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The public debate about the consequences of Chernobyl is of particular political relevance because each interpretation of the event also involves a judgment about the danger of low-level radiation exposure. Thus, statements about Chernobyl and its aftermath are also claims about what it should teach us about the nonmilitary use of nuclear energy. Commemorations of Chernobyl, such as those that occur on its anniversary, are therefore inherently political: the forms of language and the “facts” used to talk about it are an attempt to influence public perceptions about the risks connected with this type of electricity production. Furthermore, the narratives created by various participants in the Chernobyl debate demonstrate how different the perceptions of risk really are.

This essay starts with an overview of the accident and its evaluation. It subsequently examines different forms of remembering Chernobyl, from both a national and transnational perspective. It discusses national and transnational carriers of memories such as literature and photography, and elaborates on the implications of the contesting narratives interpreting Chernobyl in “apocalyptic” versus “radiophobic” ways. Furthermore, the essay sheds light on the implications of Chernobyl as a national site of memory in Germany, France, and Belarus. The comparative perspective reveals the importance of underlying structures such as national (nuclear) politics, elite and expert culture, environmentalism, and the role of individual agency. These factors condition the emergence of a specific narrative of the accident within a specific discursive field, and, furthermore, determine the meaning attributed to “Chernobyl” in a given national context setting. The essay concludes with some reflections on the future of Chernobyl as a site of memory and the reshaping of the Chernobyl discourse through Fukushima.

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Radiation and Borders: Chernobyl as a National and Transnational Site of Memory¹

Karena Kalmbach

If, as Etienne François suggests, a site of memory is only “alive” when it is discussed and debated, Chernobyl is unquestionably a very living site of memory indeed. Opinions about how many deaths the nuclear accident caused, what kinds of illnesses have resulted from the radioactive fallout, or what to do about the most contaminated areas in Eastern Europe could hardly be more divergent. The public debate about the consequences of Chernobyl is of particular political relevance because



each interpretation of the event also involves a judgment about the danger of low-level radiation exposure. Thus, statements about Chernobyl and its aftermath are also claims about what it should teach us about the nonmilitary use of nuclear energy. Commemorations of Chernobyl, such as those that occur on its anniversary, are therefore inherently political: the forms of language and the “facts” used to talk about it are an attempt to influence public perceptions about the risks connected with this type of electricity production. Furthermore, the narratives created by various participants in the Chernobyl debate demonstrate how different the perceptions of risk really are.

This essay examines different forms of remembering Chernobyl, from both a national and transnational perspective. “Forms of remembrance” are understood here in a broad sense, including material representations as well as performative practices. In addition, the analysis will give particular attention to the participants in this memory discourse. Before looking at these aspects in detail, however, I will provide a short overview of the accident and its reception.

The Chernobyl Accident and How It Has Been Evaluated

During the night of 25/26 April 1986 an accident happened in reactor unit 4 of the nuclear power plant “Lenin”, located about 100 kilometers north of Kiev. It would go down in history under the name of the neighboring town, Chernobyl. “Lenin”, which consisted of four RBMK-type reactors² with a total production capacity of 4,000 megawatts, had been built in the 1970s and 1980s, with two additional reactor units under construction in 1986. Together with the nearby city of Pripyat, which had been created specifically to house the workers at the plant, this industrial complex was the embodiment of technological progress in the Soviet Union. During that night in April 1986, a

¹ This essay was translated from German by Brenda Black, including all German-language sources unless otherwise specified.

² The Reaktor Bolshoy Moshchnosti Kanalnyi (RBMK) is a graphite-moderated and light-water-cooled reactor that was developed in the Soviet Union and has been used only in plants on its (former) territory.

nuclear meltdown occurred during a performance test, resulting in a series of explosions which destroyed the reactor building and released vast quantities of radioactive material into the environment. Smoke and dust caused by the fires carried the particles high into the air where they were distributed across the globe. The concentration of radionuclides deposited in any given area depended not only on air movements, but also local weather patterns and geographical factors.

Both the physical distribution of its fallout and the coverage in media reports made Chernobyl into a transnational event. The Soviet Union initially said nothing about the event after the national press agency TASS reported on 28 April that an accident had happened in the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl.³ In Western European and US media, however, there was intense speculation about the situation in the surrounding area and the number of casualties. East of the Iron Curtain the topic was not discussed, except in Poland, where the media reported on Chernobyl. However, a map of the protective measures undertaken by various European countries painted a very different picture – although not necessarily one which corresponded with the actual regional intensity of the radioactive fallout. There was no unified response at the level of the European Communities; EC regulations setting limits on the radioactivity level in foodstuffs were only established after Chernobyl. As a result, on the German side of the Rhine lettuce was removed from the markets and playground sand was replaced, while the French radiation protection agency on the other side of the Rhine announced that these measures were absurd. Although the southeastern part of France and Corsica received significant radioactive fallout, Paris was primarily worried that the Germans would infect the French population with their “Atomangst”. The government feared the economic and social consequences of a loss of trust in the quality of French agricultural products or a growing opposition to French nuclear policy.⁴

³ Phrasing of the TASS announcement as translated in “Neues Deutschland”, cited in M. Arndt, *Tschernobyl – Auswirkungen des Reaktorunfalls auf die Bundesrepublik Deutschland und die DDR*, Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Thüringen, Erfurt 2011, p. 48.

⁴ On the Chernobyl debate in France see K. Kalmbach, *Tschernobyl und Frank-*

While in the West, advocates and opponents of nuclear power were already engaged in a struggle over the “right response” to Chernobyl, those at the power plant “Lenin” and the vicinity faced an entirely different set of problems. It took several days to extinguish the graphite fires in the reactor, followed by months of work to clean up the site and build a sarcophagus containment structure around the destroyed reactor. More than 600,000 men and women, called “Liquidators”, were brought in from throughout the Soviet Union. Although a 30 kilometer radius around the plant was declared a “forbidden zone”, controlled by the military, the remaining reactor units resumed normal operation in late 1986. However, because the radioactive contamination was not limited to this arbitrarily determined territory, resettlement measures continued for years, particularly in Belarus, the country that received the majority of the fallout. Thus the number of evacuees, originally around 116,000 and consisting primarily of residents of Pripyat, today amounts to some 350,000.⁵

Western proponents of nuclear power didn't change their position much after the early reports of the events. By using the rhetoric and clichés of the Cold War, they quickly found a narrative which discredited the Soviet nuclear policies and information policies while emphasizing that such an accident could never happen in a Western facility. This narrative – supported by information in reports by critics from within the Soviet nuclear industry such as Grigori Medvedev⁶ – still dominates accounts of the accident today, even outside pro-nuclear circles. It describes the accident as the result of faulty reactor design and untrained personnel carelessly handling this highly sensitive technology. On an international level, pro-nuclear institutions emphasized that there was no need for alarm. Whatever lessons were to be learned from Chernobyl concerned above all the RBMK reac-

reich: Die Debatte um die Auswirkungen des Unfalls im Kontext der französischen Atompolitik und Elitenkultur, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2011.

⁵ For more on this topic see the essays in A. Sahn, M. Sapper, V. Weichsel (eds), “Tschernobyl – Vermächtnis und Verpflichtung”, in *Osteuropa*, 56, 4, 2006.

⁶ G. Medvedev, *The Truth about Chernobyl*, trans. E. Rossiter, Basic Books, New York 1990.

tors, and not the nuclear industry as a whole, they claimed. One of the most prominent examples is a comment by Morris Rosen, director of nuclear safety of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), during the Chernobyl Conference in August 1986 in Vienna that “even if an accident of this type should happen once a year [...] I would still consider nuclear power an interesting energy source”.⁷

The site of the Chernobyl power plant has never been completely abandoned. Even after the last reactor was turned off in 2000, thousands of workers are still employed maintaining and inspecting the facilities and, since 2007, building a new sarcophagus. Opinions vary widely about whether the new sarcophagus is needed.⁸ For just as some details of the accident are still debated, there is also much disagreement about how much radioactive material is still in the reactor – a question that in its turn refers back to the debate about how much radioactive material was released into the environment during the accident. Such discussions also have a direct influence on the recurrent question of which regions are contaminated and how much, and, in consequence, what negative effects it might have upon the health of the people living there.

Thus, there are a great number of uncertainties surrounding the Chernobyl accident, all of which contribute to the most difficult question of all: the death toll. Determining this number requires making a whole set of assumptions about the amount and quality of the material released by the accident, how it spread through the atmosphere, how radionuclides behave in the earth and water in various places, and so forth, in order to finally reach a conclusion about how much fallout radioactivity people were exposed to. Each

⁷ In French: “Même s’il y avait un accident de ce type tous les ans, – ce qui est loin d’être le cas – je considérerais le nucléaire comme une source d’énergie intéressante”. Cited in “La catastrophe de Tchernobyl pourrait être à l’origine de 24 000 décès par cancers”, *Le Monde*, 28 August 1986, p. 20.

⁸ The various positions in this debate are summarized in a Deutschlandfunk radio report by N. Schröder, “Der Tanz um das ‘Goldene Grab’ – Wem nützt der Sarkophag von Tschernobyl?” Transcript at <http://www.dradio.de/download/148967/> (accessed 30 June 2012).

of these steps depends upon dispersion models, for it is not possible to determine individual data points. In the next step, determining what negative health effects this additional radioactive exposure might have for an individual means relying entirely upon probability models. In theory every radioactive isotope has mutagenic potential and could trigger cancer. However, since this does not happen in every case, and since there are of course also many other factors leading to cancer – without any way of telling in the end what the precise trigger was – all casualty figures for Chernobyl are reported as “probabilistic”, that is, statistically possible, illnesses or deaths.

In addition to the widely varying assumptions upon which such calculations are based, the question of how many people have fallen ill or died (or will fall ill or die) due to Chernobyl also depends upon a central unknown: the question of which illnesses can be caused by long-term exposure to low-level radiation – in this case primarily in the form of contaminated food. The official international groups of experts evaluating the consequences of Chernobyl, namely the “International Chernobyl Project” and its successor, the “Chernobyl Forum”, have considered the negative health effects of low-level radiation to be negligible. As a result, the number of deaths listed in their 2006 report⁹ is much lower than in other studies.¹⁰

In addition to a small number of firefighters who died of acute radiation syndrome and the children who died from thyroid cancer, they calculate the possibility of some 4,000 fatal cancer cases among the Liquidators, evacuees, and the population of the highly contami-

⁹ Chernobyl Forum, *Chernobyl's Legacy: Health, Environmental and Socio-Economic Impacts and Recommendations to the Governments of Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine*, IAEA, Vienna 2006.

¹⁰ Compare especially the Torch Report, which offers a critical analysis of the studies by the international organizations and today is one of the main references for nuclear critics: I. Fairlie, D. Summer, A. Nyagu, *The Other Report on Chernobyl (TORCH)*, Greens and EFA in the European Parliament, Berlin/Brussels/Kiev 2006. The prominent North American anti-nuclear activist Rosalie Bertell calculates a particularly high number of deaths (899,600 to 1,787,000). C. Busby, A. Yablokov (eds), *Chernobyl 20 Years On: Health Effects of the Chernobyl Accident*, published on behalf of the ECRF by Green Audit, Aberystwyth 2006, p. 247.

nated area as victims of Chernobyl radiation. The Chernobyl Forum considers health effects upon the five million residents of the other “contaminated” areas (the report always puts the word “contaminated” in quotation marks) to be even more speculative, and calculates radiation-related deaths as less than one percent of the normal rate of cancer mortality.¹¹ The report rejects the possibility that radioactive exposure from Chernobyl could cause DNA mutations that would affect future generations – from the perspective of this group, birth defects caused by Chernobyl do not exist. Instead, it considers the increasing number of congenital malformations observed in Belarus to be most likely the result of a more active reporting of such cases.¹²

For years, however, not only Liquidator associations but also doctors working in the areas in Belarus particularly affected by the fallout have been pointing out that since 1986 there has been a rapid increase in a variety of diseases in the most affected regions – especially circulatory-system disorders in children. For them these illnesses are directly connected with the radioactivity to which the children are exposed on a daily basis, beginning in the womb.¹³

Neither the International Chernobyl Project nor the Chernobyl Forum have ever denied that the frequency of many illnesses has increased in these regions; however, they attribute this to improved methods of recording these diseases and a “radiophobia” among the population.

¹¹ Compare Chernobyl Forum, *Chernobyl's Legacy* cit., p. 15 f.

¹² Compare Ibid., p. 19 f: “These doses are also unlikely to have any major effect on the number of stillbirths, adverse pregnancy outcomes or delivery complications or the overall health of children. Birth rates may be lower in ‘contaminated’ areas because of concern about having children (this issue is obscured by the very high rate of medical abortions) and the fact that many younger people have moved away. No discernible increase in hereditary effects caused by radiation is expected based on the low risk coefficients estimated by UNSCEAR (2001) or in previous reports on Chernobyl health effects.”

¹³ The doctors Yury Bandazhevsky and Vassili Nesterenko have played the most prominent role in international discussions. In Germany, Sebastian Pflugbeil has spoken out for encouraging public debate about the health effects of the radiation in Eastern Europe. Cf. S. Pflugbeil, “Alle Folgen liquidiert? Die gesundheitlichen Auswirkungen von Tschernobyl”, in Sahm, Sapper, Weichsel, “Tschernobyl, Vermächtnis und Verpflichtung” cit., pp. 81-104.

The concept of “radiophobia” had already been used as an explanation in the very first official international evaluation of the situation in the affected regions, in which it was claimed that people weren’t becoming sick because of the radioactive exposure, but rather their fear of it was making them sick, both psychologically and physically as a result of increased consumption of alcohol and other drugs.¹⁴ This fear, along with stress from the evacuations and resettlements, from the breakup of the Soviet Union, and from the social and economic upheaval that accompanied it, was given as the real cause of the “legacy” attributed to Chernobyl – not radioactive exposure.¹⁵ Accordingly, the 2006 report by the Chernobyl Forum advocated re-settling the regions that had been evacuated in the late 1980s and taking back “Chernobyl-related benefits and privileges”. A return to “normality”, from their point of view, was the best way to deal with “radiophobia”.

This interpretation of Chernobyl as a finished occurrence stands in stark contrast to the interpretation of the accident as an ongoing event. If one operates under the assumption that the radioactivity of the most affected regions causes diverse illnesses and alters the genetic material of the people, animals, plants, and other organisms living there, it follows that Chernobyl is still happening in the present and will continue into the future, for the full extent of its effects are still unfolding.¹⁶

The active memory work that many actors have engaged in during

¹⁴ International Chernobyl Project, *An Overview; Assessment of Radiological Consequences and Evaluation of Protective Measures*, Report by an International Advisory Committee (IAEA), Vienna 1991, p. 32. The term “radiophobia” was used for the first time in a report by the national radiation protection committee of the USSR. As the term was severely criticized it is no longer used in official reports but is paraphrased as “exaggerated sense of the dangers to health of exposure to radiation” or the like. For more on the development of this concept see T. Hlukhava-Kasperski, “La politique de la mémoire d’une catastrophe nucléaire: les usages de l’accident de Tchernobyl en Biélorussie (1986-2008)”, dissertation, Institut d’Études Politiques de Paris 2012, p. 393.

¹⁵ Compare Chernobyl Forum, *Chernobyl’s Legacy*, cit., p. 36.

¹⁶ Guillaume Grandazzi and Frédéric Lemarchand in particular have looked at the subject “Chernobyl as a future event” from the perspective of social philosophy. Cf. G. Grandazzi, F. Lemarchand (eds), *Les silences de Tchernobyl – L’avenir contaminé*, Éditions Autrement, Paris 2004, expanded edition 2006.

the 25 years since the accident focuses on precisely this aspect. The emergence of Chernobyl as a site of memory is thus directly connected with its politicization. Furthermore, because the media coverage and the memory work of those involved crosses national borders, it is not just a national site of memory, but a transnational one as well.

Narration as a Carrier of Memory

This brief summary has shown how statements about the effects of Chernobyl are rife with implications, unknowns, and assumptions. I will now look at how these interpretations of the event are reflected in specific narratives, with a particular focus on narratives that portray Chernobyl as an “apocalypse”. This narrative is not only widespread in popular literary works but has also been the subject of photography and films; it has become the carrier of memories of Chernobyl. The counter-narrative, which sees the effects of Chernobyl as primarily caused by “radiophobia”, is found mostly in the official evaluations of international organizations and their expert committees. In contrast to the “apocalypse” narrative, this narrative is not a carrier of memory, for it does not consider Chernobyl to be an event worth remembering – indeed, in this interpretation Chernobyl actually needs to be forgotten, for it perpetuates the problem of “radiophobia”.

National Narratives

The remembrance of Chernobyl has occurred in part through fictional adaptations showing the effects of such an event in the author’s own country. Two novels, one from Germany and one from France, will serve as examples of “forms of remembrance through novels”. Both were written in the immediate aftermath of the accident and adapted the event to their own national framework.

In Germany the book *Die Wolke* (“The Cloud”) by Gudrun Pausewang has played a central role in the interpretation and remembrance of Chernobyl. The children’s novel, published in 1987, focuses on the experiences of a girl named Janna-Berta. Janna-Berta lives near the nuclear plant Grafenrheinfeld. After an accident at the plant, she and her

brother Ulli try to flee the radioactive “cloud” released by it. The people’s flight is described as mass panic in which everyone fights for themselves without consideration for others, and the radioactive “cloud” is a storm front approaching visibly on the horizon. Ulli dies during the flight, and Janna-Berta collapses during a radioactive rainstorm. She wakes up in an emergency hospital, suffering from acute radiation sickness. Around her children are dying one after another. She survives, and since her parents also died in the accident, she is sent to her aunt in Hamburg, where she fights to keep the event from being forgotten.

The comparison to Chernobyl is explicit, and not just because the novel includes as a foreword an announcement published in the newspaper *Die Zeit* on 23 May 1986 about the government’s handling of Chernobyl. Within the story itself, the characters use their memories of Chernobyl as a basis for interpreting what is happening around them.¹⁷

Important for the reception of the book is the fact that, while the story is fictional, the scenes of mass panic and mass deaths due to radiation poisoning haven been considered as being realistic scenarios. For example, a teachers’ manual with classroom materials mentions the “real background” of the book.¹⁸ This article will not discuss the question of whether such a scenario could really happen, but instead the lasting impact of this story. The book received the Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis (German Children’s Literature Prize) in 1988, in spite of substantial criticism from conservative circles, and by 2011 about 1.5 million copies had been sold. It is available as an audio book and graphic novel, and a film adaptation was released in 2006 on the twentieth anniversary of Chernobyl. It is a standard school text that has shaped the imagery of nuclear accidents for a whole generation of children, for whom nuclear accidents are associated with an apocalypse.

In France, too, Chernobyl motivated literary investigation of what would happen if a similar accident were to happen in one’s own coun-

¹⁷ G. Pausewang, *Die Wolke*, Gütersloh, Rheda-Wiedenbrück 2003, p. 16 and 23.

¹⁸ B. Reddig-Korn (ed.), *Materialien zur Unterrichtspraxis – Gudrun Pausewang, Die Wolke*, compiled by G. Runge, Ravensburger Buchverlag, Ravensburg 2009, p. 3.

try. Hélène Crié and Yves Lenoir offered one answer in their novel *Tchernobyl-sur-Seine*,¹⁹ also published in 1987. Even before the book was published, Crié, the main author, had written a variety of articles for the newspaper *Libération* in which she took a critical stance towards French nuclear policy. In *Tchernobyl-sur-Seine*, the authors imagined an accident scenario for the nuclear facility at Nogent-sur-Seine. The choice of location was no coincidence: in 1987 this nuclear reactor was in the final stages of construction and even prior to Chernobyl had already been subject to criticism from anti-nuclear activists because of its proximity to Paris (it is located about 120 kilometers southeast of the city).²⁰ The goal of the novel was primarily to reveal some of the problems of the French nuclear sector, which, according to the authors, the official responses to Chernobyl had made particularly clear: the exclusiveness and secrecy of the “nucleocratic system”²¹ and a policy of disinformation intended to protect this industrial sector which was so important for France’s economy. Therefore, many of the actors who had shaped the French response to Chernobyl in spring 1986 made appearances in the novel: the director of the French radiation protection agency, Pierre Pellerin (here called Pierre Fouchon), who stated that the accident would not have any negative effects off-site; the safety experts from EDF, the company operating the French nuclear plants, who initially completely misjudged the situation; the media, who were denied access to information; and finally the government, who cared more about preventing panic than it did about the health of the population.

The story paints a very different picture from that of *Die Wolke* about the effects of the radioactive contamination. There are no im-

¹⁹ H. Crié, Y. Lenoir, *Tchernobyl-sur-Seine*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris 1987.

²⁰ The novel was not the first time the idea of a “Tchernobyl-sur-Seine” was expressed. In the *Libération* on 22 May 1986, an article entitled “Nogent, 7 décembre 1990, 20h 11: Catastrophe-fiction” described the course of a fictional accident using a comic strip.

²¹ The (negatively connoted) term “nucleocracy” is used frequently in France to further specify the idea of “technocracy” used in other languages. For the argument that the French “nucleocrats” are a sociologically homogeneous group in their background and education, see in particular P. Simonnot, *Les nucléocrates*, Presses universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble 1978.

mediate episodes of mass death. The novel's protagonists (two hikers who are unknowingly exposed to radioactivity in the forest near the nuclear plant, while the surrounding region has been put under a disaster warning and citizens have been told not to leave their houses) are exposed to radioactivity, but unlike Janna-Berta, they do not fall unconscious and lose all their hair. Instead, they are picked up by rescue workers in protective suits and are brought to a Paris hospital. They are soon released since they do not show any signs of acute radiation syndrome. In comparison to *Die Wolke*, this story is much less apocalyptic: There are few deaths and no evacuation of entire regions; only the area immediately surrounding the plant is declared a prohibited zone. But in this story, too, people die during their panicked flight to escape the approaching radioactive cloud, and uncertainty remains about how many thousands will die from the effects of exposure. If one only considers the description of the accident, whose wording echoes official French descriptions of the events at Chernobyl, then this novel should indeed be considered an apocalyptic narrative, for the French nuclear experts constantly emphasized that an accident such as Chernobyl could not occur at a French facility.

Finally, it is worth noting that *Tchernobyl-sur-Seine* has not enjoyed the same popularity as *Die Wolke*. However, it is one of many publications in France that thematize the policy of disinformation about Chernobyl.²² Thus, French literature is in no way less concerned with the topic than in Germany; we simply find a wider variety of carriers of memory.

The comparison of the two novels clearly shows the different reactions and debates that Chernobyl has evoked in Germany and France. In Germany the fear of the immediate health effects from radioactive exposure was predominant, while in France people's

²² Apart from a remarkable look at Chernobyl in the form of a comic (C. Montellier, *Tchernobyl mon amour*, Actes Sud, Arles 2006), French writing on Chernobyl consists mainly of non-fiction. Among the most important are W. Tchertkoff, *Le crime de Tchernobyl – le goulag nucléaire*, Actes Sud, Arles 2006; CRIIRAD, A. Paris, *Contaminations radioactives – atlas France et Europe*, Y. Michel, Barret-sur-Méouge 2002; J.-M. Jacquemin-Raffestin, *Tchernobyl – aujourd'hui les Français malades*, Éd. du Rocher, Monaco 2001.

concerns focused on the structures within the nuclear industry and, linked to this, on the information policies of the government and the institutions in charge of radiation protection.

Transnational Narratives

In addition to works looking at Chernobyl from a national perspective, whose audience is also largely national, portrayals of the effects of the accident have taken the form of transnational carriers of memory. Among the literary treatments of the topic, the book *Voices from Chernobyl* (in Russian: *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*) by the Belarusian author Svetlana Alexievich is the most important. Originally published in Russian in 1997, it was translated into Swedish and German in the same year. Translations into Japanese, English, Chinese, and Spanish, among other languages, soon followed. The book continues to be reprinted today. Its worldwide success is to a large degree due to the artistic quality of the narrative. Although Alexievich claimed to be simply recording eyewitness reports, she in fact heavily edited the interviews and combined them into a coherent narrative of incredible intensity.

In *Voices from Chernobyl*, Alexievich gives a voice to the “victims of Chernobyl” from the contaminated regions in Eastern Europe – people who were evacuated in 1986, family members of deceased Liquidators, sick patients and their families, and people who have returned to their evacuated villages, as well as those who moved to these regions because they considered them safer than their homelands. She lets them tell their stories in the form of monologues – sometimes nine to ten pages, sometimes only half a page – without any editorial commentary. The book has served as inspiration for a number of artists: theater groups in particular have found the texts suitable for stage adaptation.²³ However, *Voices from Chernobyl* is generally read as a documentation of the situation around Chernobyl rather

²³ For adaptations in France see V. Symaniec, “Mettre en scène La Supplication: du déni de la réalité au rejet de la représentation”, in Grandazzi, Lemarchand, *Les silences de Tchernobyl* cit., p. 178 f.

than a literary creation. As a result, quotations from the book have frequently been used as captions or explanatory texts in books and exhibits.²⁴ *Voices from Chernobyl* has come to be the prime example of narrations that portray Chernobyl as an apocalypse – the French translation even uses the word “apocalypse” in its title: *La supplication: Tchernobyl, chronique du monde après l’apocalypse*. It is anything but an easy reading: The monologues describe the suffering of the Chernobyl victims in great detail, allowing readers to visualize, for instance, the skin peeling off of the irradiated body of a firefighter when his wife talks about his time in hospital. Thus the book has become a model and reference point for narratives about the “true” effects of the accident, narratives that aim to make visible the suffering that has been disguised by the “radiophobia” concept of official reports.

Images of the accident and its aftereffects are just as transnational and universal as the reception of Alexievich’s book. Igor Kostin’s photos have enjoyed a particularly wide circulation. He was there in 1986 with his camera to document the firefighters dying from radiation sickness in the No. 6 clinic in Moscow, as well as on the roof of the destroyed reactor while Liquidators cleared the rubble from it in order to start building the sarcophagus. In the years that followed, Kostin has not only returned repeatedly to Chernobyl but has also visited hospitals in Belarus and Ukraine and the houses of the Liquidators. On the twentieth anniversary of the accident an illustrated book with his work was published.²⁵ The viewer will recognize many of the images, for they have been used in both media coverage of Chernobyl and on numerous book covers, and have also been displayed in many exhibitions.²⁶ Kostin’s interpretation of the effects of the accident is

²⁴ See for example the children’s book by P. Dowswell, *The Chernobyl Disaster: 26th April 1986*, Hodder Wayland, London 2003, p. 27 and 37; or the traveling exhibition of the Internationales Bildungs- und Begegnungswerk, “25 Jahre nach Tschernobyl”.

²⁵ I. Kostin in collaboration with T. Johnson, *Tschernobyl: confessions d’un reporter*, Editions des Arènes, Paris 2006. The book has also been published in English (“Confessions of a Reporter”) and German (“Tschernobyl: Nahaufnahme”).

²⁶ For example, one of Kostin’s photos is the cover image for Sahm, Sapper, Weichsel, “Tschernobyl: Vermächtnis und Verpflichtung” cit. The Willy-Brandt-Haus in Berlin put on a large exhibition with his photos in spring 2006.

the visual counterpart of Alexievich's narrative: his images show an accident that has brought unimaginable suffering upon humanity, the full extent of which is not yet known, for the mutagenic effects of radiation will only become visible in future generations.

In addition to the wide audience of Kostin's own work, numerous other photographers have been inspired by him. The ghost town Pripyat with its motionless ferris wheel and hastily abandoned classrooms, the plaintive faces of prematurely aged Liquidators, the scars on children's necks from thyroid operations – these motifs have become universal for portraying the “Chernobyl apocalypse”.²⁷

A National Site of Memory with Varied Implications

In addition to these narratives and images that are common to the transnational reception of Chernobyl, there are many forms of remembrance that are specific to particular countries. This is in part a result of the different degrees to which Chernobyl affected each country and their varied reactions, which resulted in “different events” that are remembered. Furthermore, the political instrumentalization of Chernobyl is quite varied, and did not always focus on questions of nuclear energy use, as the example of Belarus will demonstrate. The different implications of Chernobyl as a national site of memory mirror the divergent processes of coming to terms with the event and its consequences. The remembrance discourses in Germany, France, and Belarus will show what varied connotations Chernobyl has as a site of memory depending on the specific national perspective.²⁸

²⁷ For a philosophical and art-historical analysis of Chernobyl photography see D. Bürkner, “Eine vollkommen neue Realität: Transgression des Wahrnehmbaren in den Bildern Tschernobyls”, in *Maßlose Bilder: Visuelle Ästhetik der Transgression*, I. Reichle, S. Siegel, A. Spelten (eds), Wilhelm Fink, Munich 2009, pp. 189-206.

²⁸ Although it was not possible to consider the example of Ukraine in this essay, it is worth mentioning here some of the particular characteristics of Chernobyl as a national site of memory in Ukraine. Of prime importance is the “hero

Germany

It is necessary to distinguish between East and West Germany, at least in the early period of Chernobyl remembrance, for the reactions in 1986 were strongly divergent in the two German states. Thus, people in the GDR and FRG were in a sense confronted with two different “national events”. In West Germany, responses to Chernobyl were characterized by an intense media debate about the potential dangers of the radioactive contamination. In East Germany, on the other hand, the experience was different, not least because the state-run media offered a much less drastic portrayal of the situation – when it reported about the event at all. For residents who learned about the accident only from East German media, Chernobyl was something happening far away. However, those who could access West German media as well were confronted by imagery that blatantly contradicted the East German reporting. They became increasingly aware of the possible harmful effects of the radioactive particles in their own gardens and were forced to confront the unpleasant situation of being left uninformed by their own government about a very real danger. Thus, for many East German civil rights

narrative” that portrays the firefighters and the Liquidators as having saved the country from a catastrophe and triumphed over the adversary (in this case the burning reactor) as though in a war. In Ukraine, these heroes are commemorated and thanked in the form of memorials. At the same time, the struggle to be recognized as a Chernobyl victim is a central element in the everyday lives of many people in the country (cf. A. Petryna, *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens after Chernobyl*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2006.) Thus, the remembrance is marked by a sort of competition between the “hero” and “victim” discourses. In addition, the memory of Chernobyl is particularly concrete in Ukraine, whether in the form of exhibits in the Chernobyl Museum in Kiev, ethnographic collections of cultural relics from the evacuated towns in the “forbidden zone”, or the red and white smokestack that has become a symbol of the site of the accident and which must be torn down before building the new sarcophagus – a proposal that is subject to substantial criticism. For the most recent works on the remembrance of Chernobyl, with a particular focus on Eastern Europe, see M. Arndt (ed.), “Memories, Commemorations, and Representations of Chernobyl”, in *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 30, 1, 2012.

activists – including the prominent example of Sebastian Pflugbeil – Chernobyl became an important reference point.²⁹

While in West Germany individual memories involve activities such as stockpiling food products and replacing playground sand, in East Germany it is the sudden abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables in May 1986 – products that could no longer be exported to West Berlin and were therefore offered for sale locally. These different experiences are to some degree also reflected in sometimes different motivations for participating in Chernobyl humanitarian assistance programs, which continue to this day. The aid has mostly taken the form of providing places for recreational stays for children from the most affected regions in Ukraine and Belarus, as well as sending supplies such as medicine, clothing, and so forth. In West Germany, assistance came mostly from people actively opposed to nuclear power. In East Germany, by contrast, there was a stronger sense of fellow-feeling with the Chernobyl victims because they were from other Eastern bloc countries.³⁰ For the environmental and anti-nuclear movement, however, in both East and West Germany, Chernobyl is an important reference point for the call to stop using nuclear energy – a call that did not start in 1986, but rather was already so widespread by the 1980s that there was a receptive audience for Chernobyl and the dangers of the radioactive fallout.

Yet civil society was not the only place in Germany where the

²⁹ In contrast to West Germany, where the response to Chernobyl has been well studied, there are few studies that look at East Germany. Of particular importance are Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Landesbüro Sachsen-Anhalt, *Tschernobyl und die DDR: Fakten und Verschleierungen – Auswirkungen bis heute?*, Magdeburg 2003; D. de Nève, *Die Atomkatastrophe von Tschernobyl – Reaktionen in der DDR*, Forschungsverbund SED-Staat, Berlin 1995. A rare study that looks at both East and West Germany is Arndt, *Tschernobyl – Auswirkungen des Reaktorunfalls* cit.

³⁰ This observation is the result of numerous conversations with active members of the Chernobyl Solidarity Movement during the “International Partnership Conference” organized by the IBB on 17-22 April 2011 in Minsk. A more in-depth analysis of West German activism beyond the anti-nuclear concern can be found in M. Arndt, “Verunsicherung vor und nach der Katastrophe: Von der Anti-AKW-Bewegung zum Engagement für die ‘Tschernobyl-Kinder’”, in *Zeithistorische Forschungen*, 7, 2, 2010, pp. 240-258.

memory of Chernobyl was used to support attitudes and actions. It has also been used as a political argument in federal energy policies, at the very latest since the institutionalized German environmental and anti-nuclear movement Bündis 90/Die Grünen (the German Green Party) became part of the German coalition government in 1998. Thus, on the twentieth anniversary of the accident in 2006, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which was at that time in a coalition government with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and the SPD minister of the environment Sigmar Gabriel used Chernobyl as an argument supporting the party's energy and economic policy: an exhibit at the Willy-Brandt-Haus in Berlin displayed photography by artists such as Igor Kostin, Paul Fusco, and Rüdiger Lubricht,³¹ and a leaflet entitled "Tschernobyl – Magazin zur Atompolitik" ("Chernobyl – Magazine on Nuclear Politics")³² was mailed to 1.5 million households in Germany. With such campaigns, the SPD defended its decision to phase out Germany's nuclear power program that had been resolved in 2000 under the SPD/Green Party coalition government and that was subject to increasing criticism, particularly from the conservative CDU, because of the climate change debate.

In summary, in Germany today, the site of memory of Chernobyl represents a critical attitude towards the use of nuclear energy, if not a complete rejection of it. Chernobyl evokes the dangers of nuclear plants, the continual threat of an accident and its consequences over a nearly unlimited geographic area. It is a site of memory that is most firmly anchored in the anti-nuclear movement, but one which, as a result of the success and popularity of this movement and the Green Party, occupies a place in mainstream society. It is a fairly uncontested site of memory, which may even be used unproblematically

³¹ For more on this exhibition see D. Haas, "Tschernobyl-Ausstellung – Na-haufnahmen des Leids", *Spiegel-Online*, 3 April 2006, <http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/zeitgeschichte/0,1518,druck-409586,00.html> (accessed 30 June 2012).

³² Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und Reaktorsicherheit, *Tschernobyl – Magazin zur Atompolitik*, BMU Referat Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, Berlin 2006.

as an official justification for national policies because it draws upon interpretive schema that are accepted by nearly the entire population and reach across class, regional, and ideological boundaries.

France

However, as a glance across the Rhine to France will show, the national site of memory of Chernobyl can be connected with implications beyond purely anti-nuclear sentiments. In France it is a heavily debated site of memory; there is no overarching consensus about how it is to be interpreted. And it is definitely not a site of memory that the government might consider using to support its energy policies. When Chernobyl is used as a political argument in France, it is by citizens justifying political protests. In this regard, references to Chernobyl and its memory have implications that go beyond the issue of nuclear energy. In France Chernobyl stands for a deliberate policy of disinformation by the government about the dangers that accompany the nuclear industry. In this discourse, the buzzword Chernobyl is supplemented by references to the “cloud that stopped at the border”.

The development of this narrative around Chernobyl and its use as a frame for interpreting the position of the French government on nuclear questions in general is not only the result of the French authorities’ response (or rather lack of response) to the accident in spring 1986. Far more important were the substantial unofficial responses that were widely reported in the media, such as the foundation of the first independent radiation protection institutes, the “Commission de recherche et d’information indépendantes sur la radioactivité” (CRIIRAD) and the “Association pour le contrôle de la radioactivité dans l’ouest” (ACRO). Doubts about the official French accounts of Chernobyl and its consequences had led a number of skeptics to carry out measurements of their own. They questioned not only the official reports about the situation near the plant, but particularly the statements about the radioactive fallout in France. They gave most of the blame for what they considered to be a deliberate politics of disinformation to the agency in charge of

monitoring the French population's exposure to radioactivity, the "Service central de protection contre les rayonnements ionisants" (SCPRI). Thus, in France Chernobyl was a catalyst for the development of an institutionalized "counter expertise" that opposed the position of the public authorities. Unlike previous critical voices, such as the "Groupement de scientifiques pour l'information sur l'énergie nucléaire" (GSIEN),³³ a group of concerned scientists and employees within the nuclear sector, these new institutes set up their own laboratories and conducted studies in order to discover the "true extent" of radioactive contamination in France and reveal the "lies" of the official French agencies.

In 1996, when the existence of radioactive "hot spots" in France became widely known, the competing interpretations of the government experts and the non-government organizations about the radioactive fallout received renewed public attention. "Chernobyl" had, in effect, become a site in France. The critics began an intense search for French victims of this radioactivity,³⁴ while the public authorities just as intensely collected data to demonstrate that these victims could not possibly exist. More and more people attributed their thyroid cancer to Chernobyl, and some of them attempted to prosecute Pierre Pellerin, the founder and director of SCPRI, as well as members of the 1986 government, for willful bodily injury. The last trial concerning this issue was settled in 2011, after ten years of negotiation: the accusation was dismissed.

However, the deep mistrust on the part of much of the popula-

³³ More information about GSIEN, the French "equivalent" of the Union of Concerned Scientists can be found in S. Topçu, "Confronting Nuclear Risks: Counter-Expertise as Politics within the French Nuclear Energy Debate", in *Nature and Culture*, 3, 2008, pp. 225-245.

³⁴ Jean-Michel Jacquemin-Raffestin's many publications have reached a wide audience and made him one of the most prominent representatives of the "search for French victims". See for example J.-M. Jacquemin-Raffestin, *Ce fameux nuage... TchernoByl, la France contaminée*, Éditions Sang de la terre, Paris 1998; id., *TchernoByl: Aujourd'hui les Français malades* cit.; id., *TchernoByl, conséquences en France: J'accuse... !* Éditions Sang de la terre, Paris 2002; id., *TchernoByl 20 ans après: Cachez ce nuage que je ne saurais pas voir*, Guy Trédaniel Éditeur, Paris 2006.

tion about the official evaluation of Chernobyl's effects in France³⁵ has other causes that go beyond the particular experience of the *affaire Tchernobyl*. From the beginning, democratic decision-making processes were bypassed for key aspects of France's nuclear program.³⁶ Neither the development of atomic bombs, nor the decision, referred to as "Plan Messmer", to expand French nuclear power facilities in the 1970s and 1980s were ever subject to parliamentary debate. From the perspective of the scientific and political elites, this is seen even today as an appropriate way to handle a matter which, they feel, requires expert knowledge in order to be able to form a judgment or make recommendations. However, the French educational system with its *grandes écoles* (elite post-secondary schools) ensures that only the graduates of certain prestigious institutions achieve recognition as experts; the system thus continually produces elites with favorable attitudes towards the use of nuclear energy. In the popular idiom, this "elite expert circle" is often referred to with the negatively connoted term "nucleocrats".³⁷ It is nearly impossible for anyone who is not part of this circle to convince the political elite to listen to them – a situation that the French anti-nuclear movement has struggled to overcome since the beginning, for all the parties (with the exception of the Green Party) are in agreement that nuclear energy is not only the energy of the future, but also a tremendous economic opportunity for France, both in terms of domestic reactors (with 58 currently in operation), and the export abroad of technology and expertise through the largely state-owned corporations Areva and EDF.

The criticism of particular aspects of the French nuclear sector, above all its elite culture and the way it cuts itself off from general public discussion and influence, has crystallized in France around

³⁵ Compare the results of an opinion survey by IRSN: *Baromètre IRSN 2006, La perception des situations à risques par les Français*, IRSN, Fontenay-aux-Roses 2006, p. 40.

³⁶ On the socio-political implications of the French nuclear energy program in the post-war period, see G. Hecht, *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War II*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1998.

³⁷ On the terms "nucleocracy" and "nucleocrat", see footnote 21.

the debate about the aftereffects of Chernobyl. This is the main reason why Chernobyl has been such a polarizing topic in France for so long and why the debate has actually become more heated as the accident retreats further into the past. On the twentieth anniversary in 2006, there were countless events organized in France, as well as a veritable flood of publications about Chernobyl.³⁸ This phenomenon must be understood in the context of a widely heralded worldwide renaissance in nuclear energy taking place at the time – a renaissance to which French nuclear politics and its promotion of the “green atom” contributed substantially.³⁹

The critics of French “nucleocracy” are quite clearly the driving force behind the continuing remembrance of Chernobyl. From the perspective of the “nucleocrats”, who from the beginning have considered the effects of Chernobyl to be quite limited and the meltdown to be merely an industrial accident like many others, there is no reason to emphasize this particular event. On the contrary, for them, every mention of Chernobyl only fuels the population’s “radiophobia”. To be sure, there are scientists such as Georges Charpak⁴⁰ – one of the most prominent French advocates of nuclear energy – who encourage the active remembrance of Chernobyl, but only under specific conditions: Charpak considers it important to remember the mistakes made by the operators of the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl in order to prevent careless actions. Only in this way can nuclear energy continue to be what he believes is the safest and best means of sustainable electricity production.

However, it is above all the active opponents of nuclear power who

³⁸ Not only were there multi-page feature articles in nearly all major newspapers, but radio and TV programs also gave substantial coverage of Chernobyl. For a detailed analysis of the publications see Kalmbach, *Tschernobyl und Frankreich* cit., p. 131 ff.

³⁹ On the role that France has played in the international lobby to “green the atom” see E. Mühlhoyer, *L’environnement en politique étrangère: raisons et illusions; Une analyse de l’argument environnemental dans les diplomaties électronucléaires françaises et américaines*, L’Harmattan, Paris 2002.

⁴⁰ G. Charpak, R.L. Garwin, V. Journé, *De Tschernobyl en tchernobyls*, Odile Jacob, Paris 2005.

shape Chernobyl's character as a national site of memory: the anti-nuclear network "Sortir du nucléaire" ("Phase out nuclear power"), Greenpeace France, and the French "nuclear counter-expert groups" CRIIRAD and ACRO.⁴¹ For them Chernobyl was a "blot on the clean record" of the French "nucleocrats". Reference to the "cloud that stopped at the border" is therefore considered an ideal weak spot for revealing the "dark recesses" of the "nucleocratic" system: a system that, from the point of view of its critics, acts irresponsibly and is prepared to endanger its own people in order to protect itself. By keeping the memory of Chernobyl alive, many activists have seen a chance to broaden their protest against the "nuclear state".⁴² As a national site of memory, Chernobyl represents not only a critical attitude towards the use of nuclear energy, but also criticism of the French elite system and thus also of the political culture of the country.

Belarus

A look at Belarus will show yet another national interpretation of Chernobyl: the memory of the accident as a site of conflict between an authoritarian president and his opposition. As Tatiana Kasperski shows in her work, for Belarus the expression "contested site of memory" has dimensions which go far beyond the disputes about the interpretation of events and how they are co-opted by opposing interests that are usually meant when discussing *lieux de mémoire*.⁴³ In Belarus we are

⁴¹ Guillaume Grandazzi, Frédéric Lemarchand, Galia Ackermann, and Wladimir Tchertkoff, whose publications and ideas have significantly influenced the Chernobyl discourse in France, particularly on the twentieth anniversary, will not be discussed here further, since they belong more to the transnational discourse and the reception of Svetlana Alexievich's book than to a French site of national memory.

⁴² With reference to R. Jungk, *Der Atomstaat: Vom Fortschritt in die Unmenschlichkeit*, Kindler, Munich 1977.

⁴³ The discussion of Belarus is based largely on Kasperski, "La politique de la mémoire" cit. Selections of her findings have been published in id., "Chernobyl's Aftermath in Political Symbols, Monuments and Rituals: Remembering the

confronted with a conflict with potentially serious consequences for the side of the opposition, as in the case of Yury Bandazhevsky.⁴⁴

Since 1989, the annual “Chernobyl Path” (Charnobylski Shlyakh) has stood for public criticism of the political system of the country. Between 1989 and Belarus’s independence in 1991, this criticism was part of a growing nationalist movement against the Soviet government in Moscow and the communist authorities in Belarus. Since 1996, however, the “Chernobyl Path” has become a ritual for those wishing to challenge Lukashenko’s government and publicly criticize the official response to the accident and its aftermath. The “Chernobyl Path” consists of a religious service, a rally, and a protest march through Minsk. Every year the event is authorized only at the last minute and the path is altered as government officials attempt to keep the protest march out of the city center. This event organized by the opposition is a major thorn in the side of the Belarusian authorities because it calls into question official statements about the consequences of the accident. Unlike the government, the protesters don’t think that the problems have all been addressed and overcome. Instead, they emphasize the danger that the radioactive contamination continues to present, particularly for people who live in the most affected regions

Disaster in Belarus,” in Arndt, “Memories, Commemorations, and Representations” cit., pp. 82-99. For the memory of Chernobyl in Belarus see also A. Sahm, “Und der dritte Weltkrieg heißt Tschernobyl...”, in *Erinnerungen gegen den Krieg*, F. Dorn et al. (eds), Journalistenfonds des Journalistenverbandes von Belarus, Minsk 1995, pp. 202-227; M. Arndt, “Von der Todeszone zum Strahlen-Mekka? Die Erinnerung an die Katastrophe von Tschernobyl in Belarus, der Ukraine und Russland”, in *Zeitgeschichte-online*, April 2006; A. Dudchik, M. Fabrykant, “Ordinary Tragedy: ‘Perestroika’ of Collective Memory about Chernobyl Disaster in Belarusian History Textbooks”, in Arndt, “Memories, Commemorations, and Representations” cit., pp. 65-81.

⁴⁴ Bandazhevsky is a Belarusian pediatrician who worked in one of the most heavily contaminated areas and carried out his own research on the relationship between the children’s constant exposure to radionuclides in their food and their many sicknesses (particularly respiratory and cardiovascular). In 1999 he was arrested on charges of corruption. Worldwide protests against his arrest followed, both by human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, and anti-nuclear organizations. In 2005 Bandazhevsky was finally released on parole.

in the southeast of Belarus. The government, however, has opened up parts of precisely these regions for resettlement and is investing in the (agricultural) economy of the area. This policy is supported by statements of the IAEA and the Chernobyl Forum, who likewise call for “normalizing” the living conditions in the once-evacuated areas.

In addition to challenging Lukashenko’s Chernobyl policy, the “Chernobyl Path” also threatens Lukashenko’s portrayal of himself. Chernobyl was made into a national symbol by the opposition – first the opposition against the communist authorities and later the opposition against Lukashenko – yet Lukashenko has appropriated it in order to create the image of a “caring father of the nation”. For this purpose, every year an official memorial ceremony takes place in Minsk, and the music festival “Chernobyl Path – The Road of Life” is staged in various cities in the most affected regions. The name of the event speaks for itself: It emphasizes the future-oriented nature of the event and thereby seeks to discredit the “backwards-looking” demonstration of the opposition in Minsk. Furthermore, around 26 April, Lukashenko personally undertakes a multi-day journey through the most affected areas, leaving wreaths on Chernobyl memorials, visiting local farms and industries, and meeting with the local population and presenting them with gifts. This last activity is particularly important for reinforcing his media image as “president of the people”. Nor does he neglect to mention how the agitation of the opposition is destabilizing Belarusian society by disrupting its unity – a unity which, in his interpretation of history, Chernobyl brought clearly to light: The collective efforts to overcome the effects of the accident brought the Belarusian people together, and the fruits of this are reflected in the flourishing landscape of the once-evacuated zones.

The symbolic power of Chernobyl for Belarus as a nation – the land which received the largest amount of fallout – raises the general debate there about the (health) effects of the accident to a level beyond that found in other countries. People’s positions in relation to Chernobyl shape their national and political identity. At the same time, Belarus’s citizens are confronted with the conflicting need to “remember in order to survive” and to “forget in order to go on with their lives”. In the heavily contaminated areas the people cannot for-

get Chernobyl because the only way to limit the amount of radioactivity they are exposed to is through strict regulation of their activities and food sources.⁴⁵ There is neither money nor political support for larger re-settlements; however there is plenty of money for promoting the economy in the once-evacuated areas, thanks to international financial aid programs. If one follows the “radiophobia” interpretation, the only way to overcome the effects of Chernobyl is to normalize the lives of the people living in these territories as quickly as possible. However, if one takes the position that Chernobyl has caused more deaths than the ones calculated by the Chernobyl Forum and has also led to mutations in the genetic material of humans, animals, and plants, then the proclaimed goal of “overcoming Chernobyl” and pushing ahead with “normalizing people’s lives” is a perfidious experiment that may result in a future which nobody wants to imagine.

A Transnational Site of Memory: The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of Chernobyl in 2011

In addition to the national responses to and memories of Chernobyl, this site of memory also has a transnational⁴⁶ dimension in which the narrative and images of Chernobyl as an apocalypse are of central importance. The following short account of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Chernobyl will show the particular material and performative characteristics of this transnational form of remembrance.

The “International Chernobyl Day”, which in 2011 took place under the slogan “25th anniversary – 25 days of action”, is one of the most important events in this context. The concept is less a unified event coordinated by a central organization than a loose network of

⁴⁵ See for example A. Pena-Vega, “Leben in einer Welt der Verbote: Eine Vergangenheit, die nicht vergeht”, in Sahm, Sapper, Weichsel, “Tschernobyl, Vermächtnis und Verpflichtung” cit., pp. 71-80.

⁴⁶ Although those involved mostly designate these initiatives as “international”, I am using the term “transnational” in order to make clear that this cooperation is rooted in civil society.

initiatives that organize public remembrances of the accident every year. This network serves as a platform for exchanging ideas and bringing together a wide variety of individual actors, thus increasing their visibility. The French anti-nuclear network “Sortir du nucléaire” provides a sort of coordination by listing individual events on the website www.chernobyl-day.org, where partner organizations from around the world can announce their calls to action. The site also provides Chernobyl Day materials such as posters. Partner organizations include, for instance, regional branches of Greenpeace and various local anti-nuclear groups.⁴⁷ The events organized in 2011 – the network listed 532 events in 27 countries – included commemorative rallies, marches, benefit concerts, and candlelight protests, to give just a few examples.

In addition to the anti-nuclear networks, the “Chernobyl Solidarity Movement” plays an important role in the transnational character of the site of memory Chernobyl. The “Chernobyl Solidarity Movement” refers to all of the community organized humanitarian aid, often the result of individual initiatives, for the most affected areas in Eastern Europe. This aid is best-known to the general public for organizing recreational stays for children from these regions and collecting relief items.⁴⁸ For the associations and individuals who are actively involved, the anniversary is always a time to remind people of the problematic situation of the residents – particularly the children – in these regions and to call for donations and support. For the twenty-fifth anniversary in 2011, a campaign by the Internationales Bildungs- und Begegnungswerk (“Association for International Education and Exchange,” IBB) gained particular prominence. It pursued the goal of bringing together

⁴⁷ A detailed list of events and the organizations involved is at <http://www.chernobyl-day.org/> (accessed 30 June 2012).

⁴⁸ For a history of the “Chernobyl Solidarity Movement”, compare IBB (ed.), *Tschernobyl und die europäische Solidaritätsbewegung*, IBB, Dortmund 2011. For an analysis of the reasons for the commitment of West German groups see Arndt, “Verunsicherung vor und nach der Katastrophe” cit. For Belarus see A. Sahn, “Auf dem Weg in eine transnationale Gesellschaft? Belarus und die internationale Tschernobyl-Hilfe”, in Sahn, Sapper, Weichsel, “Tschernobyl, Vermächtnis und Verpflichtung” cit., pp. 105-116.

the various aid initiatives at an “International Partnership Conference” in Minsk with the purpose of taking an active role in shaping the commemoration of Chernobyl on its twenty-fifth anniversary and after.⁴⁹ With this in mind, by November 2010 representatives of various associations had already gotten together and established the “European Chernobyl Network”, which devised ideas for joint initiatives on 26 April, including a candlelight event.⁵⁰ During the conference in April 2011 the cornerstone for a “Zukunftswerkstatt” (workshop for the future) in the form of an information center on renewable energy was laid on the grounds of the IBB in Minsk. This “Zukunftswerkstatt” thus connects the transnational remembrance of the victims of Chernobyl with the demand for an energy transition – a connection that must also be seen in relation to the Belarusian government’s decision in March 2011 to build their own nuclear power plant.

The Future of Chernobyl as a Site of Memory

Efforts to network and transnationalize the commemoration of Chernobyl, such as “Chernobyl Day” and the “European Chernobyl Network”, stem from a fear that Chernobyl – and with it its victims and the dangers of nuclear power that they symbolize – is being increasingly forgotten. If the plans for resettling the evacuated zones are pushed forward, as well as additional plans for turning the forbidden zone into a nature discovery park,⁵¹ Chernobyl will essentially disappear as a geographic reference point. Without this physical symbol,

⁴⁹ Compare A. Sahn, “Die Katastrophe von Tschernobyl im Kontext einer europäischen Erinnerungskultur”, in IBB, *Tschernobyl und die europäische Solidaritätsbewegung* cit., pp. 16-32.

⁵⁰ The website of the European Chernobyl Network has more information about its members and the candlelight event: <http://www.ecnchernobyl.eu/> (accessed 30 June 2012).

⁵¹ The final report of the Chernobyl Forum presented a proposal “to explore the possibilities for promoting specialized ecological tourism”. Chernobyl Forum, *Chernobyl’s Legacy*, cit., p. 57. The proposal is inspired by the fact that endangered animal species such as wild horses and wolves have flourished due to the lack of human activity in the “forbidden zone” for many years.

all Chernobyl memory work by the anti-nuclear networks and the Solidarity Movement would need to be reconceptualized. Key elements of the imagery used to visualize the consequences of the radioactive fallout – the abandoned villages, the ghost town Pripyat – would no longer be available. It seems unlikely that the transnational anti-nuclear movement would then still be able to effectively point to Chernobyl in order to strengthen their position. And if the memory work conducted by these groups should cease, Chernobyl would also soon cease to be “alive” as a site of memory and would disappear from the collective memory. In a national context, the memory might continue to be accessible, but as has been shown, these national memories have very different implications, and this would make it extremely difficult for the anti-nuclear movement and the Chernobyl Solidarity Movement to find universal guiding principles in these disparate forms of recollection. The power plant and the city of Pripyat might continue to become increasingly appealing as a tourist attraction. However, it is unclear whether these locations would then offer more to visitors than merely the experience of industrial ruins and a ghost town.

Chernobyl could cease to be a guiding site of memory for reasons other than the disappearance of the geographical reference point that serves today as a concrete physical reminder of the event, as reactions to Fukushima in spring 2011 demonstrated. The question of whether Fukushima will replace Chernobyl colored the debates surrounding the twenty-fifth anniversary of Chernobyl. It was inspired by the fact that in certain countries the reactions to Fukushima had similar political effects and pursued similar goals as in 1986. In Germany, the Federal Ministry for the Environment was founded after Chernobyl, while after Fukushima the first Green *Ministerpräsident* (head of a German federal state’s government) was elected in the state Baden-Württemberg. In Italy, an absolute majority voted against nuclear power plants in 1987 referenda, and in June 2011 they did so again. In 1986, the French government and radiation protection authorities saw no reason for concern and declared the French reactors to be absolutely safe. This attitude towards the event was to some degree similar to the French government’s categorization of an

accident in the French nuclear facility Marcoule in September 2011 as an “industrial accident”. It remains open to discussion whether there is also a certain continuity implied in the British government’s attempt to influence media reports about Fukushima, an attempt that was revealed by the *Guardian* in July 2011.

Even these few examples of the political effects of Fukushima, the media response, and the corresponding public attention to the accident give reason to believe that in the long term Fukushima will also establish itself as an “ecological site of memory”. Whether this happens will depend to a large part upon whether the media shows interest – particularly on anniversaries – in reporting about the current situation at the site, or whether it will succumb to the difficulty of capturing attention about an event which isn’t “breaking news”. Chernobyl, however, will continue for the time being to occupy a special position as the first demonstration that “it can indeed happen” to reach the broader public. Yet it is already clear that the status of this site of memory is being reevaluated as a result of Fukushima: the narrative of a “Soviet accident”, implied in the discourse surrounding Chernobyl from the beginning, is slowly being displaced by the narrative of a “universal residual risk”, since the issue of losing control over the technology, the difficulties of organizing mass evacuations, and the credibility of the operators and the information they report can no longer be explained using Cold War rhetoric. It remains to be seen whether this “universal residual risk” will be accepted as a satisfactory explanation or whether it will eventually lead instead to calling the entire nuclear industry into question.