

Monitoring the Chernobyl Disaster

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUN 30 2020

This is an excerpt from *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* by David R. Marples. Download your free copy on E-International Relations.

The year 1986 was a momentous and tragic one for me. In March, our daughter Nicole was born, apparently healthy but within 24 hours she had some seizures, attributed later to deprivation of oxygen during her birth. Though my wife and I never followed this up – we were so traumatized by what had happened – it seems in retrospect that it was a result of the obstetrician’s error rather than any innate problems or something linked to the parents. She suffered from cerebral palsy throughout her short life, but we kept her close, at home, with much help from friends, neighbors, and our parents.

Barely seven weeks later, Krawchenko came hurrying down the hallway at CIUS announcing a nuclear accident in Ukraine. He was well aware of my studies of nuclear power in Ukraine and anticipated I would be busy. Sure enough, within hours of his announcement, phone calls came to CIUS at ever-increasing frequency. A UPI report, later deemed fictitious, had estimated there were already 2,000 deaths, and we learned that the accident had occurred at Ukraine’s first nuclear power station at Chernobyl (Chornobyl in Ukrainian). In North America in late April 1986, few people had even heard of Chernobyl. Therefore, I could at least provide some background information, though I could not keep up with events. The phone calls continued day after day.

On April 30, I received a call from the Prolog office in New York, a Ukrainian group run by Roman Kupchynsky – and also, as I later discovered – financed by the CIA. Kupchynsky was probably the major figure on the payroll from the Ukrainian community at the time. Its members intended to hold a press conference in New York the following day and wanted me to be there as a spokesperson. All expenses would be covered. The only way to get there was to take the overnight red-eye flight from Edmonton to Toronto, and then on to New York the following morning. The press conference would be in mid-afternoon. By this time, the USSR were reporting that two people had died, and that a 10-kilometer zone round the station was being evacuated, including the town of Prypiat where the plant operators and their families lived.

Though not obvious at the time, this was to be the beginning of my peregrinations, which never really ended for the next decade or so. Thrust into the limelight by chance, it proved hard to extricate myself, and perhaps at heart I embraced it, full of rash confidence that was not really merited. Ian allowed me to continue, despite our home difficulties with Nicole and an older child still under five. Career-wise, it seemed like I could use and supplement my knowledge, and at CIUS both earlier and currently, I was fairly low in the hierarchy. Suddenly, I was the best-known person there; in turn, it became better known because of my activities. But there are prices to pay for such selfishness and ambition.

After the marathon journey, I was picked up in New York and driven to Prolog’s headquarters where people were writing their statements for the press conference at the Ukrainian Institute of America near Central Park. The conference was packed and all the main US news outlets were present. They were dissatisfied with the statements because of their lack of details. At one point, a reporter yelled out:

“What do you think of the figure of two dead?”

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Without thinking I responded: "The figure of two dead is lunacy."

That was apparently what they were hoping for. I was asked next to appear on CBS Evening News and interviewed by different newspapers, most notably New York *Newsday*. At the end of an exhausting day I was relaxing at Kupchynsky's home when the phone rang. A Ukrainian group in Montreal was requesting that I go there the next day for another press conference. Kupchynsky asked me if I was okay with that, and quickly arranged another flight.

Montreal seemed somewhat subdued by comparison but the Ukrainians there were out in force. After a panel on Chernobyl, I attended a solemn ceremony at the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which was for Easter, but now with the gloom of Chernobyl detracting from what is usually a joyful commemoration. It lasted for about four hours, but I did not remain to the end.

Once I returned to Edmonton, I resolved to write a book on nuclear power in Ukraine, with Chernobyl events added at the end. Krawchenko agreed to give me all the time I needed. He also negotiated a contract with colleagues he knew at Macmillan in London. That company was extremely enthusiastic. There could hardly have been a hotter topic. I made the decision after listening to several 'Kremlinologists' on television discussing the situation, who clearly had very little knowledge of the Soviet nuclear power program.

I also applied to the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa for permission to visit Chernobyl, but did not receive any response at the time. Together with the notes I had and updates sent from Munich by Roman Solchanyk, I was able to complete the book *Chernobyl and Nuclear Power in the USSR* after three months of frantic writing. It was not a perfect book, but it at least provided a solid background. Tim Farmiloe, then director of Macmillan Press, acquired world rights and published the US edition through St. Martin's Press in New York, while CIUS Press had the Canadian rights. In the United States, I had a book launch in New York and the first edition quickly ran out of print, to be replaced by a second. In Canada, by contrast, sales were slow because CIUS Press lacked the publicity that the bigger companies could wield.

The broad exposure continued throughout the year. In late 1986, I was in Washington to give talks at the US Department of State, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and even The White House, which was arranged through an internal employee Kateryna Chumachenko, subsequently the wife of Ukraine's third president, Viktor Yushchenko. I also spoke to the local Ukrainian community in Washington, renewing my acquaintance with old friends such as Iaro(slav) Bihun, Jurij Dobczansky, and Ross and Martha Chomiak, among others. At the same time, the USSR revealed more and more information about the aftermath of the disaster. It was evident to me that I could not leave this subject for some time. The only question was how to approach it.

Early in the following year I received requests for talks by a number of Ukrainian student groups at US universities, including Michigan, Pennsylvania, Columbia, and Rutgers. These visits were usually combined with other events involving the local communities, dinners, church services, and ceremonies. I was writing regular articles for *The Ukrainian Weekly*, which published verbatim everything I wrote, with the strong encouragement of its editor Roma Hadzewycz, a small but dynamic woman with a great sense of humor and a strong commitment to the Ukrainian cause. If Chernobyl was the topic, then I was usually the first to be considered as a speaker. It was not really my 15 minutes of fame because it seemed never-ending. A debate had emerged concerning the effects of low-level radiation. Chernobyl was linked to the anti-nuclear movement and campaigns against nuclear reactors in US, Germany, Poland, and other countries.

In the fall, I gave a speech to the East-West Round Table, Foundation for International Affairs in New York, which published it in pamphlet form, followed by a Discussion section in the form of an interview in the *The East-West Papers* issue of September/October 1987 under the title "Beyond Chernobyl."

Later in 1987, the Ukrainian National Association (UNA) approached me about writing another book, which they promised to assist financially. Its leader, John Flis, had the title of Supreme President – in fact Roma, who had to deal with them frequently as they published her newspaper, always referred to them as 'The Supremes'. Flis was an amicable and courtly fellow, and agreed promptly to the suggested sum for supporting a new book. I used the funds

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to hire a biomedical engineering student from the University of Pennsylvania, Leda Hewka, who was fluent in Ukrainian and Russian, to come to Edmonton and work with me for several months on the second book. She was a brilliant assistant and we quickly worked through a vast amount of material.

My only real difficulty was understanding the nature of the reactor and how to write about the causes of the accident. I decided to consult with experts at Atomic Energy of Canada, and in particular its safety expert Victor G. Snell, whom I met in Mississauga, Ontario. Victor and other nuclear scientists, such as Heiki Tamm, had studied the accident's causes in depth, concerned because the CANDU (Canada Deuterium Uranium) reactors also used graphite as a moderator, as at Chernobyl. Victor agreed to write an introduction to my book, putting forward the explanation of how the accident had occurred in the view of Canadian nuclear experts. I also visited Atomic Energy of Canada Limited's (AECL) research station in Pinawa, Manitoba, and was taken to see the experimental nuclear waste disposal site under the Canadian Shield – it was subsequently abandoned.

The book appeared under the title *The Social Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster*, again with Macmillan and St. Martin's Press, in 1988. In my view it was more satisfying in every way than its rapidly written prequel. I was able to explain about the cleanup campaign, evacuees, Soviet media coverage, and reconstruction of life in the disaster zone. It was the featured review on the front page of *The Los Angeles Times Book Review* when it was published. The reviewer, James Oberg, described the book as “a shining example of the best type of non-Soviet analysis into topics that only recently were absolutely taboo in Moscow official circles.”

Reviews of the book were universally very positive, with one exception. Reviewer Frederik Pohl, in the journal *New Scientist*, accused me of adopting the Ukrainian mindset and of being too critical toward the USSR's recovery efforts. Likely he had made this conclusion from reading the Acknowledgements section where he would have found my thanks to the Ukrainian National Association. I have never been averse to useful criticism but this particular statement seemed unfair because manifestly the book was not pro-Ukrainian, I had done my utmost to be objective. In retrospect, such a comment might have been appropriate had it been made about my first book, which was written, partially, in anger. Rashly perhaps, since today I think it wisest never to respond to reviews, I decided to respond:

Rarely does an author feel obliged to respond to a review of his book, but when he is grossly misrepresented, as I am in Frederik Pohl's review of my book *The Social Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster* (Review, 7 January), he is obliged to speak out. First, I do not know what Pohl has got against Ukrainians, but clearly in his view it is tantamount to an offense to be associated closely with them. In doing so, one adopts something called a Ukrainian émigré “mindset,” i.e. my views and those of the Diaspora coincide and I am incapable of independent thought.

In an interview with *The Ukrainian Weekly's* Myrosia Stefaniuk, I rationalized my motives for writing the second book as follows:

I ask myself, what do you do? You've got this information, and you see the obvious – the officials lying in public and getting praised, and getting away with it. To take one side or another is a dangerous thing to do, yet you are a human being and it is difficult and seems almost criminal, in a way, to try to stand aside from it.

But I had still not visited Chernobyl. In early 1989, I finally received a response from the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry through the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa to a letter I had sent two years earlier asking for permission to visit the accident site. It was finally granted and I could visit Chernobyl in the immediate future. Before describing it, I need to backtrack a couple of years to explain how I first entered the country I had studied for so long.

About the author:

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Studies and Distinguished Professor of Russian and East European History at the University of Alberta. His books include *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* (2020), *Ukraine in Conflict* (2017), *'Our Glorious Past': Lukashenka's Belarus and the Great Patriotic War* (2014), *Russia in the 20th Century: The Quest for Stability* (2011), and *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine* (2007).