

Visiting Chernobyl and Kyiv in 1989

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 16 2020

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

Four months after I returned to Canada from Germany, the Chernobyl disaster occurred, though it was only after a couple of days that news began to filter through to the world. Krawchenko was not only encouraging; he released me from all other duties to follow the news reports from around the world. He recognized far more quickly than anyone else I knew the importance of the event. Though little was known at the time, the accident was a result of an experiment on the safety equipment of Chernobyl's fourth reactor, one of four graphite-moderated reactors in operation at a large edifice on the Uzh and Pripyat rivers, about 80 miles north of Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital of 2.5 million people. The goal of the experiment, conducted by a senior engineer in the absence of the plant director and chief engineer (it was a holiday weekend), was to see how long spinning turbines could generate enough power during a shutdown before the safety equipment activated. In order to prevent an automatic shutdown, the various safety mechanisms were dismantled beforehand. One of the operators began to pull out control rods to raise the reactor's power, which caused a violent surge blowing off the roof over the core and causing a graphite fire.

Chernobyl was the only graphite-moderated station (the Russian acronym was RBMK) in Ukraine – there were others at Leningrad, Kursk, and a large station with 1500 MW reactors in Ignalina in Lithuania, as well as a new modern plant under construction near Smolensk. Much later the Kurchatov Institute of Atomic Energy acknowledged an inherent flaw (one of 32) in the RBMK reactor in that it became unstable if operated at low power. The Soviets boasted in 1985 that their nuclear program had remained accident-free, a statement that was later demonstrated to be a blatant lie – there had been a previous very serious accident at Chernobyl in September 1982 that was revealed when materials from the archives of the Ukrainian KGB were published in the 1990s.

On the ground around the station, events moved rapidly though dissemination of news was fragmentary. The graphite fire spread from the fourth to part of the third reactor. Firemen arrived from Kyiv to try to contain it, and first-aid workers attended to the early victims. All three categories suffered heavy casualties though the official total never rose from about 28 dead, and 2-3 instant deaths from the explosion. Helicopters flew over the fourth reactor dropping sand, boron, and lead pellets into the interior. The eventual weight derived pushed the reactor down toward the water table and coal miners from the Donbas and Russia were brought for the grueling task of constructing a concrete shelf to prevent its further fall.

The reactor was entombed eventually in what was termed a *sarkofag*, a concrete covering, prior to which a massive decontamination exercise began to remove the irradiated topsoil in the 30-kilometer zone and cut down the forested areas. Initially “volunteers” from all over the USSR took part in the operation, but within a month the authorities ordered military reservists to the zone for initial periods of one month that were soon extended. They had a few Geiger counters but the measurements soon went off the scale. The evacuation encompassed over 120,000 residents on both sides of the border. Eventually the figure would rise to 250,000 as levels for acceptable living standards were raised over time. Some residents refused to move; others, mainly elderly, returned without permission. The Soviet media featured disasters at US nuclear stations but eventually revealed more information.

The spring of 1989 was a pivotal moment in the history of the Chernobyl accident. At that time *Pravda* and other

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newspapers published the first detailed maps of the radioactive fallout based on Cesium-137 (and to some extent Strontium-90), extending well beyond the officially designated 30-kilometer zone around the reactor. The dark patches on the map extended almost to the Polish border in the west, over swathes of Belarus in the south, east, and central part of the republic, and over the Russian border into Bryansk and Orel. In some parts of Zhytomyr region of Ukraine there were hotspots of radiation that were higher than most parts of the 30-kilometer zone. In the wake of this information, which infuriated local activists and journalists, I finally arrived in Kyiv in May as the guest of the Foreign Ministry of Ukraine, the second Canadian allowed to tour the Chernobyl site after a professor of Physics from Manitoba.

In 1989 there were regular contacts between Soviet and Western academics. It was not unusual to find articles by or about familiar Ukrainianists in some of the Soviet press. What was unusual was for the Soviet authorities to allow a Westerner, such as myself, who had specialized on Ukraine and worked for Radio Liberty not merely to go to the Chernobyl station but to peruse at will and photograph the premises of the Center for Radiation Medicine in Kyiv, even to go into rooms where sick firemen were still recuperating.

My scheduled arrival in Kyiv coincided with one of the most violent storms in the history of the region. I had flown from Toronto to Paris, and then to Moscow Sheremetyevo Airport. I was taken by an Intourist car to Vnukovo Airport and remained there in stupefying boredom for ten hours, without any explanations as to why the flight was delayed. Arriving in Boryspil Airport at 3:30 am the reasons for the delay became apparent. Winds reaching 90 kilometers per hour had felled trees in every direction. Power lines were down. Many roads were flooded. I later discovered that the storm had also affected the Chernihiv and Cherkasy regions.

After 31 hours of travel, the next day was a virtual write-off. It was supposed to have been the day that I went to Chernobyl but I had slept until noon. It was insufferably hot. I wandered down the Khreshchatyk watching the summer scenes and looking for drinks, drinks, and more drinks.

Through the Intourist office of the Dnipro Hotel the next day, I tried to reorganize my Chernobyl visit. After some time, I was informed that I was expected there, but that Tuesday (the next day) was inconvenient. Would Wednesday be appropriate? I replied that Wednesday would be fine. However, on the following morning, Valery Ingulsky, the First Secretary of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, arrived at the hotel at 8:30 am, and asked me what I wanted to do in Kyiv. "Who do you want to talk with?" he asked. "Make me a list."

Needless to say, I happily complied. Looking it over, he noticed that the newspaper *Vechirnyi Kyiv* was included. He said that it might be possible to go there today. He then began to make phone calls, smoking constantly. In between calls, this rather portly man paced up and down the hotel foyer. But within an hour we were in a taxi heading for *Vechirnyi Kyiv*, a journey that necessitated driving across most of the city to some drab offices that also contained two other newspapers, *Prapor Komunizma* and *Kyivska Pravda*. We were greeted by Vitalii Karpenko, Editor-in-Chief, and Oleksander Bilyk, Deputy Editor. Karpenko was a shambling figure in his 50s, while Bilyk was much younger.

I was interested in finding out what Karpenko was like, first because from the beginning of my visit, the great popularity of *Vechirnyi Kyiv* among Kyivans was evident, and second, because Solchanyk and I had just written an article about an incident during the election campaign that involved him and the Chief Editor of *Robitnycha Hazeta*, Mykola Shybyk.[1] In general, my impression was that Karpenko by nature was not a reformer. However, as a political candidate and as one who wished to expand his newspaper, he had proved adept at changing with the times. Therefore, over the previous three years he had raised the circulation of the Ukrainian edition from 85,000 in 1986 to 130,000 in 1989, while the Russian edition remained stable at 330,000. In addition, he showed me a sheaf of files on the language question awaiting the attention of writer Ivan Dzyuba.

Karpenko was bitter about the election, less about losing the seat to Volodymyr Cherniak,[2] whom he seemed to respect, than the way his own campaign had been knocked off course by allegations of plagiarism. And yet he looked and sounded like a typical apparatchik. There was no enthusiasm to his ritualistic support for the conclusions of Gorbachev's 19th Party Conference, no energy in his admission that two-thirds of the mail reaching his newspaper

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was in support of the Ukrainian Popular Movement and only one-third opposed – which was a startling admission at that time. Before the interview the newspaper's photographer had taken some snaps of me, and an article about my visit appeared in the newspaper on June 14.

In the evening, I received a phone call from Yuri Shcherbak, the medical doctor who had been one of the first on site after the Chernobyl accident, who asked me over to his apartment, though it was already 10:30 pm. We had met in Edmonton the previous year. I made the two-kilometer walk down the Khreshchatyk and on to Chervonoarmiiska Street where he was awaiting me. After the formal introductions to his wife (who was Polish), son (adorned in a University of Alberta sweatshirt) and daughter, who curtsied, he informed me about events at the recent USSR Congress of People's Deputies and at the USSR Supreme Soviet, where he was obliged to sit with his enemy Shybyk, a rather unpopular figure, it seemed, in 1989.

We then watched a new video filmed in the Narodychi district of Zhytomyr region called *Zapridel* (Beyond the Limits). Following the path taken by an earlier film, *Mi-kro-fon!*, it showed deformed livestock and meetings in the village center of both residents and, on another occasion, medical personnel. The entire film was made on May 16, 1989, and represented another attempt to show the authorities that people in the district were sick, and that radiation levels there, three years after the accident, remained alarmingly high. Young children with hugely swollen thyroid glands and cataracts were depicted, and it was claimed that there were over 460 such cases. Although the film was taken to Moscow, it was not shown there. However, Italian correspondents had made twelve copies and taken them back to Italy where they caused a media sensation.

On the next morning, a wet and dull day, I was met at the hotel entrance at 8 am by Yuri Risovanny, a senior engineer from the Kombinat production association that had the task of directing the Chernobyl cleanup operation. He was 40 years of age, and I was taken aback by his excellent English, which was almost without accent. Shortly, a black Volga car arrived, and our driver took the road northward. Once in the countryside, the road quickly deteriorated. It was crammed with trucks, tractors, and other vehicles. At one point, the road was literally filled with cattle and our impatient driver went right into the ditch to circumnavigate them.

We drove at breakneck speed, while Yuri asked me, in his mild manner, why I had worked for Radio Liberty. Was it for ideological reasons? And if so, why, since I was not a Ukrainian? I replied, honestly, that I went there because I had wanted to conduct research. We approached Ivankiv. There was a sort of traffic circle – without an island – with signs pointing east to Zelenyi Mys (the new shift settlement for Chernobyl workers) and north to Chernobyl. Awaiting us was another black Volga with a blue police light on top. This was our escort into the 30-kilometer zone. I had no time to be impressed, since what seemed to be a reckless pace on the bumpy and gravelly road to that point now became almost suicidal.

At Hornostaipil, the entrance to the 30-kilometer zone not far from the Kyiv Reservoir, our car was waved right through without pausing. I commented that Mikhail Gorbachev must have been accorded similar treatment during his visit the previous February. By now I had some slight doubts about the nature of my reception and my desire to get to the station was tempered by my apprehension both about the dangers of radiation and being treated as an unfriendly outsider. Already, very young reservists in brown overalls could be seen at the roadside. Some were sitting in the undergrowth smoking. Road signs carried radiation danger warnings. On our left appeared a truck station and also one for buses, with the clean non-zone buses on the left and dirty “zone” buses on the right.

The scenery was similar to that of Ontario, with forests that seemed to go on forever. Almost without warning we arrived at the town of Chernobyl at 10:15 am. Here people in brown overalls were walking around in large numbers. Yuri said that the city had a population of about 6,500 at that time, all shift workers. However, there was at least one old lady who looked like a local resident.

The headquarters of Kombinat were located close to the southern entrance to the city. It was a wooden building, a cross between an army barracks and residential housing. We met Pavel Pokutny, head of the Information and Foreign Relations Department of Kombinat. Pokutny was a big man of about 30, built like an American football player. He was friendly, but asked about Radio Liberty, adding that in 1985 it would have been impossible for

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someone who had worked there to visit the Soviet Union. He had evidently read my first book on Chernobyl, which, he said, was a great deal more accurate and realistic than most other accounts.

He then provided a brief account of the work of Kombinat, and over coffee and candies, I plied him with questions. We then discussed the details of my day in the zone, and I told him that it was satisfactory. He gave me a Geiger counter to carry around. Then Yurii and I got into an evil-smelling bus, obviously stinking from the overalls of cleanup workers, accompanied by the Kombinat photographer Sasha, and headed northward once again.

The countryside became bleaker. The first major viewpoint was of the incomplete cooling towers of the now abandoned fifth and sixth reactors, followed by the reactor buildings themselves. Number 5 was nearly completed whereas the sixth one was about 15% complete. Then the four main reactors came into view, much closer together than I had expected. The entire station was compressed into a small area crisscrossed with a maze of gridlines. Under the latter, the ground had been replaced with concrete slabs.

We drove to the main entrance of the power plant, at which inevitably there was a bust of Lenin, for whom it was named, and were taken up a marble staircase – by this time looking worn – above which were stained glass windows, and with what seemed like astonishing haste into the office of Mikhail Umanets, the station's director. At this moment, I felt a sense of unreality. After three years of studying Chernobyl, surely as one of the most critical observers of the situation, here I was sitting opposite a man who had been featured in my two books: one, moreover, who was the avowed enemy of the Ukrainian environmentalists and oppositionists such as Shcherbak, Dmytro Pavlychko, and Volodymyr Kolinko.

If it had not already been drummed into me, it was now more than ever apparent that all the stops had been pulled out for my visit. Umanets provided a frank interview (all my interviews were recorded) and answered the questions sincerely. One notable comment was the admission that he had been incorrect in advocating that the fifth and sixth reactors should be completed and brought online. They would have caused too much human suffering, he added.

After the interview, I presented Umanets with a University of Alberta crested spoon, and took a photograph of this stern, but seemingly vulnerable little man sitting at his desk. At the same time, it was – as I said to Yurii – as though he sat there in the face of reality, in spite of the horrors of the past three years. It was rather like a baron sitting in a besieged fortress in the Middle Ages, while knowing that his food supplies had run out, or would run out very shortly.

We donned white coats and overalls. Yurii, Sasha, and I were then taken by an engineer down an almost endless corridor that linked the four reactors of the station. We stopped at the control room of reactor No. 2, which was just in the process of a shutdown. The chief operator informed me that it was a scheduled 15-day maintenance shutdown. He said this in a monotone voice that was at odds with his lanky and bespectacled appearance and obvious interest in my visit.

Next, we went to the huge turbine hall for all four reactors, beyond which was located the sarcophagus covering of reactor No. 4. I was taking photographs at will, as was Sasha, although I thought by now he must have had thousands already. Then it was time for lunch. Umanets and the new chief engineer at the station, Yurii Solomentsev, also attended. We ate in a small room that was obviously set aside for the plant's leaders. I mention lunch because it was by far the best food I had ever tasted in the Soviet Union: a sumptuous feast of tomato salad, roast pork, borscht, and beef stroganoff, followed by delicious chocolates and coffee. Yurii Risovanny said that the workers' fare was less lavishly presented, but equally good.

That being said, we had to gulp down piping hot coffee in order to maintain our schedule. We stopped next at the sarcophagus, where work was continuing inside. I took photographs of this horrific structure while Yurii took out his Geiger counter. It jumped quickly to 1.6 millirems per hour, even though we were 400 meters away, Yurii informed me that closer to the structure, the level was around 10 millirems per hour, and higher within the building itself.[3] To put these figures into perspective, 10 millirems is about 1,000 times higher than normal background levels, while 1.6 millirems represents 160 times the background. In addition, our Geiger counter was being held at shoulder level. Had it been on the ground, then the figure would have been much higher. At the Chernobyl station itself, where men and

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women roamed freely without protection, the recorded level was 0.6 millirems/hour, 60 times the norm.

On the horizon now was Prypiat, the abandoned city for plant operatives and their families. Crossing the bridge into the city, Yurii told me casually, in one of those statements that suddenly explains a thousand questions, that on the day of the accident the radiation level on this bridge was 80 rems per hour – 800,000 times above background and potentially fatal within two to three hours. If this was the case, I asked, how could scientists such as Leonid Ilin, Vice-President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, have stated that Prypiat need never have been evacuated? Yurii responded, unconvincingly, that radiation levels varied greatly in the city, so that Ilin may not have possessed the figure for the bridge. I got the impression that he himself did not really believe this explanation.

Prypiat was nightmarish. There is no way to describe adequately the impression that it made on me. Yurii said that two observers had remarked that it was like the effects of a neutron bomb, where the buildings remain but the people disappear. There was row upon row of deserted apartment buildings, a new soccer stadium (the first match was scheduled for May 1, 1986), and an eerily still Ferris wheel, The grass was now waist high and was blowing in the wind – the weather was quite pleasant outside Kyiv, in contrast to the wasteland created by the nuclear plant explosions. A swimming pool, which had four staffers, was operational and used by cleanup workers.

Originally, the city was noted for its greenery, but as the trees collected radioactive products, they were chopped down and taken away for burial. Instead, it looked as though a city of 50,000 had been built on a desolate wasteland. And yet, it would stand as a reminder of the supreme folly of the careless handling of nuclear power; of the willful subordination of nature to the demands of an all-pervasive economy. It would always remain empty, but its death has a cause. And many of its citizens had perished with it, or were dying a slow, surreal death in a different environment.

The Kompleks association was running an experimental hothouse in the city, which was to be our next stop. Some 20 people were working there, and residing in the shift settlement of Zelenyi Mys. Our host was a head biologist, Borys Solomanyk. He took us around to see beds of trees. One bed was planted after the nuclear disaster and displayed “normal” growth. The other contained shoots that had received up to 600 rems of irradiation. This bed contained wild deformities of growth, with new elongated shoots growing out of the top of the tree. The irradiated trees were also warped in growth.

Our host pointed out the cucumbers and tomatoes and asked if I would like to try them. Ah, I surmised, the ultimate litmus test of courage. He duly washed a tomato and a cucumber. Before passing them to me, he took another cucumber and bit into it. I did the same, but pocketed the tomato to take back to Canada with me. Yurii remarked that I had a strange expression on my face. Incidentally, on the way home my suitcase went astray somewhere in Montreal and when it arrived two days later, the tomato had disintegrated among my clothing. Everything ended up somewhere in Edmonton’s landfill site.

The conversation, not surprisingly, switched to radiophobia. I replied that it was not always a matter of radiophobia, that I had watched the film *Zaprider* and had read about the events in Narodychi. The son of the head of the hothouse had by then joined us, and he fiercely attacked the prognoses about Narodychi. He then insisted that I go to look at the Chernobyl area cattle that had been in the immediate fallout area, but had been relatively unaffected by the accident. Yurii commented wryly that he felt this was unnecessary as I had probably seen a cow before.

Observing my evident skepticism, the young fellow moderated his views. In Narodychi, he maintained, other factors such as content of the soil and crossbreeding of livestock had resulted in the deformities. However, the cattle at Chernobyl had been affected in other ways by the accident. Some had burns in their mouths, for example, but subsequently recovered. At that moment, a lively black dog emerged. I gave it a wide berth. The young man said that the dog was born after the accident and was not suffering from any diseases or deformities, but I drew the limits at taking the mouthful of cucumber. Not knowing where the dog had frolicked, I had no desire to pet it into the bargain.

We left Prypiat, the sad ghost town of the 20th century, condemned to eternal emptiness – other than as a tourist zone for day trips from Kyiv, I should add. As our coach approached the city’s exit, we passed truckloads of irradiated cars being taken away for disposal. Sasha was quite excited by the sight, and I managed to take two photographs through

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the bus window. At the exit itself, a sign announced the distance to Kyiv: 158 kilometers. Driving past the plant, in the distance we could see part of the 25-kilometer long cooling pond, and the rail line to the newly built town of Slavutych, intended as a permanent location for plant workers, but later also abandoned.

We drove back to Chernobyl for an “inquest” about my visit, in the form of an interview recorded by Yurii. Such an interview, he explained, was designed to obtain the first reactions of an observer. I stated that nothing had been more revealing to me than the visit to the zone, especially in terms of appreciating the nature and the extent of cleanup work. And yet, as I had long felt, the Chernobyl plant should not be operating in 1989, both because of its ineradicable technical flaws and because it is irrational and unfair to ask people to work in areas with a high radiation background.

Even upon reflection, I could see no reason to change such a view. Had I never visited Chernobyl, I felt that I might have gone through life condemning the follies that took place around the disaster and also the technical drawbacks inherent in the Soviet RBMK reactor, but without holding very strong views on the pros and cons of nuclear energy. Having been to this distant northern borderland of Ukraine, my views had changed. My feeling then was as follows: while it may be true that every form of power production has its dangers, nothing is as irrevocable as the effects of a nuclear accident. In nuclear power, man had harnessed a monster. And humankind lacked the wisdom to anticipate the behavior of such a creature. I asked myself therefore whether we could manage without nuclear power, whether this would not be a regression to an earlier stage, a step backward. My conclusion was that we could exist only too well without this industry, which was destructive and endless in its capacity to lay waste to the natural environment.

Notes

[1] Mykola Shybyk (b. 1930) was a Communist Party member who worked first as a correspondent for the newspaper *Kyivska Pravda*. From December 1983 to September 1991, he was the editor of the republican newspaper, *Robitnycha Hazeta* (Workers' Gazette). He became a People's Deputy for the Congress of Deputies of the USSR, representing the Union of Journalists, from March 1989 to December 26, 1991, when the Congress was disbanded.

[2] Volodymyr Cherniak (b. 1941), is a Professor of Economics from Rivne region and one of the founders of the Ukrainian Popular Movement for Perestroika (Rukh). After serving in the Congress of Deputies, he was also elected to the Ukrainian Parliament in both 1998 and 2002.

[3] The US Nuclear Regulatory Commission limit for members of the public was less than 2 millirems per hour from external radiation sources.

About the author:

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