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Chernobyl

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Introduction

On April 26, 1986, a catastrophic event took place at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. What began as a routine safety test quickly spiraled into the worst accident in the history of nuclear power generation. At the heart of this disaster were a flawed reactor design, compounded by a cascade of critical mistakes made under conditions of routine yet perilous neglect—errors that would have consequences reverberating across continents and generations.

The explosion at Reactor 4 of the Chernobyl plant unleashed an unprecedented quantity of radioactive materials into the atmosphere. In mere moments, a local emergency became a global crisis. Winds carried the radioactive plume across vast swathes of Europe, contaminating millions of acres of land, forests, water bodies, and communities far removed from the plant itself. The rapid escalation of the disaster overwhelmed Soviet emergency services and exposed the world to the somber risks that accompanied the atomic age. Tragically, the initial response was hampered by official secrecy and denial, delaying critical evacuations and intensifying the human and environmental toll.

The story of Chernobyl is not only one of technical and procedural failure, but also of heroism and resilience. Thousands of men and women—the so-called "liquidators"—were mobilized to fight the fires, contain the radioactive debris, and prevent an already unprecedented disaster from becoming a continental cataclysm. The town of Pripjat, once a showcase of Soviet science and planning, became a ghost town virtually overnight. In the days, months, and years that followed, the world watched as the Soviet Union attempted to come to terms with the true scale of its nuclear tragedy.

Chernobyl's aftermath has proven both enduring and complex. Decades later, the consequences continue to unfold: lives lost to radiation, far-reaching spikes in childhood thyroid cancer, persistent psychological trauma, and towns and villages abandoned to time and the elements. The exclusion zone, first drawn up as a temporary measure, has become a permanent monument to both the hubris and ingenuity of the nuclear era—a place of ongoing danger but also unexpected ecological renewal.

This book sets out to tell the history of the Chernobyl disaster in all its dimensions. It explores not only the precise sequence of technical misjudgments and human errors that culminated in the explosion, but also the military, political, and social context in which the plant operated. It examines the immediate bravery and suffering of responders, the wrenching displacement of entire communities, the international

reverberations for nuclear policy, and Chernobyl's enduring role in the global imagination. As the decades pass, Chernobyl stands as a cautionary tale—an event that tested the limits of science, governance, and human endurance on a scale never before witnessed.

In tracing the trajectory from disaster to legacy, "Chernobyl: History of a Disaster" invites readers to consider more than the accident itself. It explores the far-reaching implications for technology, society, and the environment, and asks what lessons—if any—have truly been learned. The continuing challenges of cleanup, decommissioning, and living with the past are juxtaposed with new risks and uncertainties, ensuring that Chernobyl remains a story very much of the present as well as the past.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Soviet Nuclear Ambition

The genesis of the Chernobyl disaster is inextricably linked to the Soviet Union's overarching ambition for nuclear supremacy, an ambition born from the crucible of World War II and the subsequent ideological clash of the Cold War. In the immediate aftermath of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, Joseph Stalin, the Soviet leader, initiated an urgent and comprehensive program to develop nuclear weapons. This was not merely a matter of national security but also a potent symbol of technological prowess and ideological parity with the West.

The Soviet atomic bomb project was led by Igor Kurchatov, a prominent physicist, at a clandestine site known as Arzamas-16. Early efforts were significantly bolstered by intelligence gathered from spies embedded within the American Manhattan Project, most notably Klaus Fuchs. These intelligence coups provided crucial insights, including detailed descriptions of the implosion-type Fat Man bomb and the processes for plutonium production. By December 25, 1946, the Soviets had achieved their first self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction in a graphite reactor, a critical step toward their atomic goals. Just under three years later, on August 29, 1949, the Soviet Union successfully detonated its first atomic device, codenamed RDS-1 (or "First Lightning" by the Soviets, and "Joe-1" by the West), at the Semipalatinsk Test Site in Kazakhstan. This event, which had an estimated yield of around 22 kilotons, marked the official entry of the Soviet Union into the nuclear club and dramatically escalated the global arms race.

With the foundational success of their weapons program, Soviet scientists and policymakers began to seriously consider the peaceful applications of atomic energy. The immense heat generated by nuclear fission, initially harnessed for destruction, clearly held potential for generating electricity. The vision was clear: nuclear power would not only meet the nation's burgeoning energy demands but also further demonstrate Soviet scientific and engineering superiority.

On June 26, 1954, a mere five years after their first atomic bomb test, the Soviet Union inaugurated the world's first nuclear power plant in Obninsk, near Moscow. This experimental facility, with a modest output of 5 MWe (megawatts electrical), was a groundbreaking achievement, designed to prove the viability of nuclear power for commercial electricity generation. Its success paved the way for the broader development of a civilian nuclear energy program.

The Obninsk plant utilized a graphite-moderated, channel-type reactor, a design that would become a hallmark of the Soviet nuclear industry, and a direct precursor to the RBMK. This early reactor, the AM-1 ("Atom Mirny" or "Peaceful Atom"), marked a pivot

from purely military objectives towards a dual-use approach, where reactor designs could potentially serve both power generation and plutonium production.

Following Obninsk's successful operation, the Soviet Union moved to expand its nuclear power capabilities rapidly. In 1958, the Siberian Nuclear Power Station, with a significantly larger capacity of 100 MWe (later increased to 600 MWe), came online. This aggressive expansion continued through the 1960s and 1970s, with commercial power stations being constructed across the vast Soviet landscape, including plants at Beloyarsk, Novo-Voronezh, Kola, Leningrad, and Armenia. By 1975, the Soviet Union's nuclear power capacity had grown to 4.7 GW, and by the end of 1982, it exceeded 18 GW.

The rationale behind this ambitious nuclear program was multifaceted. The Soviet Union, despite its vast fossil fuel reserves, faced the logistical challenge of transporting these resources from the eastern regions, where 80% of them were concentrated, to the more populous and energy-intensive European part of the USSR. Nuclear power plants offered a solution by providing a concentrated energy source closer to consumption centers, significantly reducing the strain on the country's railway system. Furthermore, nuclear energy was seen as a cleaner alternative to conventional power generation, a less damaging option for the environment in theory.

By the mid-1980s, nuclear power accounted for a substantial and growing portion of the Soviet Union's electricity production. In 1981, nuclear plants generated 6.5% of the country's total electricity, and projections aimed for this figure to increase dramatically, reaching 14% by 1985 and 24% in the European region of the USSR. This demonstrated a clear, unwavering commitment to nuclear power as a primary source of energy, with plans for a tenfold expansion in nuclear electric generation between 1980 and 2000.

The Soviet nuclear program was primarily based on two types of thermal power reactors: the VVER (Voda-Vodyanoi Energetichesky Reaktor, or water-cooled power reactor), a pressurized light-water reactor similar to Western PWRs, and the RBMK (Reaktor Bolshoy Moshchnosty Kanalny, or high-power channel reactor). The RBMK, in particular, was a unique Soviet design, distinguished by its graphite moderation and light water cooling in individual fuel channels. It was a boiling light water reactor that directly fed steam to turbines. This design allowed for on-load refueling, meaning fuel bundles could be changed without shutting down the reactor, offering a perceived operational advantage.

The development of the RBMK reactor began in the 1960s, with the first unit commencing construction in Leningrad in 1970 and becoming operational in 1973. The RBMK-1000, with an electrical output of 1,000 MWe, was at the time the world's largest nuclear reactor design, surpassing Western designs and even the Soviet VVER in power output and physical size. The design was finalized in 1968. During a nine-

year period from December 1973 to December 1982, ten RBMK-1000 units, totaling 10,000 MWe, were commissioned across the USSR, including additional units at Leningrad.

These nuclear power plants were often designed with twin reactors, sharing auxiliary systems to streamline construction, operation, and maintenance. The average construction time for two 1000 MWe units was approximately 7.68 years, meaning each unit took about 3.84 years to build. By 1980, RBMK reactors were significant contributors to the Soviet energy grid, producing 47 billion kWh, or 64.5% of all electrical power generated by Soviet nuclear power plants.

Despite the impressive statistics and the apparent efficiency of the RBMK reactors, there were inherent design flaws, some of which were recognized even before the first units were built. These concerns, however, were seemingly outweighed by the political and economic imperatives of the Soviet nuclear program. The RBMK was embraced as the "national reactor," partly due to its unique design and large power output, differentiating it from the "American-style" VVERs. The emphasis was on ease of local construction and economical value, with safety concerns often de-prioritized or kept secret.

The Ministry of Medium Machine Building (Sredmash), responsible for the Soviet nuclear weapons complex, designed all Soviet power reactors. However, the Ministry of Energy and Electrification (Minenergo) was in charge of ordering and administering the plants for power production. This bureaucratic division, coupled with a drive for rapid deployment and a culture of secrecy, would contribute to a system where critical design shortcomings went unaddressed, setting the stage for future catastrophe. The Chernobyl plant itself, with its four RBMK-1000 units, stood as a towering testament to this Soviet nuclear ambition.

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