



Voices of Chernobyl: Chronicle of the Future, Svetlana Alexievich, London: Aurum Press, 198 pp. (Book Review)

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Abstract

Nuclear energy is good until it's bad, and when it's bad it's catastrophic. This year is the fortieth anniversary of the explosion of a nuclear reactor at Chernobyl (Reactor #4, on 26 April 1986, then USSR, now Ukraine). Many books and reports have appeared in the decades since. It is timely to revisit 'Voices of Chernobyl' by Svetlana Alexievich. Her book is unlike any other about Chernobyl; it records the 'voices' of those who lived through the catastrophe. Other accounts provide timelines and technical analyses. The author of 'Voices' won the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 1994) "for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time". The chosen genre of Svetlana Alexievich is the reportage of the 'voices' of others rather than stamping her own words to a tragedy. In a time of energy challenges for all, and of a fresh flirtation with nuclear energy by some, 'Voices of Chernobyl' is especially timely. The book is a powerful testament of ordinary people facing extraordinary events. As a 'taster', eight of those 'voices' are quoted in the present review. The recommendation of the present review applies to the masterful translation (from the original Russian) by Antonia W Bouis (do not accept substitutes). For both proponents and opponents of nuclear energy alike, 'Voices of Chernobyl' is highly recommended.

Keywords: Ukraine; Russia; USSR; Chornobyl; Nuclear Energy; Environmental Science; Environmental Studies; Personal Testimony; Nuclear Catastrophe; Classic; Fortieth Anniversary

The Book under Review

'Voices of Chernobyl: Chronicle of the Future', Svetlana Alexievich (Translator: Antonia W Bouis). London: Aurum Press, 1999, ISBN 1 85410 649 X.

In the 40 years since the Chernobyl catastrophe there have been a great many books and reports; many are technical, many provide timelines of events. This book by Svetlana Alexievich charts a different path.

'Voices of Chernobyl' is a classic; amidst the millions of words written about the nuclear catastrophe of Chernobyl, it is tempting to say it is THE classic. These are the voices of those who lived through the terror. Not apologists, not apparatchiks, not advocates, not whiners, not blamers, ordinary folk.

'Voices of Chernobyl' holds a special place in the constellation of Chernobyl books and reports. Here are the voices of ordinary people navigating extraordinary times, sharing their personal tragedies, hopes, loves, and heartaches. The words are not the apologetics of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) whose brief and practice is to promote nuclear energy nor of the smitten eye of the World Health Organisation (WHO) which needs to retain funding from powerful vested interests.

The testimonies relate the lived experience of ordinary people sharing their personal tragedies, hopes, and heartaches. These testimonies are raw and unsanitised, from those who have lived through the disaster of Chernobyl and earned their right to testify.

The reviewed book is a masterful translation by Antonia W Bouis from the original Russian [1]. This book has also been translated by Keith Gessen [2] (which is not recommended).

Chernobyl

Chernobyl was: “The largest technological catastrophe of the twentieth century” [1, dj]. “On 26 April 1986 ... a series of explosions destroyed the reactor and building of the fourth energobloc of the Chernobyl station” [1, dj].

The cloud of radioactivity promptly spread north and west, enveloping the globe: “According to observations, on 29 April 1986 a high radiation background was registered in Poland, Germany, Austria, Romania, on 30 April in Switzerland and northern Italy, on 1-2 May in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Great Britain and Northern Greece. On 3 May in Israel, Kuwait and Turkey ... The gaseous and flying particles thrown high into the air spread globally: on 2 May they were registered in Japan, on 4 May in China, 5 May in India, 5 and 6 May in USA and Canada. It took less than a week for Chernobyl to become a problem for the entire world” [International Sakharov College for Radiology in 1, p.2].

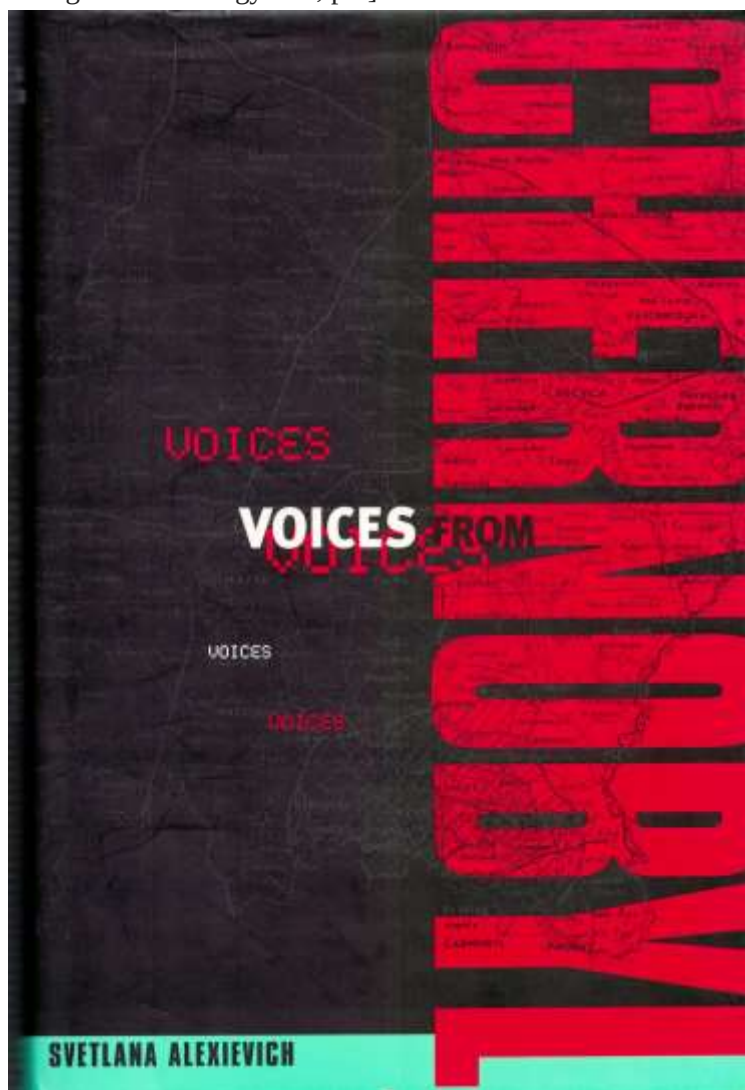


Figure 1. Front cover of the first English edition of ‘Voices of Chernobyl’ (image: J Paull).

Scholars should be aware of ‘Chornobyl’ as an alternative place-name spelling: “changed to Chornobyl ... when Ukraine became independent” [3, p.28]. Most accounts use the spelling ‘Chernobyl’ rather than ‘Chornobyl’ (worldcat.org).

Svetlana Alexievich

Svetlana Alexievich (b.1948, Ukraine) is “A dissident Belarussian writer and journalist” [1, dj]. She won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1994 “for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time” [4].

She explains: “I spent a long time searching for a genre that would reflect the way I see the world. The way my eye and ear work ... And I chose the genre of human voices ... I look for and listen to my books on the streets

... In them, real people recount the major events of their time—the war, the collapse of the socialist empire, Chernobyl—and together they leave behind in words the history of the country, a shared history. Old and new. And each one—the story of their own small human destiny” [5, p.1].

She observes: “After Chernobyl we live in a different world, the former world no longer exists. But we do not want to think about it, because we had never thought about it before” [1, pp.19-20].

For ‘Voices of Chernobyl’ she relates: “I travelled around for three years talking to workers at the station, scientists, former Party members, soldiers, refugees, people who had moved back. People of various professions, lives, generations, and temperaments, believers and non-believers, peasants and intellectuals. Chernobyl is the fundamental content of their world. Everything within and without is poisoned by it, not only the earth and water. Their entire life” [1, p.20].

How this book was created: “I travelled, I talked, I wrote it down. These people were the first to see what the rest of us only suspect exists. What is a mystery to the rest. But I will let them tell it for themselves. More than once, I had the feeling that I was recording the future” [1, p.21].

Voices, a sample

The author of ‘Voices of Chernobyl’ has dedicated her pages to enable those who lived Chernobyl to speak. Hers is a book of the voices, the living memories, of Chernobyl. And although Svetlana Alexievich is listed as the author (and rightly so), she is really the scribe, the channel, the conduit, of these living memories, of which these are some:

Wife of a clean-up crew member: “We were expecting our first baby. My husband wanted a boy, I wanted a girl. The doctors tried to talk me into having an abortion, ‘Your husband was in Chernobyl.’ He is a driver and in the first days they drafted him there. He hauled sand. I did not believe anyone. The baby was still-born. And missing two fingers. A girl. I cried. ‘Why couldn’t she at least have had her fingers. She was a girl, after all’” [Nina Khantsevich in 1, p.114].

Wife of a firefighter: “I don’t know what to tell you about. Death or love? Or is it one and the same? What shall I tell you? We were newly weds. We still held hands in the street, even if we were just going to the store. I told him: ‘I love you.’ But I didn’t even know how much. I had no idea ... I did not see the explosion itself. Only the flames ... They had gone off to the fire without their protective gear, just in their shirt sleeves. They had not been warned, they had been summoned as if to a normal fire ... The prognosis for acute radiation sickness is fourteen days. It takes a man fourteen days to die ... I wasn’t allowed to hug him ... ‘what you have here is not your husband, the man you love, but a radioactive object with a high density of radiation’ ... ‘He got 1600 roentgens and the fatal dose is 400. You are sitting next to a reactor’ ... They told everyone the same thing: you cannot have the bodies of your husbands, your sons, because they are very radioactive and they will be buried in a special way in a Moscow cemetery, in sealed zinc coffins, under concrete slabs. And you must sign this document ... they were told that the men were heroes and no longer belonged to their families. They were state personages. They belonged to the state ... I was twenty-three then ... my contractions began ... She looked healthy ... Four hours later they told me that the girl had died ... She had no name, nothing ... All the people from the station live around me ... many of them have horrible diseases, disabilities, but they don’t abandon the nation ... They are dying, but no one has questioned them really. About what we’ve lived through. No one wants to hear about death. About the horror. But I have told you about love. About how I loved” [Ludmila Ignatenko in 1, pp.5-18].

A child: “I am twelve and I am an invalid. At our home the mailman delivers two pensions - one for me and one for my grandfather. When the girls in my class learned that I had leukaemia, they were afraid to sit next to me. Afraid to touch me. The doctors said that I was sick because my father worked in Chernobyl. And then I was born. I love my father” [Vanya Kovarov in 1, pp.180-1].

A child about a pet: “We left my hamster behind in our house. It was white. We left food for two days. But we left forever” [1, p.178].

A child about saying good-bye: “I want to tell you how my grandmother said good-bye to our house. She asked my father to bring a sack of wheat and she scattered it in the garden: ‘For God’s birds’... She got all her seeds out - carrots, pumpkins, cucumbers, flowers. She scattered them in the garden. ‘Let them live in the earth.’ And then she bowed to the house. To the shed. And she went and said goodbye to each apple tree” [1, p.178].

A psychologist: “And bear in mind that memory is a fragile thing, ephemeral, it is not an exact science, but a guess about oneself. It is not yet knowledge, only feeling” [Pyotr S. in 1, p.25].

A father: “My daughter was six years old. I was putting her to bed and she whispered in my ear, ‘Papa I want to live, I’m still little’ ... Can you picture seven bald girls. There were seven in the ward. ... We laid her out on the door - the door on which my father had been laid out - until they brought the tiny coffin. It was the size of a box for a large doll. I want to bear witness - my daughter died from Chernobyl. And they want us not to remember” [Nikolai Fomich Kalugin in 1, p.33].

A soldier driver: “I went there. I could have stayed away but I volunteered ... Real men off to do real work ... We came home. I took everything off that I had worn there and threw it down the garbage chute. But I gave my cap to my little boy. He really begged for it. He wore it all the time. And two years later he was diagnosed with a brain tumour. You can guess the rest yourself. I don’t want to talk anymore” [Valentin Komkov in 1, p.59].

Ironies et al.

There was forewarning of peril well before Chernobyl blew up [e.g. 6]. Have ‘lessons been learned’? The most notable nuclear catastrophe since Chernobyl was Fukushima in 2011 [7-9].

When the USSR imploded, Ukraine became the third biggest nuclear power in terms of nuclear warheads (after Russia and USA). Under the terms of the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, these legacy nuclear weapons were relinquished in exchange for security guarantees from Russia, UK, and USA [10]. These guarantees have proved to be worthless. Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The United Nations has proven to be a “lame duck” [10, p.18]. What if Ukraine had not relinquished its nuclear arsenal, would that have deterred an invasion?

Ukraine is rich in deposits of uranium and Ukraine is still relies on nuclear energy. Europe’s largest nuclear energy complex at Zaporizhzhya is presently in the theatre of war and control is contested, the chief engineer was killed in July 2026, and Russian troops are presently in occupation [11].

Verdict

On a scale of one to four, ‘Voices of Chernobyl’ is a five. This book should be compulsory reading for every proponent of nuclear energy. And for every opponent as well. The book is the raw testimony of lived experience. Surprisingly, it offers heartbreaking testament of love (not anger, bitterness, or blame). It is a classic of environmental science and of nuclear history.

Yes, Svetlana Alexievich is the author of ‘Voices of Chernobyl’, yet very few of the words of this book are her own. Her role has been that of a scribe, recording for posterity the voices of the otherwise voiceless, ordinary victims of the most extraordinary techno-catastrophe of our times.

‘Voices of Chernobyl’ is a sacred testimony of humanity as it stares down grief, heartbreak, heartache, despair, hope, resilience, resignation, tragedy, love, loss, illness, suffering, disability.

A reader of ‘Voices of Chernobyl’ might well conclude: ‘If nuclear energy is the answer then we are asking the wrong question’. The book offers a diversity of personal testimonies captured at the time, the lived experience of those with the tragedy of Chernobyl still under their fingernails.

The prominent statue in Pripyat (formerly the dormitory town of Chernobyl workers) is of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods and gifting it to humanity. The maxim ‘Beware of Greeks bearing gifts’ could well have been inscribed on the plinth. As ‘Voices’ bears eloquent witness, nuclear energy is ‘an opportunity riding the dangerous wind’.

When a solar panel falters, when a wind tower falls, the effects are local; the consequences are negligible, and globally inconsequential. In contrast, when a nuclear reactor fails the legacy can poison a whole planet, without recall. There is a reason why no insurance is available for such an event. ‘Voices of Chernobyl’ is: Highly recommended.

Reviewer

Dr John Paull is an Australian environmental scientist. For the twentieth anniversary of Chernobyl he teamed with Danish photographer Mads Eskesen to bring the exhibition ‘Chernobyl 20 Years 20 Lives’ to Australia; and with Bob Bott of Rotary International to tour the exhibition around Australia [12]. Dozens of venues hosted the exhibition including the Parliament of Victoria (Melbourne), Parliament of Western Australia (Perth), Sts Peter and Paul Ukrainian Cathedral (North Melbourne), and many schools. With the co-operation of the Chernobyl Children’s Project International (Ireland), a thousand DVDs of the Academy Award winning documentary ‘Chernobyl Heart’ were distributed to and screened at 1,000 Australian schools [13].

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