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A Liquidator Searches for the Truth at Chernobyl 25 Years On

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Glushchenko near an icon-like painting of a black-faced woman with an infant signed “Madonna of Chernobyl.” **Vladimir Filonov**

Editor's note: This is the final installment in a three-part series about the Chernobyl disaster.

Twenty-five years ago, Alexander Glushchenko volunteered to join the "liquidators," an army of 600,000 who put their lives on the line to clean up the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

But sitting in his Moscow apartment, packed with books and photos about the catastrophe, he argued that with a disaster this big, there could be no liquidation, only a "minimization" of the consequences.

Glushchenko, 68, said crucial facts about the catastrophe remain "silenced" and that the global community still has not learned its lesson.

However, the solution is not abandoning nuclear industry altogether but developing a "culture of nuclear safety," said Glushchenko, who has written three books on the matter, with the latest out last week.

A nuclear physicist by education, Glushchenko used to work at the very institute that developed a Chernobyl-type nuclear reactor — and he said he is among the few to harbor doubts about its safety.

"I was one of the few in the field to foresee the tragedy, but it wasn't in my power to do anything," he said, regretfully.

For years, the scientific community was confident to the point of arrogance that nuclear safety was guaranteed. Anatoly Alexandrov, head of the Soviet industry's leading research body, the Kurchatov Institute of Atomic Energy, once boasted that it was safe to build a nuclear power station even in the Kremlin.

Glushchenko was not so sure.

"I had a growing feeling over the years that something at the top was going wrong, even as our bosses kept on repeating that everything was safe," he said.

At least two incidents seemed to justify his concerns. In 1975, a Chernobyl-type reactor in the Leningrad region underwent a partial meltdown, and in 1979, the infamous Three Mile accident took place in the United States. Three Mile ranked as the world's worst nuclear incident until 1986 and the second-worst ever since — a title it now shares with Japan's Fukushima.

But in the Soviet Union, no one seemed to notice.

Nuclear Blast

The April 26, 1986, incident is still shrouded in mystery, with some religious-minded people going as far as to claim that "Chernobyl," which means "Wormwood" in Ukrainian, is mentioned in the biblical book of Revelation as a sign of the end of times.

Glushchenko, though an Orthodox Christian himself, does not put any stock in such stories. But he acknowledged that much about the catastrophe remained unknown, including the cause of the blast.

The disaster took place after an experiment to test a new emergency core cooling feature went wrong. What exactly happened remains open to debate, though the most widespread version blames a "thermal explosion," or an equipment blast that destroyed the reactor.

Though disastrous, the blast was not nuclear, officials say. But Glushchenko said they lied.

"In my personal opinion, it was a nuclear explosion," he said. The truth was hushed up in a desperate attempt to downplay the gravity of the incident and later was accepted by most researchers, he said.

Only a handful of experts posit that the Chernobyl incident was an actual nuclear explosion —

which would make it among the most deadly blasts of this kind since the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings in 1945. But among the supporters of this version is Konstantin Checherov, another researcher who has also been investigating the Chernobyl disaster for 25 years.

"There was only one explosion, and it was nuclear one," Checherov said in an interview with Novaya Gazeta last week.

There is also no consensus about who to blame for the disaster, but Glushchenko said the actual reason was the naive and unquestioned belief that "everything was safe."

"Everyone is guilty, but to a different extent," Glushchenko said, adding that the role of the main suspects, the plant's designers and operators, was "minimal."

He pointed out that Chernobyl's safety chief was so sure that nothing could go wrong that he was not even present at the facility during the ill-fated experiment.

Destiny Called Chernobyl

Whatever its cause, the blast released some 200 tons of uranium into the atmosphere, polluting most of the Northern Hemisphere. Ironically, most Western Europeans were notified about the radiation earlier than the Soviet people, who were kept in the dark until the May holidays were over to prevent panic.

Nevertheless, Soviet authorities collected a 600,000-strong army of liquidators, most of whom were not informed about the scale of the incident and were exposed to enormous levels of radiation during the cleanup.

Unlike them, Glushchenko, a researcher with the Soviet Academy of Sciences at the time, knew what he was facing but still volunteered to work in the 30-kilometer exclusion zone around the reactor, which remains a desolate place even today.

"I have no doubt that Chernobyl is my destiny, my burden," he said, sitting in a chair against a photo of the reactor and a monochrome print of an icon-like painting of a black-faced woman with an infant signed "Madonna of Chernobyl."

Glushchenko headed a unit that collected and studied samples of soil and water in the area. He spent almost a year in Chernobyl, enough to rank being declared disabled due to health problems he preferred not to talk about.

"I am lucky because most of my former colleagues from the institute who were working at the plant after the accident are already dead," Glushchenko said.

There is no official data on fatalities among liquidators, but independent analysts say as many as 100,000 may already be dead and an equal number suffer severe health problems due to radiation exposure.

More Disasters Ahead?

The nuclear industry is still surviving, if not thriving, even after last month's disaster

in Japan. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin pledged after the Japanese incident that Russia would not give up its plans to build dozens of new nuclear power stations both at home and abroad.

Glushchenko is not opposed to the plans but said the industry still needed to address vital safety issues pending since the Chernobyl disaster.

The key problem, he said, is plant lifetime — which is limited at 25 to 30 years but routinely extended for financial reasons by many countries.

Of the 444 reactors currently in operation worldwide, 178 have exceeded their lifetime. In Russia, 19 out of 32 reactors will be working past their expiration date by 2013, Glushchenko said.

There is no better illustration to his point than the Fukushima plant, which was commissioned in 1971 and also had its official lifetime extended.

Despite warnings from global nuclear safety bodies, Fukushima continued to operate — until a tsunami hit in March, disabling the emergency generators and putting the reactor on the brink of a meltdown. A handful of "nuclear samurais" are still trying to clean up the disaster, much like Glushchenko and his team did at Chernobyl 25 years ago.

"Life shows that everything repeats itself," Glushchenko said dejectedly. "But there are two global issues on which all countries should cooperate unequivocally: The protection of children and a culture of nuclear safety.

"That's the Chernobyl lesson we should never forget."

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