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THE CHORNOBYL' DISASTER AND THE END OF THE SOVIET UNION

Стаття присвячена аналізу наслідків Чорнобильської катастрофи для Радянського Союзу. Особлива увага приділена впливу Чорнобилю на політичну кризу в СРСР. Автор також розглядає чорнобильський фактор у сучасній українській політиці.

Ключові слова: Чорнобильська катастрофа, СРСР, політична криза.

The dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1991 caught the world unprepared. Though intelligence reports suggested that the Soviet Union's stability was threatened by its slowing economy (Berkowitz 2008), the growth of NATO, and struggles within the central leadership, the prevailing wisdom held that the Communist Party would evolve to adapt to rather than collapse under the weight of these pressures (Arbel and Edelist 2004). Instead, Gorbachev's 25 December 1991 announcement of the end of the

USSR, and the subsequent overnight upending of the geopolitical world order, sent out shockwaves of surprise. Western investigations and suppositions as to why this happened, seemingly out of the blue, sprang up immediately, crafting narratives of American triumphalism, the victory of the free market, and Soviet leaders recognizing their own amorality, among others (see for example Plokhyi 2014: 388-408)

Two dozen years and multiple waves of declassification of state documents later, a wealth of scholarly work has been done on the reasons behind the USSR's dissolution, the most recent of which is Serhiy Plokhyi's *The Last Empire* (2014). Plokhyi claims the end of the USSR was the result of an agreement between the heads of the Russian and Ukrainian SSRs in the wake of the coup and counter-coup in Moscow in August 1991. As to the reasons he states that the main characters in his narrative—Krivchuk, Yeltsin, Gorbachev, Shcherbytsky—took the actions they did to dismantle the Soviet Union, Plokhyi only mentions that they were under popular pressure; that is, grassroots opposition groups had organized and mobilized effectively enough to successfully make political demands of the republican governments. That opposition was able to take root was a direct result of Gorbachev's *glasnost'* policy, which he outlined in late 1985. *Glasnost'* however was largely rhetorical until the Chornobyl' disaster. As Geist and others describe, Soviet management of the disaster was initially shrouded in secrecy and mis/disinformation, leading to the unnecessary exposure of hundreds of thousands of people to Chornobylgenic radiation. When western sources started running reports of a major radiological disaster happening in the USSR, Soviet officials could not hide behind their policies of secrecy and nondisclosure—effectively, Chornobyl' forced the central government's hand in regards to both the heightened transparency and the affordance of legal vocal critiques of the party and the state of *glasnost'* policies. In other words, the 1986 Chornobyl' nuclear disaster was instrumental in the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Though I am not the first to make this claim (see Shevchenko 2011), in light of Plokhyi's newest book and the upcoming thirtieth anniversary of the disaster, I feel this topic is worth exploring. This paper will explore the causal chain between Chornobyl' and the end of the USSR. First, it will examine the changing political landscape in the Soviet Union precipitated by Gorbachev's election to Premier and his *perestroika* and *glasnost'* reforms. Second, it will

consider the events and immediate political ramifications of the administration's handling of the Chernobyl' disaster. Third, it will look at the organization of opposition movements in Ukraine primarily, but also elsewhere in the USSR, that emerged in the new political space created by the Chernobyl' disaster. Finally, it will consider the events of 1991 in the context of Chernobyl' and how that event, and perceptions of the Soviet mishandling of it, transformed the relationship between Soviet citizens and the state.

Gorbachev's Union

Compared to the tumultuous eras that bookended it, from Stalin's death in 1953 until the beginning of Gorbachev's premiership in 1985, the USSR was a quiet place: the turbulent beginning of the Soviet Union and the devastation of World War II had given way to a relative calm and status quo that would not really be shaken until Gorbachev's reforms, perestroika, which introduced some market elements to the Soviet economy, and glasnost', which lessened the Communist Party's control over media and "made some allowance for ideological pluralism" (Plokhyi 2014: 12). Understandably, these reforms rankled many of the party elite not just in the central administration but also in the republics, resulting, in many cases, in a slow and half-hearted rolling out of the reforms. For example, Volodymyr Shcherbytsky, the conservative First Secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine, resisted implementing the reforms because was suspicious of Gorbachev's motives (Yekelchuk 2008: 180).

Resistance and skepticism contributed to the poor implementation of these reforms, though they were not the only factors. Perestroika broke down mechanisms of the centrally-planned economy before establishing market-based alternatives, leading to an economic downturn. As I mentioned above, prior to the Chernobyl' disaster, glasnost' had yet to be tested, though the party's perceived mishandling of the disaster led to increasing calls for government transparency and the birth of legitimate political opposition. This put Gorbachev and the central administration in a difficult position: the party elites dissatisfied with Gorbachev could remove him from power, but at great political cost, especially given the rapport that quickly blossomed between Gorbachev and Reagan; Gorbachev could roll back his reforms at the risk of inciting the Soviet public, weakening the center and possibly precipitating

another Prague Spring, but this time closer to home; or the regime could stick by the reforms and try to weather the storm of protest Chornobyl' ignited.

The Chornobyl' Disaster

The Chornobyl' Nuclear Power Plant was built in the late 1970s as a showcase of Soviet technological advancement and the accident on 26 April 1986 marked not only a major ecological disaster, but also a disaster of Soviet ideology and institutions. The accident happened during an experiment to minimize the time between shutting off the main generators and the backup generators getting up to full speed during maintenance shutdowns, but an unforeseen delay, a shift change, junior operator inexperience, flawed control rod design, emergency-situation panic, and pressure from the top to see the experiment through resulted in the xenon-poisoning of reactor 4's core, a massive power surge, and a series of devastating steam explosions that blew the roof off the reactor, ruptured the fuel and coolant lines, and broke the reactor container. Aside from that initial radiation release from the explosions themselves, the reactor ignited when it was exposed to the air, substantially increasing the spread of radioactive fallout. Chornobyl' has the distinction of being the worst nuclear accident to date (Steinhauser et al 2013), though much of its significance resides with how Soviet authorities (mis)handled the disaster and the political crisis that emerged as a result (see Imanaka 2008).

Geist (2015) characterizes the Soviet Chornobyl' response as having three stages: the first day, 26 April, when Soviet authorities did not grasp the severity of the accident; the next two and a half weeks, 27 April-14 May, when people were evacuated and cleanup commenced though authorities tried to keep the disaster a secret; and the third from Gorbachev's public acknowledgement of the accident on 14 May. No amount of speechifying could make up for the damage done by the administration's dishonesty and secrecy, however. The Soviet authorities' "initial decision to withhold information about life-threatening radioactive fallout caused resentment among the population. The Communist Party lost a great deal of legitimacy in Ukraine, and in public discourse, Chernobyl became a potent symbol of the regime's criminal negligence" (Yekelchuk 2007: 180). More than that, Reid (2004) states that Chornobyl' was the moment where, for many Ukrainians, their faith in the Soviet system and ideology was broken, noting that "the Chernobyl affair epitomized everything that was wrong with the Soviet Union... Imperilling everyone impartially and in the most basic and dramatic

fashion, no other single piece of communist bungling did more to turn public opinion against the regime" (194).

New Ukrainian Politics

As Chornobyl' turned the tide of public opinion against the center, many disaffected Soviet citizens found an early outlet for their voices in the Soviet environmentalist movement. Because the party's attempts to keep Chornobyl' secret backfired spectacularly on them, informal environmentalist groups such as Zelenyi Svit swelled in membership of activists of all stripes. Wilson (1997), in charting the development of Ukrainian nationalism in the 1990s, noted that, "As elsewhere in the USSR, Zelenyi svit's members were increasingly able to raise overtly political issues under the cover of ecological protest, normally by using 'ecological genocide' as a metaphor for all other forms of national, cultural and linguistic repression" (63). This phenomenon was not unique to Ukraine, and particularly in the Baltics, environmentalism was a productive vehicle for oppositional political action "because it provided a release valve for pent-up frustrations and repressed nationalistic ardor" (Auer 1998: 659).

As environmentalist and anti-nuclear groups steadily pushed the boundaries of glasnost' it became clear by 1988-89 that Soviet authorities would be unlikely to crack down on more openly oppositional groups, leading to a proliferation of popular fronts in a number of republics. In Ukraine, the most important of such civic organizations, The Popular Movement of Ukraine for Perestroika—called Rukh for short—began to coalesce in late 1988 and held its inaugural congress in September 1989. Rukh was a catchall organization, ostensibly concerned with speeding up the reform process in Ukraine that party officials were deliberately slow in implementing. Though Rukh would later crumble under the weight of its diverse membership, it opened the door for mass politics in Ukraine (see Yekelchuk 2008: 181-188). Coupled with Gorbachev's rollout of democratic elections in 1989, Rukh and groups like it succeeded in establishing democratic opposition in Ukrainian parliament, laying the foundation for Ukraine's 1991 declaration of independence.

Plokhyi's 1991 in the Shadow of Chornobyl'

As I noted above, Plokhyi's (2014) lengthy, detailed account of the last six months of the Soviet Union revolves around two principal actors, Boris Yeltsin and Leonid Kravchuk, the leaders of the Russian SFSR and Ukrainian

SSR, respectively, and a small supporting cast that includes Gorbachev and the participants in the 18 August 1991 coup. His main contention is that

the most important factor in deciding the future of the last world empire was not the policy of the United States, the conflict between the Union center and Russia (respectively represented by Gorbachev and Yeltsin), or tensions between the Union center and other republics, but rather the relationship between the two largest Soviet republics, Russia and Ukraine. It was the unwillingness of their political elites to find a *modus vivendi* within one state structure that drove the final nail into the coffin of the Soviet Union. (xx)

Kravchuk and Yeltsin's inability to find a common ground that would have allowed the Soviet Union to continue is charted in meticulous detail in *The Last Empire*, but there is scant reflection on why they could not come to a consensus beyond a nod to *realpolitik* and nascent Ukrainian opposition parties. It is my contention here though that the Chornobyl' disaster was the kernel of that dissensus; had it never occurred, barring another event equally as cataclysmic, popular opposition fronts would not have had the momentum to overcome the inertia of Soviet political culture and the Soviet Union might have simply adapted to new economic and political realities that many sovietologists and western intelligence agencies had predicted (see for example, Arbel and Edelist 2004: 169–173).

Concluding Thoughts

The Chornobyl' disaster played an instrumental role in the dissolution of the Soviet Union because of its transformative effect on Soviet citizen-state (or public-party) relations. At the time of the disaster however, that it would provide the spark that would ignite the opposition was by no means clear. By insisting on long-held policies of withholding information from the public, Soviet authorities sowed the seeds of the destruction of their state and ideology.

Even after the end of the Soviet Union, Chornobyl' still continues to bear on the politics, economics, and society of Ukraine, most noticeably in the multi-billion dollar project of building a new confinement shelter for the still-burning reactor, and its legacy still resonates in Ukrainian-Russian relations. Chornobyl' remains a symbol of many things, not the least of which as a tragic crucible in which modern Ukrainian independence was forged.

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МІНІСТЕРСТВО ОСВІТИ І НАУКИ УКРАЇНИ
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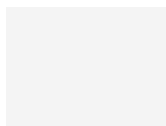
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