



Top Secret Chernobyl : The Nuclear Disaster through the Eyes of the Soviet Politburo, KGB, and U.S. Intelligence

Memorial to Those who Saved the World, Chernobyl, Ukraine (Wikipedia)

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Declassified documents detail highest-level reactions, cover-ups, critiques

Sources include Politburo notes, diaries, protocols never before translated into English

Part One of a Two-Volume Publication

Washington, D.C., August 15, 2019 – Documents from the highest levels of the Soviet Union, including notes, protocols and diaries of Politburo sessions in the immediate aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986, detail a sequence of cover-up, revelation, shock, mobilization, individual bravery, and bureaucratic turf battles in the Soviet reaction, according to the “Top Secret Chernobyl” e-book published today by the National Security Archive.

Key sources include protocols of the Politburo Operational Group on Chernobyl that were published in Russian by the journalist and former Supreme Soviet deputy Alla Yaroshinskaya in 1992. The posting today begins with Yaroshinskaya's essay (written exclusively for this publication) reviewing the Chernobyl story and her own efforts dating back to 1986 to document and expose the lies and the secrecy that surrounded the disaster.

Also included are excerpts from the diary of Politburo member Vitaly Vorotnikov, notes on Politburo sessions by Anatoly Chernyaev, and excerpts from rare "official working copies" of Politburo sessions that were published in Russian by former Rosarchiv director Rudolf Pikhoia in 2000. Today's publication also contains declassified reactions from the U.S. State Department's intelligence bureau, the CIA, and the National Security Council's Jack Matlock, as well as reporting from the Ukrainian KGB.

"Top Secret Chernobyl" is the first part of a two-volume documentary publication, taking the Chernobyl story through July 1986. The second part will include Soviet military reporting on the radiation contamination, the process of "liquidation" of the consequences, and more foreign reactions to the disaster.

The documents published today complement a number of other important accounts of Chernobyl. The author Adam Higginbotham, whose book *Midnight in Chernobyl* (2019) illuminates the tragedy with quotations from his hundreds of interviews, also relied on a trove of Soviet-era documents collected by the Ukrainian National Chernobyl Museum in Kiev. In April 2019, Higginbotham published an [extremely useful selection](#) of these documents on the "Sources and Methods" blog of the History and Public Policy Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The Higginbotham documents particularly detail the reaction of the Kiev authorities, ranging from the Council of Ministers to the Ukrainian Communist Party Central Committee to the Ministry of Health to the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences.

Another richly documented account that begins with the trial of the Chernobyl plant operators in 1987 and analyzes the entire rise of the Soviet nuclear power industry is Sonja D. Schmid's *Producing Power* (2015). Schmid dissects the various competing explanations for the Chernobyl disaster, including operator error, reactor design, and deficiencies in the Soviet system overall, and cites to more than 100 pages of notes on sources. A more popularized and novelistic treatment may be found in Serhii Plokhyy's account, *Chernobyl: A History of a Nuclear Catastrophe* (2018).

Deception on the Scale of Chernobyl

By Alla Yaroshinskaya

In my journalistic archive are stored pounds of secret Chernobyl documents from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU) and the Soviet government. The tens of thousands of deaths of liquidators and victims of the

catastrophe and the loss of health and quality of life for the nine million people who still survive in the affected areas paid for them.

It is known that from the very beginning of everything, the nuclear accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant (NPP) was completely classified, and the communist regime repeated its deceitful mantra: “Nothing threatens peoples’ health.” (I write about this in detail in my nonfiction books.) I managed to fight my way to the most secret Kremlin documents only in 1991, when I was elected a People’s Deputy of the USSR from the city of Zhytomyr, which is 86 miles from Chernobyl. After the military coup in the USSR in August of 1991 and the ban of the Communist Party, the transfer of its archives began and the deputies finally received the secret protocols of the operative group of the Politburo of the CC CPSU on the accident at the Chernobyl NPS.

One of the December days in 1991, when the USSR was already in the process of self-destruction and the parliament living out its last months, I went over to the building of the Supreme Soviet (the parliament) and saw the deputies’ archives being loaded into cars. And suddenly it dawned on me: now the secret Chernobyl protocols will be carried off, even though we, the deputies, have not even had the time to read them yet! I decided to immediately make copies of them. However, the ‘veto’ in the only deputies’ copy center was imposed by a certain Vladimir Pronin from the secret sector of the Armed Forces of the USSR. This was a shock: the special services were watching all of the deputies’ actions! I dropped in on the head of the special units of the Secretariat of the Armed Forces of the USSR Anatoly Burko, and explained that I had the right. He calmly uttered: in order to get the authorization to copy documents, I must address the organization that classified them. Let me remind you that it was after the August coup of 1991. The President of Russia Boris Yeltsin had already banned the CPSU, and some members of its politburo were contemplating life in KGB cells.

I decided to go to the newspaper ‘Izvestia’, where I found the coveted Xerox. (In 1991 in the USSR, Xerox copying machines were still inaccessible not only to ordinary citizens, but, as one can see, to members of parliament.) On my return to my deputy’s office, I put the originals back in the safe and thought: in this country everything is so unsteady, and if the communists end up in power again tomorrow, what will become of my family? I opened the safe again, took out the first protocol from there—the original—and put the copy in its place.

When I began to read the secret documents, I saw that the deception around the catastrophe turned out to be just as vast as the catastrophe itself. And the main deadly isotope leaking out the Chernobyl reactor was not Cesium-37, but ‘Deception-86.’ As it follows from the documents, the first meeting of the Politburo group was held on April 29, 1986. A flood of reports on the hospitalization of the public comes, starting on May 4th.

“Secret. Protocol No. 7. May 6, 1986. Present: members of the Politburo of the CC CPSU Comrades N.I. Ryzhkov, E.K. Ligachev, V.I. Vorotnikov, V.L. Chebrikov, the Secretary of the

CC CPSU A.N. Yakovlev... (...) as of 09:00 hours on May 6th, the total number of the hospitalized amounted to 3,454 people...the number stricken with radiation sickness amounted to 367 people.” According to the protocols, the number of the sick is growing every day. The count is already in the thousands.

“Secret. Protocol No. 12. May 12, 1986. (...) There are 10,198 people under in-patient examination and treatment, of which 345 people have symptoms of radiation sickness.”

After more than ten thousand of the radiation-exposed turned up in hospital beds their general discharge suddenly began. It seems the worse the radiation spread, the healthier the Soviet people grew.

And here is the solution of sudden, miraculous ‘healing.’

“Secret. Protocol No. 9. May 8, 1986. (...) The Ministry of Health of the USSR approved new standards of permissible levels of exposure of the population to radioactive irradiation, surpassing the former by 10 times. In special cases, it is possible to increase these standards to levels exceeding the previous by 50 times. [Author’s Note- !]”

The Kremlin went to great lengths to hide the scale of the radiation debacle. Not two months after the evacuation of people from the ‘black’ zone—as the 30—kilometer zone was termed in the secret letters of the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine Vladimir Shcherbitsky—the authorities hastily began the reverse process: re-evacuation! “Secret. Protocol No. 29. (...) June 23, 1986. The conclusion about the possibility of the return of children and pregnant women to the areas where the radiation levels fall within the limits of 2 to 5 mR/hr. 1. Allow the re-evacuation (return) of children and pregnant women to all residential areas where the combined calculated dose will not exceed 10 rem for the first year (237 residential areas in total)”, and there “where the calculated doses of radiation exposure (without the restriction of the consumption of contaminated foods) surpasses 10 rem,—from October 1, 1986...(174 residential areas)... Israel, Burenkov, Aleksandrov.” This is despite the fact that a month earlier the head of the State Committee for Hydrometeorology Yuri Israel reported: “Areas with radiation levels higher than 5 mR/hr (...) are recognized as dangerous for people to live in. In areas with radiation levels of less than 5 mR/hr it is critical to introduce strict control for radioactive food, especially milk.”

It is interesting to compare with the secret “Report of the head of the Chemical Corps of the Ministry Defense of the USSR V. Pikalov at a meeting of the CC CPSU on June 15, 1987.”: “...in the ‘red’ forest, because of the turn-down and the conservation of the forest, the radiation levels are lowered from 5 Roentgen/hr to 7.5 mR/hr, which surpasses admissible values by 15 times.” ‘Red’ was the name of the forest close to the NPP, which had been killed by a nuclear blast. It turns out that pregnant women and children were re-evacuated nearly to the ‘red’ forest! Isn’t this criminal? (One of the authors of the idea of returning children and pregnant women to the danger zone—Yuri Israel—was subsequently awarded the Order of Lenin “for Chernobyl.”)

Secret recipes from the Politburo on the use of radioactive meat and milk are undoubtedly one of the strongest parts of the Kremlin-Chernobyl bestseller. “Secret. Protocol No. 32. August 22, 1986. (...) Paragraph 10: “Consider it expedient to store meat with an elevated level of radioactive contaminant in the government reserve, in storage, as well as subject for purchase in the current year.”

“Top Secret. Resolution of the Politburo of the CC CPSU on May 8, 1986. Comrade V.S. Murakhovsky’s report. (...) Secretary of the CC CPSU M.S. Gorbachev. (...) In the course of slaughtering large cattle and pigs, it is established that washing the animals with water and also the removal of their lymph nodes results in obtaining meat suitable for consumption.” It is interesting, what did they do with the ‘removed lymph nodes’? Indeed, they also could have been put on Soviet schoolchildren’s doughnuts!

“Secret. Attachment to paragraph 10 of Protocol No. 32. (...) At present, there are around 10 thousand tons of meat with contamination levels of radioactive materials from $1.1 \cdot 10^{-7}$ Ci/kg to $1.0 \cdot 10^{-9}$ Ci/kg in storage in fridges of the meat industry in a number of regions, in August to December of this year it is expected that another 30 thousand tons of such meat will enter into production.” And then comes the recommendation: “...disperse the meat contaminated with radioactive material around the country as much as possible, and use it for the production of sausage products, canned goods, and manufactured meat products at a ratio of one to 10 with normal meat.”

The following is how the Deputy Prosecutor-General of the USSR V.I. Andreyev answered my official inquiry 5 years after the accident: “...in the period of 1986 to 1989, in the specified zones 47,500 tons of meat and 2 million tons of milk over the limit of the level of contamination were produced....These circumstances put around 75 million people in dangerous living conditions (Author’s Note- !)... and created the conditions for increased mortality, the increase in the number of malignant tumors, the increase of the number of deformities, hereditary and somatic medical problems, and a change in the population’s capacity for work.

... Only 1.5 million people (as well as 160,000 children under the age of 7) at the time of the accident were living in the zone of the largest contamination with iodine-131, those with irradiation exposure of the thyroid gland at 30 rem composed 87% of adults and 48% of children, at 11% and 35%, respectively, at 30 to 100 rem, and 2% of adults and 17% of children were at upwards of 100 rem.” An exposure to radiation of 100 rem guarantees cancer.

The Union collapsed. Even in Bulgaria criminal proceedings took place for those who had lied to the people about the radiation. And we did not have those who were guilty in the Chernobyl outrages under the party bosses, who called “to intensify propaganda efforts aimed at the exposure of false fabrications of the bourgeois information and intelligence agencies about the events at the Chernobyl NPP,” nor under democracies—sovereign public prosecutors still keep a deathlike silence.

Alla Yaroshinskaya

Writer, author of nonfiction books about Chernobyl
Former Peoples' Deputy of the USSR
Former Adviser to the President of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin

Translated by Sarah Dunn for the National Security Archive.

Read the documents



[Document 1](#)

[Excerpt from Vitaly Vorotnikov Diary](#)

1986-04-26

Source: Vorotnikov, V.I. *A eto bylo tak: Iz dnevnika chlena PB TsK KPSS* (Moscow, Soyuz Veteranov Knigoizdaniya: SIMAR, 1995)

Member of the Politburo Vitaly Vorotnikov writes in his diary about the first information Politburo members received regarding the accident at the Chernobyl NPS (Nuclear Power Station). According to Vladimir Dolgikh, the Central Committee Secretary in charge of heavy industry and energy production who received information from Station Director Viktor Bryukhanov, the fire was extinguished and the reactor was not damaged. In the morning the leadership formed a State Commission headed by Boris Shcherbina, which departed for Chernobyl later in the day.



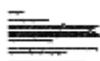
[Document 2](#)

[USSR Ministry of Energy, "Regarding the Accident at Reactor No. 4 of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant," Urgent Report to the CC CPSU Politburo](#)

1986-04-26

Source: Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, Fond 89

The first official report of the accident to the Politburo misrepresents the situation completely. According to the report from the Ministry of Energy, the fire was extinguished by 3:30 a.m. and the reactor core was being cooled down. The report states that according to Ministry of Health representatives, "adoption of special measures, including evacuating the population from the city, is unnecessary."



[Document 3](#)

[Excerpt from Vitaly Vorotnikov Diary](#)

1986-04-27

Source: Vorotnikov, V.I. *A eto bylo tak: Iz dnevnika chlena PB TsK KPSS* (Moscow, Soyuz Veteranov Knigoizdaniya: SIMAR, 1995)

A brief note from Vitaly Vorotnikov's diary shows a reassessment of the situation by Moscow. According to new information, the accident was much more severe than thought earlier. The decision is made to evacuate the town of Pripyat.



[Document 4](#)

[Extraordinary Session of the CC CPSU Politburo](#)

1986-04-28

Source: Archive of the President of the Russian Federation (APRF), Record of Session of the CC CPSU Politburo, 28 April 1986, working copy, published in Rudolph Pikhoia, *Sovetskii Soyuz: Istoriya Vlasti, 1945-1991* (Novosibirsk: Sibirskii Khronograph, 2000), pp. 429-432.

Excerpts from this amazing document are available to us thanks to the extraordinary work by the first Director of the Russian state archival agency (Rosarchiv), Rudolph Pikhoia, who published them in his book on the history of the Soviet government. Almost all of the "working copies" of Politburo sessions are still secret in the Russian Presidential Archive. These excerpts provide a practically verbatim account of the first discussion of the Chernobyl accident by the full Politburo.



[Document 5](#)

[CC CPSU Politburo Session \(from Vitaly Vorotnikov Diary\)](#)

1986-04-29

Source: Vorotnikov, V.I. *A eto bylo tak: Iz dnevnika chlena PB TsK KPSS* (Moscow, Soyuz Veteranov Knigoizdaniya: SIMAR, 1995)

These brief notes from a Politburo session contain only snippets of what was said, but they convey the sense of utter shock among the Soviet leadership. Dolgikh reports: "The situation at the NPS is catastrophic. The reactor is practically destroyed. There is an active expulsion of graphite ..." The Politburo approves urgent measures to deal with the fire and contamination and forms the Politburo Operational Group on Chernobyl.



[Document 6](#)

[CC CPSU Politburo Operational Group Session Protocol #1](#)

1986-04-29

Source: Alla Yaroshinskaya “*Chernobyl: Sovershenno Sekretno* (Moscow: Drugie Berega, 1992)

This is the first of many protocols created by the Politburo Operational Group. These protocols, and all the granular details of how the Soviet leadership dealt with the accident day-by-day, are available to scholars and citizens due to the courage and decisiveness of a brave Russian journalist and subsequently member of the first democratically elected Supreme Soviet, Alla Yaroshinskaya, who published these protocols after the August 1991 coup in Moscow. The Politburo Operational Group on Chernobyl was staffed by some of the most powerful and experienced leaders in the USSR. The first protocol reviews necessary measures to combat the damage done by the explosion in energy block 4. Among those measures are assignments to accurately measure radiation, evacuate citizens from Pripyat, and deploy chemical troops and other emergency management services.



[Document 7](#)

[CC CPSU Politburo Operational Group Session Protocol #2](#)

1986-04-30

Source: Alla Yaroshinskaya “*Chernobyl: Sovershenno Sekretno* (Moscow: Drugie Berega, 1992)

This protocol of the second session of the Politburo Operational Group Chernobyl focuses on tasking representatives of government agencies with various emergency management duties. The tasks delineated in this protocol include management of radiation levels in the European territories of the USSR, cleanup by the Ministry of Defense, and monitoring of international students studying in Ukraine at the time of the accident. Chief of General Staff Marshal Sergey Akhromeyev reports on the Soviet military’s efforts to contain the fire and clean the most radioactive parts of the accident site. He states that the remote control equipment (which failed practically immediately because of high levels of radioactivity and had to be replaced with “biorobots”—Soviet soldiers) has arrived and tells the Group that the brigade of chemical troops will be formed and deployed by May 4.



[Document 8](#)

[Ukrainian KGB Intelligence Report on students studying abroad during the Chernobyl accident.](#)

1986-04-30

Source: Bashan, Oleg, Burchak, Vladimir, and Gennady Boryak. *Chernobilsky Dossier KGB*. (Academic Council Institute of History of Ukraine, 2019).

This Ukrainian KGB intelligence report reviews discussions in Kiev among international students about the Chernobyl explosion. It uses information collected undercover to monitor the level of panic among students. The report quotes students mainly from the Middle East who discuss various rumors about the cause of the accident—that it was political revenge, punishment for Communists, or karma. In conclusion, Major Komarevich reports that his informers were instructed to identify and locate those who were spreading these panicked rumors.



[Document 9](#)

[INR Information Memorandum from Morton Abramowitz to the Secretary of State: Estimate of Fatalities at Chernobyl Reactor Accident. Secret.](#)

1986-05-02

Source: Obtained through FOIA

This memo reviews early Soviet information and information received through U.S. intelligence and speculates about the number of fatalities on the day of the explosion. The authors conclude that “the entire intelligence community believes that the fatality figure of two is preposterous.” Intelligence analysis estimates the number of people in the immediate vicinity of the reactor at the time of the accident to be around 100. It is emphasized that this is purely speculation as inside details are unknown. In fact, the number of people on the night shift was minimal and actual fatalities did total two on the first day of the accident. The memo notes images of fire trucks and other personnel in the area, but those were dispatched to the reactor after the accident. No immediate evacuation followed.



[Document 10](#)

[Draft Collective European Statement on Chernobyl Implications](#)

1986-05-06

Source: Obtained through FOIA from the Central Intelligence Agency

This statement comes from the leaders of seven industrialized European countries and expresses sympathy and offers aid to the USSR and the town of Pripyat. It goes on to discuss the increased global use of nuclear energy and requests information from the

USSR on the cause of the explosion so that the other nuclear countries can avoid such an accident. The authors further encourage an expansion of International Atomic Energy Agency guidelines on sharing information.



[Document 11](#)

[National Security Council Jack Matlock Memo on Strategy for US-Soviet Relations](#)

1986-05-07

Source: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library

In a memo from NSC staffer Jack Matlock to National Security Advisor John Poindexter, Matlock outlines what he calls the Soviet “public propaganda campaign on arms control,” and Gorbachev’s seeming preference for public proposals over private negotiations with Reagan (reference to his January plan for elimination of nuclear weapons), and the Soviet handling of Chernobyl. Matlock describes the Soviet response to the Chernobyl disaster as a “PR fiasco,” and predicts that it will make the Soviets “testy.” He cautions that the issue of Chernobyl and the Soviet failures should not be excessively exploited as it might backfire with the European publics and could also drive Gorbachev into a corner in terms of further negotiations. At the same time, Matlock believes that “there are ways we can capitalize on this indirectly.” He predicts correctly that one could expect “an upsurge in generalized anti-nuclear sentiments, unless we act rapidly to lead public opinion.” Matlock also outlines a “notional” proposal for the elimination of nuclear weapons clearly responding to Gorbachev’s proposal of January 1986.



[Document 12](#)

[Letter from Science Editor Vladimir Gubarev to the CC CPSU About His Trip to Chernobyl](#)

1986-05-10

Source: Source: Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, Fond 89, opis 53, delo 6. In this secret letter to the Central Committee, Gubarev shares his observations and recommendations. His main criticism is about the lack of information, the level of secrecy, and the degree of incompetency that led to unnecessary human losses, especially among the fire-fighters. He notes that “the situation with radiation in the city [of Pripyat] was clear within an hour.” And yet, “no planned emergency evacuation measures existed: people did not know what to do.” He criticizes military officers who wanted to show off their bravery and appeared near the reactor wearing regular uniforms. Gubarev compares standards and regulations in the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Energy and finds the latter ones much weaker. He notes the complete paralysis of local authorities who were unable to do anything without orders from Moscow. Gubarev

recommends that the central leadership should move quickly to award several liquidators who “don’t have long to live,” in particular Major L. Telyatnikov, Lieutenants V. Pravik, and V. Kibenkov, with the rank of Hero of the Soviet Union and take priority care of other people working on eliminating the consequences of the explosion.



[Document 13](#)

[Minutes of CC CPSU Politburo Session \(Anatoly S. Chernyaev notes\)](#)

1986-06-05

Source: Archive of the Gorbachev Foundation, Fond 2, opis 6

In these notes from a Politburo session, Chernyaev mainly records Gorbachev’s interventions. The General Secretary calls for individual responsibility of every agency in eliminating the consequences of the accident and emphasizes “the social sphere,” meaning taking care of the people who are working on decontamination and those who were evacuated from the area. He also insists on informing the West and the socialist countries, especially because they are using the same reactors supplied by the USSR. Gorbachev is also thinking about the connection between Chernobyl and the threat that nuclear weapons represent: “One or two accidents like this and we would get it worse than from a total nuclear war.”



[Document 14](#)

[Session of the CC CPSU Politburo](#)

1986-07-03

Source: Source: Archive of the President of the Russian Federation (APRF), Record of Session of the CC CPSU Politburo, 3 July 1986, working copy, published in Rudolph Pikhoia, *Sovetskii Soyuz: Istoriya Vlasti, 1945-1991* (Novosibirsk: Sibirskii Khronograph, 2000), pp. 434-437

These excerpts from the official working copy of Politburo sessions were published by Rudolph Pikhoia. They present a fascinating account of a rare “fight” at the Politburo, where representatives of various agencies were trying to shift the blame onto one another and protect their turf. Gorbachev blasts the nuclear industry leadership and academic scientists for making the wrong decisions, especially regarding placing nuclear power stations close to cities as if they had not been considered and approved by the party leadership and the Politburo itself.



Document 15

Minutes of CC CPSU Politburo Session (Anatoly S. Chernyaev notes)

1986-07-03

Source: Archive of the Gorbachev Foundation, Fond 2, opis 6

Chernyaev's notes from the same Politburo session as Document 14 are less detailed than those made by official stenographers, but they capture the heated emotional atmosphere of the meeting and they cover the entire Chernobyl discussion. Chernyaev's notes reveal the central leadership's obsession with presenting a proper image of the Soviet system to the West, especially in how it is dealing with the Chernobyl accident. The Politburo is aware that the failures in addressing the accident will serve as judgment on the vitality of the system. At the end of the session Gorbachev gives sweeping instructions on removing several ministers and lower-level officials for failure to prevent and deal with the consequences of the accident. He also sharply criticizes scientists for their independence and lack of party oversight of the institutes.

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