

Putin's Media Struggle to Deal With HBO's Chernobyl

The fact that an American, not a Russian, TV channel told the story about our own heroes is a source of shame for pro-Kremlin media.

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Chernobyl / HBO

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It seems every major Russian media outlet had to chime in about the “Chernobyl” TV series by HBO. Although the foreign program airs only online to paying viewers, the show has become something of a national sensation in Russia where the pro-Kremlin media have launched a mini-crusade against it.

Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP), Russia's most popular newspaper, raised suspicions that competitors of state-atomic center Rosatom were using the series to tarnish this country's

image as a nuclear power.

Argumenty i Fakty, a newspaper popular among the elderly, dismissed the show as “a caricature and not the truth.”

“The only things missing are the bears and accordions!” quipped Stanislav Natanzon, lead anchor of Rossia 24, one of the country’s main news channels. He pointed to shots showing modern storm windows on a building in Pripyat — that are only visible if you greatly enlarge the image — as evidence of shoddy filmmaking. However, critics of the series found fault with more than just minor details.

"The scientist Valery Legasov not only led the government’s response to the Chernobyl disaster, he was also openly critical of its management of the nuclear industry."

In his show, the Rossia 24 anchor pointed out a major article published by KP, arguing that the HBO series was wrong to suggest that the Soviet authorities were afraid to admit their mistakes and that this reluctance led to terrible consequences.

Legasov’s article in the country’s leading newspaper, the anchor says, proves this was not the case, undermining one of the main theses of the show.

Unfortunately, however, state-controlled media often tries unmask one set of lies with the help of another. It is true that Legasov did write such an article for KP in 1987, but the editors didn’t like it and refused to publish the piece.

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Legasov was at wit's end by this time: the Academy of Sciences had rejected his ideas and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had refused to award him the honorary title of Hero of Socialist Labor (although he did bestow it upon others who worked with Legasov in Chernobyl).

Following a meeting at the Academy of Sciences, Legasov hung himself. Two weeks after his death, KP reversed its decision and published Legasov’s article in 1988.

“Chernobyl” is relatively historically accurate and the filmmakers devote a great deal of attention to detail. Nonetheless, I expect that the airing of the final installment will spur a fresh wave of unfounded criticism.

Ultra pro-Soviet columnist Anatoly Vasserman offered what is probably the most candid of all the reviews leveled against the show: “If Anglo-Saxons film something about Russians,” he said, “it definitely will not correspond to the truth.”

In so saying, he spared himself the need to look for hidden storm windows or other historical inaccuracies. “Those people always get it wrong. ‘Nuff said.”

In fact, it has been a long time since even Russians made uncontroversial historical films about Russia. Against this backdrop, HBO’s “Chernobyl” does not look too bad. So why were the pro-Kremlin media opposed to it from the start?

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It is an ordinary case of jealous resentment: “Only we have the right to talk about our history,” they say, “so don’t butt in.” However, the reception given “Chernobyl” says more about the critics than it does about the series.

Thanks to the HBO series, many of my peers now have a different view of the Chernobyl accident. Whereas most disaster films culminate with the central catastrophe, only the first episode in this series is devoted to the Chernobyl reactor explosion.

All the subsequent episodes focus on the harrowing and self-sacrificing struggle that the Soviet people waged against the consequences of the explosion. And it was these people who saved Europe — at the cost of their own lives and health.

Watching this series provides at least a passing understanding of the hardships they endured in the process.

Russia, however, does not honor these individuals as heroes who saved Europe.

Just go to the official Kremlin website to see how often President Vladimir Putin mentions the Chernobyl survivors — many of whom are still alive and suffer from a variety of radiation-induced illnesses.

Putin’s sole references to them occur on the major anniversaries of the Chernobyl accident. He last mentioned them in 2016, on the 30th anniversary of the disaster, and again in 2011, on the 25th anniversary.

As odd as it might sound, the clean-up effort after the Chernobyl accident was almost as important to Europe as the Allied victory in World War II.

What began as a day of solemnity and sorrow, Victory Day has since turned into a noisy holiday with military parades.

Russia will never celebrate the Chernobyl events as a holiday — and if leaders cannot turn it into a fete of national pride and greatness, then better to forget that it ever happened at all.

Still, an attempt will be made to put an entirely different spin on those events. Russia’s NTV channel has already announced that it is shooting its own “Chernobyl” series based on the premise that the CIA sent an agent to the Chernobyl zone to carry out acts of sabotage.

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As justification for the story, the film’s director, Alexei Muradov, cited fringe conspiracy theorists: “One theory holds that Americans had infiltrated the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and many historians do not deny that, on the day of the explosion, an agent of the enemy’s intelligence services was present at the station.”

In place of a moving tribute to the heroic men and women who sacrificed everything to overcome the fallout from the Chernobyl disaster, Moscow gives us a thrilling detective film based on a conspiracy theory in which a KGB officer struggles to thwart American spies — the new villains in this national tragedy.

The fact that an American, not a Russian, TV channel tells us about our own heroes is a source of shame that the pro-Kremlin media apparently cannot live down. And this is the real reason they find fault with HBO's "Chernobyl" series.

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