experienced public relations team, he immediately could have focused attention on the heroes and persuaded the world that the Soviet Union was doing everything within its power to master the situation.

NOTES

1. A selection of Politburo documents was declassified in 1994 and released in connection with the trial of the Communist Party before the Constitutional Court. These documents are contained in Fond 89, Opis 28–32 and 50–54 of the Arkhivny Kremlya I Staroi Ploshadi. Unfortunately, they do not represent a complete record of the Politburo discussions on Chernobyl. Individual documents are described in *Arkhivny Kremlya i Staroi Ploshadi: Dokumenty po “Delu KPSS”* (Novosibirsk, Russia: Sibirskii Khronograf, 1995).

Microfilm copies are located at Harvard University’s film archive in Lamont Library. Film A975, Reels 18 and 19.

2. Joseph Gibbs, *Gorbachev’s Glasnost’: The Soviet Media in the First Phase of Perestroika* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1999).

3. Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

4. *The Second Russian Revolution: The Battle for Glasnost’*, reported by Angus Roxburgh. London: Brian Lapping Associates, 1991.

5. Angus Roxburgh, *The Second Russian Revolution: The Struggle for Power in the Kremlin* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992).

6. Stephen Cohen and Katrina vander Heuvel, *Voices of Glasnost: Interviews with Gorbachev’s Reformers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989).

7. Scott Shane, *Dismantling Utopia: How Information Ended the Soviet Union* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1994).

8. James Oberg, *Uncovering Soviet Disasters: Exploring the Limits of Glasnost’* (Boston: Little Brown, 1988).

9. Geoffrey Hosking, *The Awakening of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

10. Zhores Medvedev, “Chernobyl: A Catalyst for Change” in *Milestones in Glasnost’ and Perestroika*, ed. A. Hewett and Victor H. Winston (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1991).

11. Grigory Medvedev, *The Truth about Chernobyl* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

12. David Marples, *The Soviet Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988).

13. Alexander N. Yakovlev, *Omut Pamyati* (Whirlpool of Memory) (Moscow: Vagrius Publishers, 2000), 255, confuses Defense Minister Dmitrii Yazov with Sergei L. Sokolov, Defense Minister from 1984–1987, who served during the Chernobyl crisis.

14. In his *Memoirs*, Mikhail Gorbachev tries to embellish his performance in the Chernobyl crisis by creating the impression he called an emergency meeting of the Politburo to meet within hours after the explosion instead of two days later (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 189.

15. Marples, *The Social Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster*, 11–24.

16. *Ibid.*, 19.

17. *O nedostatkakh v stroitel'stve Chernobyl'skoi AEC*, Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezobastnosti SSSR, 21/02/79, No. 346-A.

18. Medvedev, 113, 153. Medvedev, a nuclear expert, was involved in the cleanup of the explosion. His account is based on his own experience as well as on the testimony of witnesses to the trial of the plant management.

19. *Srochnoye Donesenie: ob avarii na bloke no.4, Chernobyl'skoi AES, Secret*. (Urgent advisory: about the accident at reactor no. 4 of the Chernobyl Atomic Power Station, Secret to the Central Committee), KPSS, April 26, 1986, from First Deputy Minister of Energy A. N. Makukhin, Reel 19, 53/1.

20. S. F. Akhromeyev and K. M. Kornienko, *Glazami Marshala i Diplomata*, (Through the Eyes of a Marshal and a Diplomat) (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya, 1992), 99.

21. Interview with Premier Nikolai I. Ryzhkov, the "2RR" Collection, File 1/2, #1, archives of the London School of Economics, London, UK.

22. Gorbachev, 189.

23. Dev Murarka, *The Limits of Power* (London: Hutchinson Ltd.), 200.

24. Roxburgh, *The Second Russian Revolution: The Battle for Glasnost'*.

25. Eduard Shevardnadze, *The Future Belongs to Freedom* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 171.

26. Akhromeyev and Kornienko, 99.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Interview with Premier Nikolai I. Ryzhkov.

29. Akhromeyev and Kornienko, 100.

30. Interview with Premier Nikolai I. Ryzhkov.

31. Medvedev, 142.

32. *Ibid.*, 121–122, 135.

33. *Ibid.*, 143–147.

34. Roxburgh, *The Second Russian Revolution: The Battle for Glasnost'*.

35. *Istoriya Sovetskoi, Politicheskoi Tzensury* (History of Soviet Political Censorship) (Moscow: Rosspen, 1997), 404 et seq. Throughout 1991, Chief Censor V. A. Boldyrev expressed concern that without censorship, the media would destabilize Soviet society and government secrets would leak to the press. With the elimination of Glavlit, the function of preventing publication of government secrets was transferred to the Ministry of Information.

36. Yakovlev, 254.

37. Medvedev, 181–190.

38. Valery I. Boldin, *Krushenie P'edestala* (The Breakup) (Moscow, "Respublika," 1995), 214.

39. Interview with Pravda Science Editor Vladimir S. Gubrev, the "2RR" Collection, File 3/4 #2, archives of the London School of Economics, London, UK.

40. Interview with Premier N. I. Ryzhkov.

41. Interview with Alexander N. Yakovlev, the "2RR" Collection, File 3/10 #7, archives of the London School of Economics, London, UK.

42. Interview with *Pravda* science editor Vladimir S. Gubarev.

43. "Vypiska iz Protokola No. 8, Sovershenno sekretno" (Extract from Protocol no. 8, Top Secret) Reel 19, 53/1.

44. V. I. Vorotnikov, *A Bylo Eto Tak* (The Way It Was) (Moscow: Soviet Veteranov Knigoizdaniye, 1995), 96.

45. Secret memorandum to the Central Committee of the KPSS by Eduard A. Shevardnadze, April 30, 1986. Reel 19, 53/3.

46. This report caused consternation among officials of the Soviet Foreign Ministry who threatened to close the UPI Moscow Bureau in retaliation. UPI European editor Barry James flew to Moscow to pacify Soviet officials. Eventually, Whittington was withdrawn.

47. *The New York Post*, April 30, 1986.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *The New York Post*, April 30, 1986, and May 1, 1986.

50. Memorandum to the Central Committee of the KPSS, from Viktor M. Chebrikov, chief of the KGB, April 30, 1986: "O peaktsii inostrannykh diplomatov i korrespondentov ha soobshchenie ob avarii na Chernobylskoi AES" (About the reaction of foreign diplomats and correspondents to the announcement about the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power station). Reel 19, 53/3.

51. *Ibid.*

52. Roxburgh, *The Second Russian Revolution: The Battle for Glasnost*. See also Ligachev's criticism of Yakovlev as holding a radicalizing influence over Gorbachev in E. K. Ligachev, *Zagadka Gorbacheva* (The Riddle of Gorbachev) (Moscow, Novosibirsk: Interbuk, 1992), 79.

53. Dmitrii Volkogonov, *Sem' Vozhdei*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), 354.

54. Shevardnadze, Secret memorandum to the Central Committee of the KPSS.

55. Interview with Premier Nikolai I. Ryzhkov, 170–171.

56. Boldin, 214 et seq.

57. *Protokol No .3, May 1, 1986, Secret (Protokol No. 3, May 1, 1986, Secret)* Reel 18, 51/19).

58. *Ibid.*

59. Undated memorandum from *Pravda* science editor Vladimir S. Gubarev to the Central Committee of the KPSS with the notation: To be returned to the General Department of the TsK KPSS, May 16, 1986.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *The New York Times*, May 8, 1986, A10.

62. Boldin, *The Breakup*, 208–209.

63. *Ibid.*, 213. Boldin describes how Gorbachev turned Politburo gatherings from thirty- or forty-minute sessions into lengthy meetings, sometimes lasting as much as ten hours. Fearing a draft on his back, Gorbachev would turn off the air conditioning. Lack of fresh air caused annoyance to a number of the older leaders with heart problems, including Andrei Gromyko and N. N. Sliunkov.

64. Gorbachev, 191; A. S. Chernyaev, *Shest' Let s Gorbachevym* (Six Years with Gorbachev) (Moskva: Progress, 1993), 87.

65. Georgii Kh. Shakhnazarov, *Tsena Svobody* (The Price of Freedom) (Moscow: Zevs, 1993), 50 et seq.

66. Pavel Palazchenko, *My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 49.