

~~TOP SECRET~~ [REDACTED]

NIO/USSR et al.
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IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHERNOBYL DISASTER

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This is a very preliminary and tentative effort to scope out the implications of this disaster and related intelligence tasks.

Although it is by far the largest nuclear power plant accident in world history, the immediate effects are still far from clear.

If we accept Soviet official claims that two people died in the immediate event at the plant and the other three reactors were shut down, then the Soviets did use forewarning of a meltdown (possibly up to 24 hours) to evacuate the plant. But this is still very uncertain.

We have reports that evacuations in a 30 km radius are taking place. If these started well before the actual meltdown, immediate loss of life in the neighborhood may be quite small. But we also have rumors of hundreds, even thousands, of dead already, and of hospitals being heavily taxed. This suggests that only the plant took advantage of early warning. Again, very uncertain.

Long-term effects, resulting from radiation and associated ecological impact, are very difficult to predict on the basis of our sparse current data, and will be influenced by variables such as weather and winds in the immediate future and Soviet protective measures.

Apparently the fire in the graphite of the reactor continues to inject new radioactive contaminants into the atmosphere.

Some Implications

The direct impact of the facility loss on the Soviet power economy is likely to be small. If the Soviets are obliged for safety reasons to shut down other reactors, it could have a noticeable impact.

Large economic impacts could well arise from:

The disruption of large areas downwind of the radiation source due to evacuations, shutdown of plants and facilities, and decontamination activities.

The impact of radiation on agriculture, especially the dairy industry.

Pollution of water supplies, especially downstream on the Dniepr toward Kiev.

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The social impact of the accident will depend upon the number of casualties already suffered and expected over the longer term. Even if the number of people physically affected in the short run is small, the lingering public health effects of this kind of radiological event could magnify social impact.

A major concern of Soviet citizens will be how well their system looked out for their safety. And it will be of great importance to the regime to influence the way this is perceived, either by effective action or, as is the usual Soviet practice, by manipulating information.

The disaster could exacerbate ethnic and class resentments because, on present evidence, it seems likely that lower classes and Baltic and Ukrainian populations will suffer disproportionately.

If there is widespread death, illness, and dislocation, this event will be a severe psychological blow to the Gorbachev regime and its gospel of optimism, even if the economic effects are limited.

No matter what the regime does or says, many Soviets will blame their suffering on a negligent system which only looks out for the nomenklatura.

In a population where ancient superstitions still play a role, Chernobyl will be an evil omen.

In any case, the system under Gorbachev's new leadership will be put to a politically and psychologically important test:

Did it react with the honesty, efficiency, promptness, and public-mindedness he calls for?

Or did it manifest the usual sloth, carelessness, evasions, and outright lies?

Moscow will show a strong inclination to find prominent people to blame and punish. Shcherbitskiy, the Ukrainian party boss, is likely to come under renewed fire.

Although East European customers for Soviet electric power may face some disruptions and Soviet nuclear power plants are likely to lose their market for a while, the principal international effects of this event are likely to be political and psychological:

Governments and publics in both East and West Europe could be alienated in lasting ways by Soviet failure to provide any early warning, when something like three days were available. This will noticeably dull Soviet persuasiveness on all manner of negotiations, from arms control to trade, and their related propaganda efforts.

The accident will undoubtedly inspire the Green and other environmentally oriented political movements to new efforts directed against nuclear power.

If there are tangible environmental impacts in West Europe, such a rise in the rate of cancer deaths, these could linger as problems for Soviet diplomacy in the years ahead.

Some Intelligence Tasks

Our main tasks will be to assess the magnitude of this accident and to track the implications noted above and others that will surely develop, technical, economic, social, and political. In addition, we can already identify some other intelligence concerns.

The causes and phenomenology of this accident are of great interest simply because of the insight they will provide into nuclear safety and protective measures, a world-wide concern.

If we target appropriately now, we ought to get some insight into the effectiveness of the Soviet civil defense organization in the nearest thing to its "design task" short of nuclear war itself.

We are disturbed by the lack of intelligence evidence, prior to the Swedish disclosures and the near simultaneous official Soviet announcement, that this disaster was unfolding over some three days. We are especially disturbed because it occurred right in the heart of NATO's "warning of war" domain. We need to find out why.

We may be asked to judge whether it is safe for official and unofficial US travelers to be in affected parts of the USSR. This may get us into the business of -- or give us a case for -- overt radiation monitoring within the USSR.

We shall want to derive intelligence from any Western organizations who become involved in containing the accident (e.g., fighting the fire), cleaning up, or contributing to medical needs.

Unless the Soviet government is uncharacteristically prompt and candid in disclosing information about this accident, US intelligence will be a principal source of data and analysis on it, to inform everything from US policy to world opinion. This is likely to impose some new kinds of pressure for declassifying otherwise sensitive information or for sharing it with foreign governments. This is something the world believes it has a need to know about in detail. The protection of sources and methods will not be recognized as a comparably important concern.