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The Heroic Bitter Land of 'Chernobyl'

The series has captivated viewers around the world

By Jennifer Eremeeva

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On April 25-26, 1986 the No. 4 reactor at Chernobyl exploded. **HBO**

“Chernobyl” is not an easy show to watch.

Nor should it be. The 1986 explosion at Chernobyl in present-day Ukraine was the worst nuclear accident to date, which killed hundreds of thousands and still affects millions more. But HBO's five-part miniseries is hard to watch for reasons beyond those harrowing facts and graphic images of the immediate effect of radiation on the Chernobyl plant workers and first responders, the omnipresent column of black smoke belching from the reactor's core, or even eerie footage of the residents of the nearby factory town of Pripyat, gathered convivially to watch the fire burn while their children chase radioactive ash like snowflakes.

“Chernobyl” is so hard to watch because of the all too human themes creator Craig Mazin has woven into his masterful script. Mazin and his team have done their homework, immersing themselves into the history, science, and even the tick-tock of Chernobyl, as well as first-

hand accounts in Nobel prize laureate Svetlana Alexievich's "Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster." Watching the show is a crash course in nuclear physics, but more importantly, it is a thought-provoking exploration of the importance of truth and the nature of self-sacrifice.

"We live in a time where people seem to be re-embracing the corrosive notion that what we want to be true is more important than what is true," Craig Mazin says of the series. "It's as if truth has become a joke. One of the most important lessons of "Chernobyl" is that the truth does not care about us. The Soviet system was soaking in this cult of narrative, and then one day the truth erupts. This is why this story is more relevant than ever."

Truth— and the lack of it— is front and center in Episode One. The series' protagonist, Valery Legasov (Jared Harris) sits alone in his Moscow flat with a small cassette player, attempting to grapple with the truth of Chernobyl two years after the incident. Minutes later, we are plunged into chaos and confusion in the Chernobyl control room just seconds after the explosion. Anatoly Dyatlov (Paul Ritter), the plant's senior engineer, systematically ignores the increasingly alarming information his subordinates bring him that the reactor's core has exploded. Again, and again, Dyatlov insists that an explosion is impossible, and continues to issue orders that will consign his already doomed men to more immediate and agonizing deaths from radiation.

Fear is pervasive in the control room, but the cause is not just the alarming reads on the radiation meters (the more sophisticated and accurate meter is locked in the safe and no one has the key— a marvelously Soviet moment). No, the more pressing issue, we learn through snatches of conversation, is that the accident may have been the result of a safety test performed hours before. This is the real specter that haunts Dyatlov and the men in the control room: that they may be blamed for the damage caused by the accident. Their immediate concern is not the reactor as much as containing the damage to their reputations and job security.

If we find this ludicrous, the incredulity of all the characters suggests that worrying about their jobs is an easier problem to get their heads around than a seemingly impossible explosion in a nuclear reactor, something, as Legasov later states, "has never happened before on this planet."

But Dyatlov doggedly continues to insist that everything is fine, the damage is minimal, as are the radiation levels, and he passes this doctored information and, with it, his damage control agenda up the chain of command.

Truth is again relegated to the sidelines as the plant's apparatchiks, Director Bryukhanov and Chief Engineer Fomin meet with Pripyat party officials in a bunker below the reactor's executive office. The precaution of evacuating the city is dismissed by a veteran of the Russian Revolution, who tells the assembled officials: "It is my experience that when the people ask questions that are not in their best interests, they should simply be told to keep their minds on their labors."

Up and up the misinformation goes until it finally reaches General Secretary Gorbachev (David Dencik) and his Minister of Energy, Boris Shcherbina (Stellan Skarsgård). Shcherbina laconically informs his Politburo colleagues on the hastily-convened Government

Commission that the situation at Chernobyl is under control and that the radiation is the equivalent of a chest X-ray. But Legasov— Deputy Head of the Kurchatov Institute for Atomic Energy— interrupts the meeting, just as Gorbachev is adjourning it. Legasov blurts out the unvarnished truth that he alone has been able to parse from the summary prepared for the Commission: graphite on the site of the fire can only mean one thing: the core of the reactor has exploded.

David Dencik's portrayal of Gorbachev— the best known of the historical figures in "Chernobyl" — successfully captures both the man and the moment: Gorbachev wants to fall back on the truth as told to him by his trusted cadre of top party officials, but Legasov is too credible to ignore, and the facts he delivers too disturbing to dismiss. Gorbachev, at least, is willing to admit that he doesn't know the first thing about how a nuclear power plant works, and he gets Shcherbina, albeit more reluctantly, to acknowledge the same. Shcherbina is ordered to Chernobyl and get eyes on the disaster and to bring Legasov with him.

The "odd couple" pairing of Shcherbina and Legasov quietly introduces the second theme of the series: that quintessentially Soviet and Russian concept of sacrifice of self for the greater good of the state. Legasov doesn't question Gorbachev's orders to go to Chernobyl on what is essentially a suicide mission. Jared Harris's implacable features flicker for a mere second, but his dismay is tempered with resignation. Shcherbina doesn't question the order either, though his resolve is rooted in ignorance, and when, later in the episode, he does realize the truth, his horror is short-lived and intense (a seconds-long arc Skarsgård executes masterfully) but then it's back to business.

The senior military liaison to Chernobyl, General Pikalov (Mark Lewis Jones) makes the Chernobyl apparatchiks look ridiculous when he unflinchingly volunteers to execute vital reconnaissance himself, despite the risks. So too, the first responders at the hospital and those battling the fire don't question their orders, despite an early scene in Episode One, which depicts Lyudmilla Ignatenko (Jessie Buckley) imploring her firefighter husband, Vasily (Adam Nagaitis) not to answer the emergency call because he's not on duty. Ignatenko is one of the voices of Alexievich's "Voices of Chernobyl," and in this couple, Mazin distills the heartbreaking human tragedy of ordinary people caught up in the maelstrom.

The only person who seems willing and able to question authority is the Belarussian nuclear physicist, Ulana Khomyuk (Emily Watson), a composite fictional character who represents, as Mazin told Peter Sagal, on the Chernobyl Podcast "...the hundreds of scientists that ultimately worked on the problem of Chernobyl." Convinced that Legasov's initial strategies are flawed, Khomyuk drives through the night from Belarus, against a phalanx of thousands of city buses evacuating citizens from Pripyat. When she is ordered by a policeman to turn back or risk arrest, she tells him, "If you arrest me, you should send me to the highest possible authority." Minutes later, we see General Pikalov escorting Khomyuk into a meeting with Legasov and Shcherbina, and soon after that, she's got a seat at Gorbachev's table.

When Legasov and Shcherbina hesitate, it is Khomyuk, who looks Gorbachev in the eye and tells him that any volunteers for a vital mission into the heart of the plant to drain three water tanks will almost certainly be dead within the week. Up until this moment, with the news of the plant disaster already known in the West, the General Secretary's focus has been on damage control with the U.S.S.R.'s allies and foes. "Our power," he informs the chastened

Politburo officials, "comes from the perception of our power." But Khomyuk's candor forces Gorbachev to shift his focus to the more disturbing issue of the probable human cost of dealing with Chernobyl, and, with an epic Slavic sigh, he does so, noting that other truism of Soviet history: "our victories inevitably come at a cost."

The first two episodes present this dichotomy of Soviet life and history as two separate sides of a single coin: each unique but intrinsically fused. The obfuscation of Dyatlov and the craven self-centeredness of the Pripyat apparatchiks is juxtaposed by mounting examples of self-sacrifice that recur throughout Episode Two, which opens to a radio actor reciting stanzas from the wartime poet Konstantin Simonov's "To Surkov:"

By old Russian practice, mere fire, and destruction

Are all we abandon behind us in war.

We see alongside us the deaths of our comrades,

By old Russian practice, the breast to the fore.

Alyosha, till now we've been spared by the bullets.

But when (for the third time) my life seemed to end,

I yet still felt proud of the dearest of countries,

The great bitter land I was born to defend.

What follows is unquestionably much harder for Western audiences to digest than it is for citizens of the Former Soviet Union. Shcherbina — now aware that his own mortal clock is ticking — addresses the reluctant plant workers who are being asked to volunteer for Khomyuk's suicide repair mission, in a speech that would not have sounded out of place on the eve of the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380, the Battle of Austerlitz in 1805, or even in Stalingrad in 1943.

"You'll do what must be done," Shcherbina says to the workers, "If you don't, millions will die. If you tell me that's not enough, I won't believe you. This is always what has set our people apart. A thousand years of sacrifice is in our veins. And every generation must know its own sorrow."

In HBO's “Chernobyl,” our generation has a unique opportunity to revisit one of the most significant moments in late Soviet history. The accident at Chernobyl exposed the underbelly of Soviet authority to the entire world. In some ways, the reactor was a metaphor for the state: outdated, crumbling, dysfunctional, headed towards its own implosion, taking millions of innocents with it. The disaster at Chernobyl may not have caused the downfall of the Soviet Union, but it undoubtedly hastened it. For many outside the country, Chernobyl was one of the first concrete things learned about the U.S.S.R., and shaped subsequent understanding of Russia for good or ill. But in the miniseries, Mazin and his team have made sure that we see "the best and worst humanity can offer."

I am always wary of watching Western-made TV and film dramas set in Russia with my

Russian husband, but I need not have worried: Harris, Skarsgård, and Watson deliver masterfully nuanced performances that show that, they too have done their homework. “Chernobyl's” production team, led by designer Luke Hall, has faithfully recreated both Chernobyl and Pripyat with astonishing accuracy on 158 sets and on location in Ignalina in Lithuania. Every tiny detail, from the white stenciled letters on the heavy metal plant doors, to Legasov's ill-fitting glasses, and the rickety dish drainer in Lyudmilla Ignatenko's Pripyat kitchen are absolutely true to the period, as are the costumes designed by Odile Dicks-Mireaux, who commented, "I hate polyester, but actually, polyester reigns in this show...” A team of Lithuanian designers researched Russian patterns for work and medical uniforms, and the civilian clothes come from Belarus Film Studios. It is certainly in no small measure thanks to the entire “Chernobyl” team that my Russian husband — and tens of thousands of his compatriots — are currently raving about “Chernobyl.”

“Chernobyl” has three more episodes to go, and I anticipate that it will not get any easier to watch, nor indeed, any easier to turn away.

“Chernobyl” is distributed by HBO and in Russia by Amediateka.

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