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FOREIGN AFFAIRS | Flora Lewis

Moscow's Nuclear Cynicism

Moscow has still released only a minimum of information about the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl. Even the meager announcement was obviously provoked only when Sweden discovered the fallout and protested the Soviet failure to warn that radioactivity was coming its way.

So far, the Russians have not told their own people about requesting help from Sweden and West Germany. No pictures have been published. Obviously there are a lot of rumors in the country and evident official concern that popular reaction will endanger the ambitious nuclear energy program.

But the Moscow radio, broadcasting in English, went rather far in protesting that more Americans demonstrated after the Three Mile Island accident, in which no one was injured, than after recent Nevada weapons tests. Trying to divert attention with such propaganda is the ultimate in cynicism.

So much for the pledge from General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev to be more open with his people and inform them about things that go wrong. No wonder it was found necessary to have Oleg Tumanov hold a press conference denouncing the U.S. Russian-language station Radio Liberty as a C.I.A. front and claim some American correspondents in Moscow are its agents.

Mr. Tumanov had become the station's acting editor-in-chief after defecting to the West 20 years ago. Two months ago he disappeared from his base in Munich, and he was very skittish about explaining how he got back to Moscow when he surfaced there this week.

Internal news blackout on Chernobyl

Naturally Radio Liberty broadcasts the news that Western correspondents send from Moscow. That is its purpose: to let Soviet citizens know what the rest of us hear about what goes on in their country and the world at large. Doubtless a lot of them are tuning in these days to find out a bit more about Chernobyl and its consequences.

The full impact and the number of people dead or doomed may never be known. It is obviously more important to the Soviet leadership to hide as much as possible from its own people than to give them and neighboring countries adequate reports on the extent and nature of the risk.

There has to be sympathy for the Russians. A terrible thing has happened and it is a reminder for the nuclear age that there are no barriers and border guards in the atmosphere. It is also a reminder, so soon after America's space-shuttle disaster, that no country and no system is immune to dreadful accident. We do share the hazards of the times.

But there is also going to be a lot of political fallout in Western Europe, particularly on the left because anti-nuclear protesters and militant environmentalists tend to lean leftward. There are strong anti-nuclear movements in West Germany and in Sweden, where a Government fell over the issue a few years ago.

Finland has not joined the other Scandinavian countries in protest at the lack of warning, not because the Finns don't mind but because Finlandization means having to take great care not to irritate the Russians. People there must be feeling double injury.

West Germany's Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, has called on the Russians to shut down all nuclear reactors of the same type as the one that evidently melted in Chernobyl until the cause of the accident and needed design changes can be learned. No doubt Moscow won't do it, however; about two-thirds of the Soviet plants are of this type.

Anger in Western Europe at the lack of information and apparent indifference to safety standards has provoked some of the harshest and most fundamental criticism of the Soviet Union for many years here.

French and West German papers see the disaster as the result of the secretive, authoritarian system of making decisions without involving the people whose lives it rules, and failing to allow open debate on nuclear issues. They point out that it was the militaristic urge to disregard civilian needs that led to negligence in setting nuclear standards.

"This is just as much our problem as the radioactive cloud over Sweden," commented the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. "We're all in the same boat and Moscow must account for this." This is true around the world. The Russians keep pointing out that we have to live with them. They also have to live with us. Their people should be told, via Radio Liberty and all possible ways, that Chernobyl is another reason we don't like it. □