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## **The Long Half-Life of Chernobyl**

By *FELICITY BARRINGER*

Associated Press Chernobyl's No. 4 reactor, seen from a helicopter a few days after the April 1986 explosion. When I look back on the explosion and fire at the Chernobyl nuclear plant, which unfolded when I was living in the Soviet Union in 1986, I reflect on how that plant differed from the Fukushima Daiichi site in Japan. There's the reactor design, for one, and the cause of the explosions that ruptured buildings — in Chernobyl's case, a botched safety experiment, and at Fukushima Daiichi, an epic earthquake and resulting tsunami.

And although some have expressed frustration over the amount of information being released, Japanese officials have been far more forthcoming than the Soviet leadership was in the days after the Chernobyl explosion.

Still, there are sparks of recognition that drive home the similarities, too — for example, the selflessness of the [Japanese plant workers laboring in the radiation danger zone](#), described by my colleagues Keith Bradsher and Hiroko Tabuchi in Wednesday's newspaper. I thought instantly of the firemen from the town of Pripyat, Ukraine, who took their hoses onto the roof and directed water into a hole that opened onto blazing fires and exposed fuel rods.

And in reading about evacuations from the area around the troubled Japanese plant, I recall TV images of a seemingly endless line of school buses removing residents from a 30-kilometer exclusion zone around the Chernobyl plant.

The images of heroic firemen and a protected populace were, of course, the spin that the state-controlled press put on an out-of-control situation. Just to show how thoroughly things were in control, Ukrainian Communist Party officials insisted on having the annual May Day parade in Kiev less than a week after the explosion. I remember jumping out of a chair and swearing as the camera showed pictures of proud little Ukrainian girls, in pigtails and bows smiling as they marched down the streets while radioactive particles wafted down, unseen.

I wasn't the only one to notice what was being sacrificed to state propaganda. Not much could stay hidden from a Soviet public that was long accustomed to being lied to. Word quickly spread that the same party officials who ordered up that tableau of celebration had sent their own children away. And within a few days, trainloads full of Ukrainian

children, car after car with windows full of small, nervous faces, began arriving at the Kiev Station in Moscow.

When I went to the station, a woman accompanying them assured me they were just making a normal trip to Moscow to see relatives. Nothing to see here, move on. The message was reinforced by a hostile man wearing the kind of black leather jacket favored by the thugs who worked as government enforcers: he approached me with an air of authority and told me to get lost. "Who gave you permission to ask questions at the Kiev Station?" he growled.

I became more familiar with the Kiev Station over the next year as I made a series of reporting trips to Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, and Chernobyl. Every time I visited, street-cleaning trucks were constantly spraying water to keep the dust down and keep radioactive particles from blowing around. The pretense of normalcy presented in the May Day parade did not last much longer than the parade itself.

But there was one part of the carefully crafted story that required no hyping, though the Soviet authorities could not resist hyping it for all it was worth. What the firemen did on the roof of the reactor that night was as fine an example of self-sacrifice as one could find.

Most died within two weeks from acute radiation sickness. A shift commander, Lt. Leonid Telyatnikov, survived a debilitating case of radiation sickness, though the younger firemen under his command died from the exposure. Lt. Telyatnikov's hair had regrown when I [interviewed](#) him about a year after the disaster. His description of the scene was haunting.

"As we were putting out the fire, you had the impression you could see the radiation. First a lot of the substances there were flowing, luminescent, a bit like sparklers. There were flashes of light springing from place to place as if they had been thrown.

And there was a kind of gas on the roof where the people were. It was not like smoke. There was smoke, too. But this was a kind of fog. It gave off a peculiar smell."

He did not want to talk about the chances that the heavy dose of radiation he absorbed on the roof could result in cancer in coming years. "I expect to grow old," he said.

He died of cancer in 2004 at the age of 53.