

BOOK REVIEW

Tatiana Kasperski. *Les politiques de la radioactivité: Tchernobyl et la mémoire nationale en Biélorussie contemporaine*. Paris: Éditions Pétra, 2020. 345 pp.

ISBN: 978-2-84743-265-7

Jacob Darwin Hamblin

Oregon State University

jacob.hamblin@oregonstate.edu

After the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident mobilized independence movements in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), some of those new governments began to behave in ways reminiscent of the old Soviet regime. Such was the case of Belarus, with its territory adjacent to the Ukrainian disaster site. Once the site of anti-nuclear and pro-democracy agitation, it has in recent decades become more authoritarian, downplaying dangers from radioactive contamination and looking toward a bright future in nuclear power. What happened to the memories of Chernobyl? Tatiana Kasperski offers us a lively discussion of the freighted politics of memory since 1986, drawing on published sources, archives, and oral history interviews. The past, she reminds us, has had many political uses.

The book is not about the Chernobyl meltdown itself, but instead is about the politics of remembering it. Yet Kasperski does point out several key details that help explain why government mismanagement became such a theme among Belarusian writers, activists, and politicians in the first decade after the accident. There was no organization in the USSR designed to address such

© 2020 Jacob Darwin Hamblin.

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

emergencies, and the response was haphazard. The police, firemen, and emergency workers had no training for such extraordinary events and they were set to work without proper protective equipment. Government leaders avoided making tough decisions, such as evacuating towns, and they dodged personal responsibility. When local authorities in Ukraine and Belarus might have acted, they were paralyzed by lack of decisive leadership in Moscow. Yet they collaborated with Moscow in playing down the incident, censoring information about the explosion and about radioactive clouds passing overhead, and they neglected to provide timely details that might have helped people to protect themselves. The official government narrative, established by *Pravda* weeks after the incident, was not of disaster, death, and lingering sickness, but of Soviet heroism in a battle against a common enemy.

It was not long before personal evidence of illness, and rumors of wider harm, emerged in Belarus. Writers and scientists criticized the Soviet government for its handling of the crisis, and the tone of dissent was both anticommunist and anti-imperial. Kasperski links such sentiments to the public revelations, in 1988, that there were massive pits outside of Minsk filled with the bodies of Belarusians killed in Stalin's purges of the late 1930s. The public demonstrations about these victims stoked resentments about Chernobyl as well. The personal reflections of physicist Valery Legasov were also published in 1988. Legasov had led scientific efforts to understand and communicate the Chernobyl disaster, and later committed suicide. The posthumous publication of his ruminations about responsibility, safety, and the state sparked condemnations of Soviet mismanagement by Belarusian writers. A growing political party, the Belarusian Popular Front, deployed the memory of Chernobyl to mobilize sentiment against the Communist Party and against the ruling hand of Moscow.

In a tumultuous era that included *glasnost*, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the early years of Belarusian independence, politicians carefully framed the memory of Chernobyl. Kasperski offers an analysis of the rituals, monuments, and constructed past of the disaster. The Belarusian Popular Front regularly invited environmentalists and ecologists to its commemorations and meetings, and numerous organizations arose to study the long-term effects of radioactive contamination. The party publicly allied itself with scientists and with victim advocacy organizations such as Chernobyl Children, often emphasizing exploitation at the hands of callous foreign rulers. Shortly after independence, the government passed legislation to correct past mistakes, with plans to compensate victims and relocate large numbers of people.

Then something strange happened to the memory of Chernobyl as the new government faced the prospect of delivering on such promises and as political winds blew toward authoritarianism. New state-sponsored narratives emerged under the regime of Alexander Lukashenko, who has been president since 1994. Widely regarded outside Belarus as a dictator, Lukashenko revalorized the Soviet past, which had important consequences for the public memory of

Chernobyl. Lukashenko did not repress the memory of Chernobyl but ritualized it in his own way. The firemen, emergency workers, and inhabitants of neighboring villages were recast as heroes rather than victims, while the accident itself was remembered as a catastrophe akin to a natural disaster. Citizens were called upon to unify and overcome it, to move on rather than demand further compensation, and to make sacrifices like they had during the Great Patriotic War (World War II). Lukashenko's Chernobyl was not anti-Soviet, and instead was a national tragedy on par with the fall of the Soviet Union itself. His government took practical steps to decrease compensation to victims, and to constrain information about lingering effects through state-sponsored contamination maps and public education campaigns.

Kasperski's book provides brilliant conceptual analysis of the conflicting national narratives of Chernobyl before and during Lukashenko's regime. Because of state control of media, in Belarus there was only one public narrative. It was one that asserted the impossibility of the state taking responsibility for health. It passed on that responsibility to individuals by encouraging them to exercise, warning them about mushroom hunting, and identifying vegetables that did not accumulate radionuclides. Commemorations of Chernobyl served to frame one's place in the political order, and typically had "military-patriotic" dimensions (p. 191). Kasperski notes that Lukashenko has interpreted other views of Chernobyl as political opposition, saying that focusing on the harm of Chernobyl is akin to encouraging division in society. And it is true that alternative views of Chernobyl often implicitly criticized Belarus's authoritarian regime and rejected the valorization of the Soviet past. The exiled leaders of the Belarusian Popular Front characterized Lukashenko as a puppet of Moscow, complicit in radioactive genocide of the Belarusian people. Inside Belarus, Kasperski contends, there are privately-held national narratives, based on personal and family experiences, that do not align with that of Lukashenko.

Today, Belarus appears to have embraced not only a Soviet-style authoritarian political model but also a renewed commitment to nuclear power, despite bearing the brunt of the infamous nuclear disaster that did so much to bring down the USSR. Kasperski's insights are relevant not only to the history of contemporary Belarus, but to any context of national trauma. It is clear that Chernobyl became a crucial political lever, and that governments shaped historical memories to align them with state goals. Under an authoritarian regime, such reframing of history is particularly troubling. Kasperski reminds us that in the absence of political pluralism, there is no dissenting public discourse about what lessons to learn from the past.