Remembering Chernobyl

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Abstract
At a time when nuclear power has again begun to attract public interest as a possible energy source allowing us to slow global warming, understandings of the accident in the Ukrainian nuclear power station in Chernobyl in April 1986 and its consequences are contentious. Assessments of the damage range from the IAEA's official figure of 50 deaths from the accident to estimates that 500 000 people have died of cancer as a result of the accident over the last twenty years. Chernobyl has been remembered in countless marches and ceremonies, non-fiction books and novels, poems and plays. Volumes of photographs and museum exhibitions have marked the tenth and twentieth anniversaries in 1996 and 2006. Parties keen to keep the memory of Chernobyl alive for differing purposes include the Ukrainian and Belarusian governments, children's charities and the German Greens. Meanwhile the exclusion zone around the reactor, where a secondary wilderness has grown up, has become a magnet for scientists and curious tourists. My paper asks to what end narratives about Chernobyl have been constructed. It looks at the media through which the accident has been remembered, the modes of remembering, and parallels with broader developments in European and transnational memory culture. The photographs of Igor Kostin are discussed alongside Svetlana Alexievich's collage of oral statements *Voices From Chernobyl* and Vladimir Gubaryev's play *Sarcophagus*.

The accident in the Ukranian nuclear power station in Chernobyl in April 1986 may not immediately seem an appropriate subject to speak about at a conference on 'constructions of conflict'. In the aftermath of the disaster, the Russian and Ukranian politicians and media portrayed the men and women involved in the vital task of making safe the smouldering reactor and carrying out the enormous clean-up operation as a kind of war, and 'fighting the atomic beast'. However, it was not of course a war or conflict in the sense of most of the other events discussed at this conference. Chernobyl is nonetheless a site of *conflicting memories*, and widely differing constructions both of what happened and of its wider significance.

There is no agreement on such basic facts as the number of people who have died or whose health has been seriously affected as a result of the accident: claims range from the official Russian figure of 31 deaths to the hundreds of thousands of families whose lives are estimated by Western charities to have been blighted by bereavement, the birth of genetically malformed children, precautionary abortions, and illnesses ranging from thyroid cancer and neurological disorders to chronic anxiety and depression.[1] Seen in these terms, Chernobyl was not only the worst accident in history of commercial nuclear power, but also one the greatest technological disaster in the twentieth century. In addition to those who suffered directly as a result of exposure to the radiation released, in the shorter or longer term, the lives of some 300 000 were affected by permanent evacuation from the contaminated areas near the power plant. Nearly a quarter of the surface area of Belarus, where 70% of the radioactive material which left the site ended up, is currently uninhabitable.

Though the event of Chernobyl may not compare in historical importance with the Holocaust, the First and Second World Wars, colonialism, acts of genocide or the collapse of communism, it is then not entirely insignificant. Its impact is also worth exploring in the context of European memory. As an iconic disaster, Chernobyl is a flashbulb memory, one of those touchstones in personal memory like 09/11, Diana's death or the appearance of Russian tanks in Prague in August 1968, when many people remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news. Like these, it shook people out of complacent acceptance of political assumptions and challenged social and cultural norms.

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[1] Two operators were killed by falling debris and burns, a further twenty-nine died from massive doses of radiation by the end of August. About 200 staff received acute radiation doses and burns. See Lubrich and Kliaschuk p. 4; Phillips p. 161. The so-called 'Chernobyl children', whose organs were either damaged by radiation at the time or who were born with physical defects after the accident, number over 600 000. Hewitt and Collier cite current estimates of 30 000 fatal cancers resulting over the next 40 years in affected parts of Russia and Western Europe – a figure which, however, they claim "needs to be compared with over 30 million cancer deaths expected in the same population over the same period" (p. 179). They cite 500 cases of childhood thyroid cancer, and "non-radiological effects from stress-related conditions" in a population of 10 million living in the most affected regions (p. 180).

In the Soviet Union, it opened people's eyes to the corruption of the Soviet system, as a product of the culture of cronyism, laziness and deep-seated indifference to the general population. There was broad recognition that a poorly designed reactor (which was dangerously unstable when run at very low power, and whose core containment was inadequate to survive a serious malfunctioning) had been staffed by incompetents. (Training was seriously flawed and the accident brought fundamental institutional and organisational shortcomings to light.[2]) The authorities then denied the seriousness of the disaster for days, during which the reactor continued to release huge amounts of radioactive material into the atmosphere – in all, 400 times that at the bombing of Hiroshima. Their incompetence, indifference and lies[3] contrasted with the sense of duty and bravery of the fire-fighters who extinguished the fires on site within a matter of hours, oblivious to their exposure to radiation, and of many of the soldiers and civilians subsequently brought in, in a frantic effort to deal with the situation. Often misinformed and inadequately protected, these men manned helicopters from which 5000 tonnes of boron compounds, dolomite, sand and lead were dropped onto the burning reactor, in order to filter the escaping aerosol fission products. They climbed onto the roof of a neighbouring building to clear it of

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[2] The experiment, which was intended to improve the safety of the plant, was badly planned, safety had not been adequately considered, and there was a culture of ignoring the most basic precautions. The operators failed to achieve the intended plant conditions, departed from laid-down procedures, and violated crucial operating rules. At 1.24 am, there was an unexpected power surge to 440 times full power, leading to 2 explosions with an energy of about 200 kilo of TNT. The 1000 tonne top shield of the reactor was rotated through 90 degrees. Molten and burning fragments were thrown up, starting 30 separate fires in the plant. As Hewitt and Collier point out, equipment failure played no part in the event, and only a single action taken by the operators can be classified as a mistake: all the other violations of the operating rules were deliberate, pp. 181-3). In one of the first authoritative scientific studies of the accident, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, the Soviet biologist Zhores Medvedev disputed the official version of the accident, which placed emphasis on negligence and human error while minimizing the reactor design flaws. There were several previous nuclear accidents in the U.S.S.R.; the secrecy surrounding them was a major contributory factor in the runaway chain reaction at Chernobyl, Medvedev argued. He predicted that consumption of contaminated agricultural products, rather than the immediate fallout, would cause most of the health problems associated with this catastrophe, including a marked increase in cancer.

[3] The first radio broadcasts alerting citizens to the accident came 35 hours after the explosion, and it was only mentioned in the newspapers in Ukranian capital Kiev, a mere 70 miles away, three days later – on page 3, under the heading 'Weather'. Practically every child in Kiev was thus exposed needlessly to the dangerous levels of radiation during the May Day parade on the

debris, constructed a shield under the reactor in order to prevent the 130 tonnes of molten radioactive material from the melted core from sinking into the ground water, and finally encased the unit in concrete walls a metre thick. Over 300 000 people were involved in cleaning up the site, and as many again in works in the 30 km exclusion zone. Many of these were exposed to significant radiation.

In instigating the environmental movement in Ukraine and revealing the puppet nature of the Soviet-directed government, Chernobyl also acted as a catalyst for Ukraine's secession from the Soviet Union, and was thus a factor in the rise of nationalist feeling which led to the disintegration of the Union. It thus played a part in bringing about the most far-reaching changes in the Eastern European political landscape in the second half of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, the radiation affected many Western European countries. The cloud of radioactive gases was driven by the wind across Russia and north-east Poland to Scandinavia, then it swung southward across Poland to the south of Germany, where rainfall led to wet deposition of radioactivity across Germany, Czechoslovakia and parts of Switzerland and France. On May 2 it reached Britain, where rain again caused high levels in North Wales, Cumbria and Scotland. Fear and uncertainty were spread as a result of conflicting assessments of the danger from eating fresh milk and vegetables and exposure to rain, and Chernobyl raised troubling issues about the trustworthiness of science, the progress of civilisation, and the possibility of a genetically programmed destructive urge in human nature.

Ursula Heise has examined responses to Chernobyl as a paradigm of how risk scenarios are socio-culturally mediated, magnified or minimised. She argues that it transformed the logic that structured Western Europeans' everyday lives, by undermining the traditional sense of time and place. Through the intangibleness of radioactivity, its invisibility to the senses, the colossal damage done within moments, while the effects on individuals' health were only detectable in hindsight, in some cases after many years of good health, and the shrinking of

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first of the month. The dormitory town of Pripyat, two kilometres from the stricken reactor, was itself only evacuated a day after the accident.

the vast distances covered by the radioactive cloud to a dangerous proximity, the accident forced people to question faith in science and experiential evidence. Neither common sense nor their own senses could be trusted as a basis for decisions in their everyday lives. Chernobyl, she argues, challenged the idea that it is possible to inhabit a discrete locale in the context of transnational connectedness. Its impact on the experience of the body and place is reflected in the thought and language of works such as Christa Wolf's *Accident*.

Writing in 2003, Aleida Assmann suggested in her book *The Long Shadow of the Past* that it was too early to say whether Chernobyl would become the subject of lasting acts of remembrance and thereby take a place in European collective memory. However, it is already possible to say that remembering Chernobyl over the past 21 years has embraced a wide variety of forms and media, played a role in the self-understanding and identity of different groupings, and gone through identifiable phases. It provides a focus for reflection on the part taken by genres of writing such as official and unofficial websites, reportage and interview, diary and autobiography, essay and prose fiction, poetry and drama, by the visual media photography and film, painting and sculpture, by museums and exhibitions, and by government and oppositional commemoration ceremonies in the wider process of remembering.

Accounts composed of or drawing extensively on interviews and eye-witness testimonies include Alexievich, Kluge and Shcherbak; there are diaries and autobiographies by Hilliges/ Wachidowa, Makzanghi and Wolf, Yaroshinskaya, Mycio and others have written reportage accounts, fictional authors include Ehmke, Gubaryev, Pausewang, Pohl, Vozhnesenskaya, Wohmann and Zabytko. Kostin and Kliaschuk are among the better known of the many Chernobyl photographers. Ukranian poems are also referred to by the American anthropologist Sarah Phillips, in an informative article on the symbols encountered in representations of Chernobyl in academic and popular discourse, literature and museum exhibits. Phillips writes that "the event of Chernobyl signalled a rupture between the present and the past, a moment that necessitated a reevaluation of the self and society" for the people of Ukraine (p. 159).

Every little illness or misfortune experienced since is seen through the prism of the accident and its medical consequences. Chernobyl has become an ever-present shadow falling across the Ukranians' and Belarusians' everyday lives, determining their self-understanding and structuring their perception of the social world. It has developed a heightened sense of individual conscience, and raised disturbing doubts about their countries' past and future (p. 160). Her research into the meaning-making practices which surround the Chernobyl event identifies a constellation of symbols, which display an internal logic for all their contradictions and ironies (p. 160). All symbols have the function of linking the material with the immaterial, the concrete with the abstract, by investing objects and events with meaning: the symbols of Chernobyl have the additional task of rendering material, concrete and intelligible a radiation elusive to the senses, invisible, inaudible, without smell, taste or feel.

Interpretation of Chernobyl is inseparable from political, social and ethical issues including value judgements about the way we live, whose analysis might complement other aspects of local, national, European and global memory, and give insight into the mechanisms of collective memory. Chernobyl can, I believe, give insight into the interplay of non-fiction and fiction, 'authentic' individual memory and received narratives and images. It has also arguably already been given that wider symbolic significance in texts, images and museum exhibits which extend the time frame of individual memory through inscription in cultural artefacts, making it a part of cultural memory. And it has acquired a degree of that institutionally based permanence and stability which she sees as missing in the dynamic enactment and negotiation processes of mere social memory. For Chernobyl is remembered in annual ceremonies in Ukraine and Belarus, and through the work of charities around the world.

A full-length study of remembering Chernobyl might ask how the experience of the accident has been articulated by individuals and groups, how it has been represented in narrative and image; and how has it been (re-)constructed in the media and quasi-officially recognised in ritual enactments. In the following discussion of some of the recurring narratives and images seeking to

make sense of the accident, I make use of two concepts in trauma research and memory studies which Aleida Assmann discusses. The first is triumph and trauma as twin modes of remembering the past and strategies in constructing from individual memories a collective memory discourse contributing to group identity. The second is the emergence of the ‘moral witness’ as a phenomenon accompanying the shift towards a discourse of victim memory over the past fifteen years.

Triumph and Trauma as modes of remembering

Ernest Renan, the 19th-century French historian, was the first to put forward the idea, since refined by the German sociologist Bernhard Giesen, that collective (especially *national*) identity is shaped by a dialectic of trauma and triumph. The formative events in a nation’s history are those which can be presented as either a euphoric peak of collective self-transcendence or a trough degradation and humiliation. While both bind together the community, defeats and disasters actually create more powerful bonds than triumphs and victories, since they place an obligation on individuals to subordinate themselves to the task of restoring the national honour.

Not all national defeats can, however, be described as traumatic in the true sense of the word. After the First World War, many Germans sought to save the honour of their nation by externalising responsibility for the defeat. They constructed a set of narratives around dishonest scapegoats, and another around the heroism of honest soldiers sacrificing themselves for the country. On the level of both individual and social psychology, unbearable experiences are commonly either displaced or transformed into triumphs, through narratives of heroism affording providing comfort and hope. Such narratives can involve asserting a spiritual superiority or triumph where there has been material failure and defeat (as in the myth of the band stoically continuing to play on the deck of the *Titanic* as the ship went down, ending with the hymn ‘Nearer My God to Thee’). Alternatively, they can divert attention to acts of heroic self-sacrifice, however fruitless (as in tales of men nobly assisting while their women and

children boarded the lifeboats). After 1918, defeat was converted into an appeal to the public to unite in righting the national wrong. This was no longer possible at the end of the Second World War, in the light of the Germans' crimes against humanity. The result was a traumatised silence, in the sense of a blocking out of the past in order to get on with rebuilding the country and constructing new individual and collective identities.

The experience of holocaust survivors was of course traumatic in another sense. Their trauma was of quite a different order, having originated in the name-less terror of extreme violence, against which they were defenceless. Such extreme trauma interrupts the normal processing patterns of consciousness and resists formulation in conventional language. Because it is impossible to come to terms with through normal psychological, political and cultural strategies, it threatens their very collective identity, and it may take many years to come to terms with, in the sense of individuals being able to retrieve it from the uncon-scious, construct narratives and integrate it into their identities.

In accounts of Chernobyl, triumph and trauma are found alongside each other as modes of remembering. Just as, at the end of the Third Reich, the perpetrators took refuge in silence, refuted guilt and suppressed their memories in order to save face, in the aftermath of Chernobyl, many of those co-respon-sible for the political and technological system were silent. They were prevented as much by their continuing adherence to Communist ideology as by their sense of guilt from speaking out about what had led to the accident, and about the corruption and deception which persisted in the management of the evacuation and clean-up of the Zone. For their part, the victims were reduced to silence by the burden of their loss and humiliation, and the absence of an audience wanting to hear their story. When researchers such as Svetlana Alexievich gathered eye-witness statements ten years later, her respondents spoke of having waited to be asked for their story, and the therapeutic effect telling it had on some of them is palpable.

The main traumatic responses were thus only articulated later. Typical of the immediate official and media response to Chernobyl were rather the seeking

of explanations and guilty parties permitting externalisation of the blame, and attempts to translate the disaster into a triumph. The show trial of the 'negligent' safety managers of the plant [KOSTIN PHOTO] was one way of channelling public anger with the authorities, especially the Russian authorities, for delaying informing the public, and misinforming them about the health dangers.

This effort was accompanied by directing the media to focus on the heroism of the so-called 'liquidators', whose stories fulfilled a similar function in official commemoration to those of the New York firemen after 09/11. Many of them had been drafted in, some under coercion, to serve in the clean-up. They were now celebrated with patriotic pride as the "heroes" of Chernobyl. [KOSTIN IMAGE OF FLAG OVER REACTOR LIKE REICHSTAG] Some went out of dedication to their country, other out of bravado. Many of the military liquidators compared their experience with the Afghanistan war.

'Sarcophagus', the name given to the massive encasement built to seal off the damaged reactor, which still contained some 130 tonnes of radioactive material [KLIASCHUK IMAGE], has a related significance. It suggested the laying to final rest of the nuclear adversary, closure, safety, and the triumphant restor-ation of order and normality. Sarah Phillips suggests there may even have been a deliberate intention on the part of the politicians who introduced the word to associate the encasement of the reactor with Lenin's tomb, and thereby to evoke physical, moral and spiritual rejuvenation (pp. 170-1). In the West, however, the term 'sarcophagus' has rather seemed to commentators a grim reminder of the slumbering dangers of nuclear technology and the consequences of its criminally negligent handling. (See the reference to it in Lubricht and Kliaschuk 2005, p. 6 as "monstrous" and a "warning in stone".)

This is also closer to the meaning it is given in Vladimir Gubaryev's play. Gubaryev describes it as a monument of the Soviet system, comparable to the pyramids of the ancient Pharaohs. Only the pyramids, for all that they have lasted five thousand years, will long have turned to dust by the time it is no longer necessary to maintain the sarcophagus and seal off its dangerous contents a hundred thousand years from now (p. 45). Towards the end of the play (p. 53), its

significance as a warning to future generations is extended to embrace the danger of atomic warfare. However, *Sarcophagus* is no critique of nuclear technology, but rather a satirical exposure of the way it was handled in the USSR. Gubaryev was Science Editor of *Pravda*, and had been one of the first journalists to visit Chernobyl and file reports on it. The strength of his feelings after having witnessed the consequences of the accident and spoken to survivors, many of whom subsequently died of radiation sickness, was such that he felt compelled to speak out the truth and analyse the underlying causes of the tragedy in order to prevent such a thing happening again. He may have chosen the theatre as a way of conveying his thoughts and emotions less likely to run foul of the censors than a journal article. The play was finished in early July, and rushed into production in Moscow within months of the accident, in the spirit of *Glasnost*.

Although Gubaryev was writing before the presentation of the official findings in the frank and detailed report of the Soviet delegation to the IAEA in October 1986, he identifies quite rightly a hubristic casualness and a culture lacking in consideration for the safety of the people as at fault, and does not hold back in suggesting these are rooted in the Soviet Communist political system and ideology. His play is skilfully constructed, observing the unities of time, place and action. A second focus is on the human aspect of the tragedy: the experiences, reactions and health consequences for the people affected, and the position of the doctors treating them. The action takes place in the Medical Experimental Section of the Institute of Radiation Safety in Moscow, and Gubaryev integrates crucial information astutely by introducing a cross-section of the people affected. A fireman, a control room operator, an officer, a physicist and a small farmer tell their own stories, while an official investigator questions the Security Chief and the Director of the power station. Details of what really happened are incorporated, and the official secrecy, the misleading media announcements and the reluctance of cowardly response by senior politicians are all satirically exposed in a fictional framework which is at times reminiscent of Dario Fo, at others of Raymond Briggs. A control room technician who stayed while others fled in order to repair blown fuses, a physicist who remained in order to record and analyse what

was happening in the molten core, and the overworked doctors and nurses emerge as unsung heroes. The author succeeds in remembering the victims, celebrating the heroes, exposing the culprits and warning against the system, and his motivation is reflected in the depression and anguish expressed by Doctor Ptitsnya, Professor of Surgery. But for all Gubaryev's criticism, the play ultimately vindicates science and suggests the necessary political lessons have been learned (in the figure of the Investigator), thus reaffirming the ability of the Soviet technocratic state to overcome catastrophe (see Phillips p. 171).

A rather different response, which was quite common among the older, rural population in Ukraine and Belarus, was to see the accident in religious terms. The disaster, which took place in the context of a general revival of interest in religion in the Soviet Union since the 1980s, was interpreted, like Sodom and Gomorrha, as divine retribution for the neglect of religion in secular, materialist Soviet society, and for the sinful corruption of the Ukranian leaders. The curious coincidence that the Ukrainian word 'chornobyl' (pronounced 'chernobyl' in Russian) means 'wormwood' led anxious believers to see a link between the accident and the "star of wormwood" which is predicted to fall to earth and poison freshwater sources at the end of the world in the *Book of Revelations*. (N.B. The plant wormwood, which has a pungent smell and a bitter taste, also features in Ukranian folklore as a way of warding off evil.)

A variant of this narrative of punishment was to lay the blame on technological hubris: nuclear power epitomised 'sinful' attempts to manipulate God's domain, i.e. nature, and the wrongfulness of allowing our lives to be guided by scientific rationality.[4] The exploded reactor [KOSTIN IMAGE] seemed a modern Tower of Babel, an emblem of the transgression and fate of modernity, conflating technological overreach with the disastrous consequences of political over-centralisation of power. It united the idea of technology out of control and fears of enslavement to machines and the dictates of security with resentment of the

[4] Sarah Phillips writes that "the quintessential nature-versus-technology dichotomy is a salient theme in poetry, literature and popular discourse concerning Chernobyl". (p. 163) Chernobyl is here a "tangible representation of the dangers of technology and the incompatibility of science and nature" (p. 164).

deception practised by the totalitarian authorities, and helplessness on the part of the individual citizen. Chernobyl was widely understood as a wake-up call: Sarah Phillips identifies the ‘bell of Chernobyl’ as a recurring motif and symbol. Pictures of idyllic landscapes deserted and cordoned off or marked by signs warning of contamination [KOSTIN IMAGE] similarly reflect the illegitimacy of scientific interference in nature, and the ‘poisoning’ of our lives, through the corruption of the countryside and the food it yielded.[5]

Some of the most striking images from Chernobyl forge iconographic links with previous traumatic events associated with crisis of modernity, e.g. the poison gas attacks of the First World War [KOSTIN IMAGE]. Pictures of the bodies of radiation victims also consciously echo images of Hiroshima (see Phillips on Japanese exhibition.) In her discussion of exhibits in the Chernobyl Museum in Kiev, Phillips writes of a photograph and a replica of a strikingly shaped pine tree which also linked the reactor with the Second World War and the holocaust (p. 165) [KOSTIN IMAGE]. The tree, from which partisans were hung during the war, and which stood within sight of the Chernobyl reactor until it fell in a storm in 1990, suggests that the proponents of nuclear energy and the Soviet authorities shared a common disregard for human dignity with the Nazis.[6] Behind all these images of Chernobyl lie the implications that modern technology, especially nuclear technology, is dangerous and essentially destructive, and that technology has come to dominate humans. When German and Japanese robots proved unusable in the effort to collect the radioactive debris from the exploded reactor, so that it could be safely contained (the extraordinarily high radioactivity

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[5] The wider cultural consequences of this contamination of seemingly idyllic nature is one of the themes explored in Wolf’s *Accident*. This focuses on disillusionment with socialism, and through a series of cultural references widens into bleak pessimism about progress, patriarchal society, and the seeming link in human nature, as a blind spot of contemporary civilisation, akin to Joseph’s ‘Heart of Darkness’ in European colonialism, between invention and the urge to dominate, exploit and destroy.

[6] Phillips sees the layering of symbolic meanings in the exhibit as characteristic: “Linkages are made between the suffering of Adam and Eve and post-Chernobyl suffering, and the consequences of Chernobyl for farming and reproductive health are highlighted. […] The Pripyat pine tree is a polysemous symbol, indexing religious interpretations of the Chernobyl disaster, invocations of Holocaust atrocities, and reminders of the Chernobyl-related suffering of adults and children alike.” (p. 165)

destroyed their operating systems), the liquidators who did it instead jokingly called each other “bio-robots” (see [KOSTIN IMAGE] and Alexievich).

Victim memory and the moral witness

Aleida Assmann writes of the emergence of a new pattern or cultural form of international remembering in the 1990s characterised by fuller recognition of suffering and therapeutic overcoming of its paralysing consequences (p. 111). The international media began to serve as a neutral witness, eroding the power of national perspectives, and replacing previous identity construction through processes of othering by an ethical turn. Just as this transnational memory aided developments in German collective memory (the emergence of new forms of guilt processing and of personal engagement with negative memories, stabilising them and integrating them in the collective self-understanding), it promoted a telling of the stories of Chernobyl victims, without harnessing them to a specific political end. TV documentaries, newspaper articles, books and the exhibition in Barcelona all reflect the emergence of this ‘memory frame’, a social framework of collective memory conducive to the story of the Chernobyl victims. Charities and the appeal to ‘Remember Chernobyl’ (cf. the Jewish ‘Zakhor’). Like the holocaust, Chernobyl is no mere thing of objective analysis, but one of identification and subjective emotional experience. It is not a historical fact, but indelibly linked with the experience of the survivors. It is something we have an obligation not to forget, so that it never happens again.

A key work representing this phase of remembering Chernobyl is Svetlana Alexievich’s *Voices from Chernobyl*. Alexievich, a Ukranian journalist known for her documentary accounts of the experience of the military in Afghanistan and of everyday life in post-Soviet society, collected oral statements in interviews over a period of three years, before publishing this collage in a Moscow literary journal. It was immediately translated into German, but curiously remained unavailable in English until 2005. *Voices from Chernobyl* makes deeply moving reading, especially the longer monologues by the bereaved wives of liquidators with which it begins and ends. The book feels entirely authentic: the material is unobtrusive-

ly but most effectively selected, arranged and edited, affording thematic variation and interspersing the ‘monologues’ of varying lengths with ‘choruses’ composed from shorter statements of groups of interviewees. Alexievich’s respondents include men and women, young and old, workers and members of the intelligentsia, workers at the nuclear plant and people drafted in to clean up the Zone: soldiers, helicopter pilots, miners, doctors, teachers, nurses, scientists and former Party bureaucrats. Parents and children, evacuees and resettlers, indeed also Russian refugees fleeing from other parts of the disintegrating Soviet Union who were housed in the territory vacated because of radioactive contamination – all these are united in that Chernobyl changed their lives. The book is less concerned with historical facts than with their feelings, it says less about the disaster than about the cover-up, the subsequent deportation, and life in the decade after the accident. It opens with a heart-rending account by the newly-wed wife of a young fireman who was a member of the first team sent in after the explosion of how she nursed her husband to death. It is a tragic narrative of the refusal of love to give up. Oblivious to common sense and rational argument, and defying all regulations and authorities, she flew to Moscow when her husband was sent there to a specialist clinic, and tricked the doctors into letting her sit at her husband’s bedside. She cared for him over several weeks as his skin disintegrated and his body gradually fell apart, not daring to let anyone know she was pregnant. Of course she lost the baby as a result, and now has cancer, as well as the long-term effects of the psychological trauma. The anguish so eloquently expressed in her words is also present, though to a lesser degree, in the testimonies of the mothers who, years after the accident, saw their children’s health deteriorate, and found themselves meeting in the lavatories in hospital so as not to cry in front of their children, in the stories of children who had to leave their pets behind when they were evacuated, or who were shunned by their classmates at their new schools, called “shiny” and made go out in the dark to see if they glowed. The same suffering, often bordering on trauma, is painfully present in the stories of the old women and men who had lived all their lives in villages which were

evacuated, who lost their houses, their animals, their fields and gardens, and their communities.

The book is both a requiem or memorial for the suffering of the dead and the survivors, and an indictment of the authorities. The overall sense the reader is left with is of a people betrayed, who want the story of their experience to be told so that nothing like this is ever allowed to happen again. They speak of the shattering of their faith in Communism and in science, of a generation whose lives were blighted, and who are continuing to suffer depression. The original title, 'Chernobyl Prayer', alludes to a prayer said by one of the respondents: the title may have been altered in English because only a minority of the speakers share a religious world view. The individual interviews are given titles summing up their content, but the voices speak first anonymously, as in a radio play, and their names and professions are only revealed at the end of the interview. A recurring theme is comparison with the experience of hardship, loss and sacrifice in the Second World War (especially by the evacuees), and with the Afghan war by the soldiers. But practically all the themes and aspects of remembering Chernobyl found elsewhere are to be found in these pages. We learn of the motivation of the liquidators ranging from dedication and self-sacrifice to careless bravado and a spirit of adventure, disregarding the radiation because of the financial rewards, and of the attitudes of party officials ranging from anxious suppression of the truth to passionate determination to inform the public. Several of the interviewees reflect on the act of remembering, how painful it is, what purpose it may serve.

Igor Kostin's book of photographs of Chernobyl, which were taken consistently over a period of seventeen years, can also be seen in the context of victim memory. The title 'Confessions of a Reporter' indicates a personal involvement going beyond mere empathy with the liquidators and evacuees to a sense of responsibility, even guilt, and determination to witness to the suffering and wrong-doing. There are parallels with 'moral witnesses' to the holocaust in Kostin's mix of anger, horror and frustration at the lies, deception and distortion of the truth of the event. Aleida Assmann has distinguished between the

functions of legal, historical, religious and moral witnesses. All these derive a special kind of truthfulness and authenticity from their physical presence at the event, and there is an assumption of more or less reliable recall. As survivors they are communicators to posterity. However, unlike legal and historical witnesses, moral witnesses are not bound to impartiality, but rather advocates for the victims whose performative reconstruction of events is expected to be highly subjective.

Moral witnesses combine an element of detachment with authenticity of experience, historical truth with ethical orientation, critical enlightenment with witnessing as a public conscience, calling for acknowledgement of responsibility and action. However, they do not construct a grounding narrative for a new community. Their testimony constitutes no 'useful' remembering for a collective, but rather, in overcoming the initial lack of public interest, demolishing heroic interpretations and debunking narratives meeting our constant desire for comfort and hope, they initiate a moral discourse which does justice to the enormity of a crime which is only partially and incompletely dealt with through criminal prosecution. They thus foster a memory culture borne by empathy, solidarity with the victims, and historical responsibility. (p. 90)

Kostin's text, which is unfortunately poorly translated, reveals him as a moral witness to the victims of Chernobyl. He expresses a feeling of almost sacred duty to witness to the victims, give voice to the silenced, and keep the memory of the dead alive in a new social and political climate. Like Alexievich's book, his photos are not just an accusation, but also a monument to the dead, a mourning or lament for them.[7] Through their work, Alexievich and Kostin construct a secondary moral community of witnesses, based on the universal values of human dignity and respect for physical integrity, giving the victims their status, a face, a voice, a place and a history. Kostin matches the profile of the

[7] In an interview in 2006, he said "It was my job to go there, and I did my job. I had to go there. It was my duty to report from there. […] [The liquidators] did the dirty work. They're my heroes. I want with my photos to create a memorial to them, to those who no one talks about. […] I felt that history was being played out there, and that some one had to devote themselves to it seriously. My pictures are like an instruction manual for the next generation, so that something like it can never happen again."

moral witness in a further sense, in that he can be said to himself embody his testimony, through his presence in Chernobyl from the day after the accident on, and his sharing in the victims' suffering: he was hospitalised some months after the accident for radiation sickness and has had several operations. This bodily participation is captured in photographs which bear his shadow in the corner of the image. [IMAGE OF EXPLODED REACTOR/ BULLDOZED HOUSE] Peter Novick has shown how the holocaust became a subject distinct from the Second World War in the 1960s and 1970s, and became an icon for guilt and trauma in the 1980s and 1990s. The sociologist Jeffrey Alexander showed how the holocaust discourse developed in the context of a transnational universalist morality which emerged after 1989, when the Soviet empire was no longer conceived of as the axis of evil. This enabled it to become a free-floating signifier for analogies with other traumatic events. The 'traumatic victim memory' gradually gained social recognition and symbolic articulation for the holocaust survivors. From the 1960s on, they became a community of solidarity with their own forms of commemoration.

Aleida Assmann has written of the global ethical shift from sacrificial heroising remembering to victimological commemoration since the end of the Cold War. The moral turn has been marked by a new sensitivity towards ethical standards, and an emotionalising of history through foregrounding of suffering (p. 80). The association of passivity with purity and innocence has afforded passive victims a new status as objects of reverence and piety, and an irresistible aura attracting media attention. Unfortunately, the mythical heightening of the victim role can block the future through passivity, and lead to ignoring the experience of other groups of victims. Yehuda Elkana, Peter Novick and Charles Maier have argued that it can thus be a part of the post-traumatic syndrome rather than a solution to it. In this case, it can lead to groups seeking to prove their victim status in order to gain media attention, social recognition or financial advantage.

This shift is reflected in the depiction of Chernobyl. Charities such as the German 'Kinder von Chernobyl', founded in 1992, who have provided extremely important medical help, are a symptom of and have benefited from the emerg-

ence of this memory horizon since the 1990s, facilitating empathy with the Chernobylites as victims of a crime against humanity, as it were. An international fascination with the victims of Chernobyl has emerged, based in part on their aura of innocent victimhood. Photos of radiation victims show them as people who have entered the zone of death without blame, and returned as messengers from another world. Extensive use has been made of images of *mutilated bodies*, especially those of children whose thyroid glands were surgically removed because of the danger of developing cancer from the radioactive iodine accumulated in them, and *deformed births* (see KOSTIN IMAGES OF SCARRED BOY AND DEFORMED BOY] In our post-religious age, the fragile body has become the supreme value. The body of the tortured and traumatised is the lasting site of the violence done to them, and becomes the 'memory' of the witness. The purity, innocence and goodness of which traumatised victims become supreme examples are illustrated in their 'stigmata', physical and psychological. The emphasis on suffering and wounds is part of a post-Christian passion narrative, investing victims with absolute moral authority. Previously suppressed by heroic values, merely a subject of religious interest in symbolic form in the passion of Christ, it has become a positive cultural value and acquired new social status through the inversion of the heroic into the traumatic. What was previously a matter of shame has become one of prestige and honour. In trauma victims, the memory which cannot be admitted to the consciousness is inscribed on the body in the form of facial ticks or involuntary movements, or it manifests itself in multiple personality disorders, a pathological splitting of identity.

The focus on children emphasises the innocence and helplessness of Chernobyl victims. [DEMONSTRATION IMAGE WITH POSTER OF CHILD BEING SAVED BY LIQUIDATOR ANGEL] It would be wrong, however, to see in these images merely an indictment of the Soviet system, for they the memory-images of Chernobyl-induced suffering especially that of children, are, according to Sarah Phillips, indicative of a collective feeling of guilt. Many of her respondents expressed concern that they had compromised the health of their children through their own exposure to radiation. Underlying this speculation is a sense of

painful personal indictment, irresponsibility, and culpability alongside Soviet mismanagement and cover-up and the inadequacies of the medical system. [LUBRICHT/ KLIASCHUK picture of Artur and Dima] – bald heads arousing associations of concentration camps and the Hibakushi.

The images of deserted homes and abandoned schools were also a part of this victim memory. The town of Pripyat, built specially for the workers in the power station in 1970, had a population of 49 000. It is contaminated with Plutonium, so will not be inhabitable again for 135 000 years. Today it is beginning to resemble a lost city in the jungle, as its hotel, central square, restaurants, amusement park and sports complex become increasingly enveloped by trees and the natural vegetation of the area. [IMAGE of trees taking over from LUBRICHT] Also images of [CHILDREN'S SHOES in kindergarden], echoing the holocaust. The suffering of children is poignantly symbolised by their absence. The quintessential portrayal of Chernobyl is therefore, as Phillips states, an abandoned doll (often headless or otherwise mutilated), lying in an empty, dilapidated room (p. 168). Broken dolls and toys are metaphors for deformed and deprived children, and photographs of them representations of children's lost childhoods. [ABANDONED DOLLS]. They infer dismay that such suffering could be inflicted on children. The abandoned doll becomes a symbol of the capacity of the leaders of the Soviet Union and Ukraine to lie to and neglect the Ukrainian citizens, especially innocent children.

The fascination of a cultivated and inhabited landscape reverting to wilderness. Giving a power sense of the extent of the catastrophe and the duration of its effects. Also the paradox that there are people living here, the [RETURNERS], eking out a harsh existence, tolerated by the authorities. The children who predominate in charity pictures are matched here by images of frail old people.

The political appropriation of Chernobyl, and its transformation into a symbol of hope

Protest demonstrations against the handling of Chernobyl [IMAGE OF PROTEST DEMO 1988] served as a focus for early anti-Russian sentiment in Belarus and

Ukraine. In this sense Chernobyl is an example of the political memory which according to Peter Novick (*Nach dem Holocaust*, Frankfurt am Main 2003) reduces historical events to archetypes, mental images to icons, and narratives to myths whose function it is to persuade and influence people. The stylisation of the Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine as an event symbolising Russia's prior domination, and as a culmination of the misdeeds of Soviet leaders (Phillips pp. 172-3), made it a founding myth for the nation. [DEMONSTRATION WITH FLAGS]

Sarah Phillips comments on the symbolic attempts to "claim" Chernobyl for Ukraine, by associating the ruined reactor and the deserted exclusion Zone with the native land (pp. 160 and 164). Over 90 million acres of Ukraine, fourteen percent of the country's total area, were contaminated with caesium 137. Depict-ions of empty landscapes emphasising the loss of homeland tapped into the evacuees' collective memory of the Second World War deportations under Stalin and the Nazis.[8] It was thus easy for the Ukranian authorities to present the events surrounding Chernobyl as reminders of war days and a second quasi-genocidal act by the Russian authorities.[9] "Chernobyl's simultaneous attack on land (i.e. contamination of soil and crops) and people's sense of place (i.e. dis-placing them from their homes) was especially devastating (and symbolically meaningful) for people who saw themselves as members of 'a nation of peas-ants'", Phillips writes (p. 175). The Pripyat area was referred to as one of Ukraine's most beautiful areas, and Chernobyl was experienced as an assault on the very soul of the nation.

The use of the events of Chernobyl to assert claims to national sover-eignty meant that Chernobyl reparations became a key aspect of the new Ukranian government's policies. Five percent of the annual budget was devoted to Chernobyl-related expenditure. Soon, however, the government began to play

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[8] Some five million persons in Ukraine died in the famine of 1932-3, which resulted from Stalin's coercive grain requisitioning, three and a half million were evacuated to other parts of the Soviet Union, and a further two million were deported to camps in Europe, as Phillips notes, pp. 164 and 176.

down the medical consequences at home, in order to keep the cost of supporting the officially recognised and pensioned Chornobylets in check. At the same time they played it up in order to extract loans from the European Central Bank, refusing to shut down the other reactors in Chernobyl until 2000.

However, there is noticeable difference in tone between the accusatory books etc. which appeared in the early years after 1986, and at the tenth anniversary, and the much blander 20th anniversary remembering organised by the IAEA's international Chernobyl Forum. Guillaume Grandazzi wrote an article anticipating this in 2006, claiming the 20th anniversary would be commercialised and sanitised. "Rarely has there been such a drastic downward revision of published figures, concerning actual and expected deaths, observed and expected cancers, or the number of 'liquidators' and residents of the contaminated areas", he writes, and even quotes a colleague's use of the phrase "denial of a nuclear holocaust". As recently as 2000, he notes, the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan had spoken of the need to remember Chernobyl and prevent anything similar ever happening again: "If we forget Chernobyl we increase the risk of more such technological and environmental disasters in the future. … Secondly, more than seven million of our fellow human beings do not have the luxury of forgetting. They are still suffering, every day, as a result of what happened fourteen years ago."

Global warming has since changed attitudes towards nuclear power. By November 2006, Annan had changed tack: "As important as it is to honour the sacrifice and losses of the past, the best way to attract and keep fresh international attention will be to identify a way forward for Chernobyl." Victims were to be remembered as *survivors*, and Chernobyl transformed "from a symbol of destruction to one of human resilience and hope".

[9] Chernobyl symbols that emphasise the Ukranianness of the disaster were part of a larger attempt by Ukraine to become socially and politically a part of the international community, and to decolonise itself from Russia (Phillips p. 177).

Conclusion

Remembering Chernobyl thus gives insight into the mechanisms and psychological dispositions, political constellations and historical and cultural determinants of European remembering. We have traced the emergence of a way of remembering Chernobyl reflecting the international shift to recognition and valuing of victims' suffering. And we have even seen evidence of that fusion of remembering with self-observation which has become so common, as individual and collective remembering cease to be spontaneous, and become increasingly manipulated. Remembering Chernobyl shows on the one hand how narratives of the past are social and cultural constructions by people to meet their present needs and circumstances, and on the other how certain aspects of remembering are involuntary and beyond the control of those concerned. It also shows how memories do not exist as closed systems, but constantly impinge on, amplify, conflict with, modify and are polarised in social reality by other memories and impulses to forget (Assmann p. 17).

Remembering Chernobyl exemplifies the interaction between individual and social group memory, it shows how cultural memory is made up of symbolic media acting as vehicles of collective symbolic construction, driven by social communication, and revitalised and appropriated by individual acts of remembering. The artefacts of cultural memory of Chernobyl have stabilised and secured the individual and social remembering of events beyond the life span of ordinary eye witnesses, and determined their collective interpretation by future generations, enabling these to participate in remembering them despite the absence of direct experience. Through symbolic coding, reproduction and distribution, texts and images have constituted generalised aesthetic formulations, thus opening up the experience of a generation to a wider public. While they have aroused recognition and memory among witnesses to the event, more importantly they have prompted acceptance and empathy by others. Imaginative reconstruction permits empathy and vicarious experience. Art can also provide the impulse for the freeing of blocked memories, have a therapeutic effect by

bridging the gap between individual and collective memory, integrating private memories in the social and cultural archive.

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