

Chernobyl¹ 30 years on: Reliving² horror of worlds worst nuclear accident

Three decades have passed since the Chernobyl accident. As its reality recedes³, the memory of suffering is replaced by iconic post-apocalyptic⁴ imagery from tourists and documentary crews. Yet the story of the plants demise⁵ remains harrowing.

There had been potentially grave nuclear plant accidents before, at Selafield and Three Mile Island. But it was Chernobyl that shaped humanity's⁶ understanding of what a nuclear disaster looks and feels like. The Fukushima meltdowns five years ago have done little to replace the archetype⁷.

The 1986 disaster had all the components of the ultimate tragic myth: the avoidable and explosive⁸ accident, a delayed and panicky evacuation⁹, unsuspecting rescue workers poisoning themselves with invisible radiation, the abandoned Ferris wheel in Pripyat, and the looming¹⁰ hulk of the still-operational station buried underneath¹¹ a sarcophagus¹², as a warning and a reminder.

As the catastrophe unfolded on April 26, 1986, the chain of events could not have been more cinematic C indeed, Chernobyl has featured in dozens of films, books and video games C nor more ominous¹³ or significant.

Negligence¹⁴ & bravery

The gas explosion at 1:23am was the product of a sequence of unlikely, but not inexplicable¹⁵, failures that are reminiscent¹⁶ of other Soviet technological catastrophes. It was brought about by a combination of Chernobyl's flawed¹⁷ RBMK reactor design, unapproved anywhere else in the

¹chernobyl words not found

²reliving vt. 再生(重温)

³recedes v. 向后退,退却,减弱

⁴apocalyptic words not found

⁵demise words not found

⁶humanity's n. 人类 人性;人道;慈爱[U] He treated the prisoners with humanity. 他人道地对待俘虏。 人文学科[the P] She has a background in humanities and modern languages. 她学过人文学科和现代语言。

⁷archetype words not found

⁸explosive a. 爆炸(性)的 n. 炸药

⁹evacuation words not found

¹⁰looming n. 织布机 v. 朦胧地出现,隐约可见,可怖地出现

¹¹underneath ad. 在下面 n. 下部,底部 prep. 在...下面

¹²sarcophagus n. (精美的)石棺

¹³ominous a. 预兆的,不祥的

¹⁴negligence n. 疏忽,粗心大意

¹⁵inexplicable words not found

¹⁶reminiscent a. 回忆的,怀旧的,耽于回想的 n. 回忆者,回忆录作者

¹⁷flawed n. 缺点,裂纹,瑕疵

world, and a belated¹⁸ and unsanctioned safety test that went wrong. The test was not aborted¹⁹, thanks to a manager screaming over his underlings, which culminated²⁰ in poor split-second decision-making by exhausted and stressed-out staff.

Yet details from that night stand out. The plants deputy²¹ chief engineer, Anatoly Dyatlov, remained in the control room, refusing to believe the extent of the accident even when told by first-hand witnesses. As 50 tons of nuclear fuel fanned out from the destroyed rooftop²², the soon-to-be-dead shift manager Aleksandr Akimov sent two men to manually lower the rods. They were killed by less than a minute of exposure that left them with a ‘nuclear tan²³’. No one left their workstations as colleagues searched for each other, already vomiting²⁴ from radiation sickness. The other reactors continued to operate as if nothing had happened. And so it went.

Decontamination²⁵ of the Chernobyl NPP territory. ? Vitaliy Ankov

Decontamination of the Chernobyl NPP territory. ? Vitaliy Ankov / Sputnik

When I came in for my shift that morning, it was immediately obvious that a disaster had occurred, Aleksey Breus, an engineer at Chernobyl's fateful Reactor 4, told RT. I came to my workplace and was told that the radiation was exceeding normal levels by 1,000 times, but then they said that in places I had just walked through it was 100 times worse. At the end of that shift, I asked What should I do tomorrow? And they said, Come into work as normal. This is how things were in the USSR.

Firefighters arrived at the plant within minutes, without any specialist protective equipment or knowledge of the danger they were dealing with. Some picked up the graphite²⁶ debris²⁷ from the reactor, joking blithely²⁸ about radiation doses²⁹, just as they were being exposed to them. More than 30 people died gruesome³⁰ deaths within days, weeks, or months of the disaster, following exposure to fatal doses of radiation.

People had different wounds C fractures³¹, burns and irradiation³², Vitaly

¹⁸belated words not found

¹⁹aborted v. 流产, 打胎, 堕胎

²⁰culminated v. 达到顶点或高潮, 以...告终 vi. 达到顶点 vt. 使达高潮, 使结束

²¹deputy a. 代理的, 副的 n. 代表

²²rooftop words not found

²³tan n. 鞣制革, 黄褐色 a. 黄褐色的 v. 晒黑

²⁴vomiting v. 吐出, 呕吐

²⁵decontamination words not found

²⁶graphite words not found

²⁷debris n. 碎片, 残骸

²⁸blithely words not found

²⁹doses n. 剂量, 服用量 v. 配

³⁰gruesome words not found

³¹fractures n. 破碎, 骨折 v. 破碎, 破裂

³²irradiation words not found

Leonenko, the head physician at Pripyat hospital from 1980 until 1986, told RT. Most of them had third- and fourth-degree radiation burns. One of them died instantly, the others had to wait 24 hours to be evacuated³³ to a hospital in Moscow.

Eventually, over 600,000 ‘liquidators’³⁴ from all over the Soviet Union were drafted in to clean up the effects of the accident.

A man in uniform knocked on the door of my house and said that I was being recruited³⁵ as a liquidator³⁶. He said that if I refused, they would use force. There were eight of us in the bus and they kept us overnight, before sending us to a military regiment³⁷. There, we were forced to sign a non-disclosure³⁸ agreement and told that violating it would result in facing a firing squad³⁹, Aleksandr Filipenko, who spent months helping liquidators change in and out of irradiated⁴⁰ clothes, told RT.

Filipenko⁴¹ had been a dual cycling world champion prior to the accident. Within years, he was so riddled with an assortment⁴² of chronic illnesses that he could not walk.

But at least he is still alive.

American Professor Robert Gale operating on a victim of the Chernobyl disaster, in the 6th Clinical Hospital of the USSR Ministry of Health. Moscow. August 1986. ? Vladimir⁴³ Vyatkin

American Professor Robert Gale operating on a victim of the Chernobyl disaster, in the 6th Clinical Hospital of the USSR Ministry of Health. Moscow. August 1986. ? Vladimir Vyatkin / Sputnik

Pripyat was a model Soviet city that had been specially-constructed a little over a decade before the tragedy to house the Chernobyl plants workers and their families. It had a population of 50,000. Due to the natural tendency of Soviet officials to secrecy and the desire of power plant staff to underplay the severity⁴⁴ of the accident, while bureaucrats⁴⁵ and scientists all over the country knew something had happened, Pripyat children continued to bathe obliviously in the contaminated⁴⁶ river C at

³³evacuated v. 疏散, 撤出, 排泄

³⁴liquidators words not found

³⁵recruited n. 招聘, 新兵, 新份子, 新会员 v. 恢复, 补充, 徵募

³⁶liquidator words not found

³⁷regiment n. 团, 多数, 管理 v. 组织, 编成团, 统制

³⁸disclosure words not found

³⁹squad n. 班, 小队, 小集团

⁴⁰irradiated words not found

⁴¹filipenko words not found

⁴²assortment n. 分类, 配合, 各色俱备之物

⁴³vladimir words not found

⁴⁴severity n. 严格, 严重, 激烈

⁴⁵bureaucrats words not found

⁴⁶contaminated v. 弄脏, 污染

least until the first patients entered the hospital complaining of nausea⁴⁷, headaches and a metallic taste in their mouths.

? Gleb⁴⁸ Garanich

? Gleb Garanich / Reuters

Horror stories C many apocryphal⁴⁹ C abound. A pedestrian crossing overlooking the station is now known as the Bridge of Death. After the explosion occurred, onlookers gathered to observe the rainbow-colored plumes⁵⁰ of burning graphite rising from the station, in what they told others was one of the most beautiful sights they had ever beheld. But those who stayed too long suffered near-fatal doses of radiation, or even fatal exposures.

All of Pripyats residents were bundled⁵¹ into buses after an evacuation was finally announced on the afternoon of April 27 C 36 hours after the blasts⁵². In order to prevent packing delays and make sure that radiation-absorbing items would not circulate throughout the country, they had been told that they would return within three days.

? Gleb Garanich

? Gleb Garanich / Reuters

The eerie⁵³ calm for which the town has become known settled upon it within days.

READ⁵⁴ MORE: Wildlife thriving without humans in Chernobyl nuclear zone C study (PHOTOS, VIDEO)

When the liquidators entered the town, fridges were still stocked with rotting food and fish, and clothes were still hanging outside where they had been left to dry. Some animals, such as storks⁵⁵, that had been exposed to fatal doses of radiation lay on the ground dying. However, cattle were left to wander the streets, marveling at their unexpected freedom before being shot to prevent the spread of disease.

Post-apocalyptic normality

Ironically, considering what has happened over the past 30 years, to a Soviet time traveler Pripyat and Chernobyls power station would seem more familiar than anywhere else in the former USSR.

Read more

⁴⁷nausea n. 反胃, 晕船, 极度的不快

⁴⁸gleb words not found

⁴⁹apocryphal words not found

⁵⁰plumes n. 羽毛 v. 整理羽毛, 骚首弄姿 vt. 用羽毛装饰

⁵¹bundled n. 捆, 束

⁵²blasts n. 爆破, 冲击波, 一阵, 汽笛声 v. 爆破, 炸掉

⁵³eerie words not found

⁵⁴rEAD words not found

⁵⁵storks n. [鸟] 鹤

A sarcophagus covering the damaged fourth reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, Ukraine April 22, 2016. ? Gleb Garanich Nuclear safety is no-politics zone: Chernobyl plant head urges Russia-Ukraine cooperation

Life in the exclusion zone is reassuringly⁵⁶ routine, as the chance of the area ever returning to normal is zero. As radioactive elements in the ground reach their half-life, wildlife has crept⁵⁷ back to produce one of the most idyllic⁵⁸ landscapes anywhere in Europe. To the surprise of many outsiders, Chernobyl's surviving reactors continued to operate until 2000, and the facility still swarms⁵⁹ with maintenance staff based in and out on a daily basis.

The Ukrainian government says the cleanup will eventually be completed by 2065.

The human cost of the accident is impossible to estimate precisely, with verified deaths competing with statistical projections and complex medical theories. The UN has said that 4,000 people died earlier than otherwise due to Chernobyl, though Greenpeace says the true figure could be more than 20 times higher. The number of people suffering from additional cancers or birth defects is also impossible to attribute precisely to small or inconsistent doses of radiation received over decades, though they could reach hundreds of thousands.

Abandoned radioactive equipment that was used during clean-up operations after the Chernobyl nuclear power plant's fourth reactor exploded on April 26, 1986. ? Igor⁶⁰ Kostin

Abandoned radioactive equipment that was used during clean-up operations after the Chernobyl nuclear power plant's fourth reactor exploded on April 26, 1986. ? Igor Kostin / Sputnik

The symbolic significance of April 26, 1986 is impossible to deny. The date is still a watershed⁶¹ in world history, to rival⁶² Hiroshima or 9/11. The nuclear industry, the environmental movement, and the Soviet Union were never the same. But the visceral⁶³ stories of those who did not make it, and the dwindling⁶⁴ numbers of those who did survive saving many lives in the process should not be forgotten. Even if there is little else positive to commemorate⁶⁵ on this day.

Igor Ogorodnev, RT

⁵⁶reassuringly ad. 安慰地

⁵⁷crept words not found

⁵⁸idyllic words not found

⁵⁹swarms n. 蜂窝 v. 云集、充满

⁶⁰igor words not found

⁶¹watershed words not found

⁶²rival n. 对手, 竞争者 a. 竞争的 vt. 与...相匹敌, 比得上

⁶³visceral a. 内脏的

⁶⁴dwindling v. 减少, 缩小

⁶⁵commemorate v. 纪念, 庆祝 vt. & n. 纪念

Glossary