

## Chernobyl – Warning Against Lies, Not Against Nuclear Power

In 2006 Mikhail Gorbachev stated that the 1986 Chernobyl disaster had had more significance for the [collapse of the Soviet Union](#) in 1991 than the *perestroika* he had introduced. The causes of the collapse were surely more complex, but the events in the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant perfectly show two pillars supporting the communist system – that is lies and fear.

The catastrophe in the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl, located in present day Ukraine, and formerly in the Soviet Union for many Poles is one of the first associations connected with atomic energy. An association which will certainly be reinforced by *Chernobyl*, a popular TV series [released by HBO](#). In connection to its first screening, many interviews, articles, and recordings inspired by the series appeared in the Internet. Should we be afraid of the nuclear power in connection with the release of this American-British coproduction? Or should we perhaps be afraid of a system based on lies and fear which created circumstances favourable for the catastrophe shown in the film? Apart from answering these questions, I will also try to suggest how to function after completing such a good production if we want to remain in the Chernobyl and TV series reality. Let us, however, start from the success of *Chernobyl* – a drama created by Craig Mazin.

### **Successfully Recreated Sovietness**

Creating a film based on a true story is by no means an easy task. Creators have to follow events which really took place while simultaneously recounting them in a manner attractive not only to seekers of facts, but also viewers expecting emotions who are unlikely to be satisfied merely with a screened calendar of events.

At the moment of writing of this article, *Chernobyl* occupied the first rank among fiction series in such rankings as, among others, IMBd.com or Filmweb.pl, leaving such productions as *Band of Brothers*, *Game of Thrones*, or *Breaking Bad* behind. It is a well-deserved distinction, an opinion which I share and which is an outcome of a perfect combination of facts, captivating storyline revolving around the disaster and the atmosphere of the Soviet Union of 1980s, successfully recreated by screenwriters and actors.

Even viewers well familiar with the history of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant should not be bored, despite the fact that not all events appearing on the screen reflect the history described in source materials. HBO's TV series is a work of fiction, so there is no point in expecting one hundred percent compatibility with the facts, although many actual events have been included and faithfully recreated by the filming crew. Examples of discrepancies appear in critical voices coming also from experts dealing with nuclear power and radioactivity – something I shall return to further in this text. Another fantastic thing is that watching the TV series can be combined with many interesting reading materials or video recordings published or dusted down thanks to the film. This way one may learn even more about the causes, course, and aftermath of the catastrophe.

Both the selection of actors and their work on stage merit recognition. Jared Harris and Stellan Skarsgård perfectly portray difficult relations and emotions existing between Valery Legasov, an expert examining the incident, and the Deputy Head of the Soviet Council of Ministers, Boris Stcherbina. Not only do we get to witness a conflict between people and their characters, but we also see the central point of the dispute, located between striving for truth and complying with the communist party's interests. It is worth emphasising that Valery Legasov was not the only scientist

examining the catastrophe. However, in order to focus viewer's attention on several main characters, the series creators have created a fictional person of Ulana Khomyuk, who represents many Soviet scientists seeking the truth about the catastrophe. Khomyuk was fantastically played by Emily Watson. Khomyuk happens to undermine certain conclusions arrived at by Legasov or to draw his attention to things he seems to have overlooked. She takes the side of the truth.

The villains appearing in the story have also been given due attention, among them Anatoly Dyatlov (played by Paul Ritter), the deputy chief-engineer in the power plant who had directly supervised the test during which the catastrophe occurred, and other apparatchiks of the Soviet power machine – from the power plant's management, through local communist party committees, to the Politburo and KGB. YouTube users may watch an interview with Dyatlov who following an amnesty left prison, having served three of his ten years sentence. He stubbornly continues not to recognise his fault confirmed not only by the sentence rendered by the court, but also by the documentation analysed by the series' producers. In the film he appears as an obstinate and arrogant man, contemptuous of his staff and the powers of nature which were the source of energy in Chernobyl. At the same time, Dyatlov for a long time continues to deny that anything bad had happened in the power plant, lying this way both to himself and others alike.

Some criticism to be found on the Internet is due to the fact that the actors speak English instead of Russian or at least English with a strong Russian accent. The former solution would have significantly limited the pool of actors capable of appearing in the series. The latter one was taken into consideration by the creators, but the author of the script decided that it could result in viewers' unwanted focus on accent-related comicalities instead on the actual message to be delivered by the characters of the film. Extremely realistic stage design solves the problem of language. Not only have the interiors of Soviet flats, offices, hotels, or prisons been scrupulously recreated, but the creators skilfully took advantage of the existing post-Soviet architecture to show Prypiat – a town for members of the Chernobyl power plant's staff and their families erected in the 1970s. The outside of the power plant itself has been shown using Lithuanian Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, a facility very similar to the one in Chernobyl. Many other scenes in the TV series smelling of Sovietness and Communist roughness were shot on locations in Lithuania.

The series creator, Craig Mazin, director Johan Renck, and the entire film crew employed at shooting the series merit words of recognition which have already translated into favourable opinions of viewers and popularity of the production. Thanks to that, many people will become better acquainted with the manner of functioning of the Soviet Union just before the fall of the communist dictatorship.

### **Let Us Fear Lies, Not Nuclear Power**

In 2006 Mikhail Gorbachev stated that the 1986 Chernobyl disaster had had more significance for the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 than the *perestroika* (the process of socio-economic transformation of the Soviet Union) he had introduced. The causes of the collapse were surely more complex, but the events in the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant perfectly show two pillars supporting the Communist system – that is lies and fear. "Communism, while a noble ideal, had in practice produced a system of organised lying. (...) Chernobyl stands as a reminder of what can happen to a society when the truth is sacrificed to ideology and when a government can propagate untruths with impunity", [James Bloodworth](#) aptly notes in his text published by UnHerd.

From the very beginning the series shows a conflict between the striving to discover the truth about the catastrophe and the lie intended to protect the interests and image of the communist party and the Soviet Union. The deputy chief engineer lies to himself and to his superiors, local party representatives lie to higher rank party officers, including the Politburo, and to experts who can see something is going on based on radioactivity measurement readings. When finally the truth pierces the veil to reach the main centre of power, it is hidden from public opinion in the USSR and other countries. Only when hiding the truth about the catastrophe is no longer possible, a decision on evacuation and informing the public about the incident is made. The series also shows the main characters' struggle if the full list of the causes leading to the catastrophe should be revealed, including the manufacturing defects resulting from the low quality of socialist production.

What provides the fuel that propels the lies, but also strong obedience to higher tiers of power, is fear. The staff members supervised by Dyatlov were intimidated and they obediently followed orders which part of them considered erroneous. Dyatlov was afraid of his superiors' opinions, whereas power plant managers were afraid of the voice of the communist party, so initially they downplayed the seriousness of what was happening. Let us also remember that they all acted in the realities of an invigilating and oppressive state which is perfectly shown in the series through threads connected with KGB activities.

Obviously, it does not mean that they all acted only out of fear. Craig Mazin draws attention to heroism of numerous characters – fire fighters who thought they were on their way to put out a regular fire, power plant employees, or miners who, risking exposure to high radioactivity, fought to prevent an even greater catastrophe, or labourers working at liquidating the results of the disaster. The series abounds in stories of people who engaged in these processes out of their sense of responsibility for others or patriotism.

Two types of criticism appear in the opinions about the HBO's production. The first group of critics claim that the series is not fully accurate in terms of facts and that its producers invented certain characters and events. In this respect, much is explained in interviews with the creator of the series in which he justifies his decisions. I have already mentioned Ulana Khomyuk, a fictional character created for the purpose of presenting all other scientists involved in studying and removing the effects of the catastrophe.

Also the final trial reveals important elements of the history showing the main character, Valery Legasov's participation in the proceedings and his appearance before court, reminiscent of scenes from legal thrillers. The trial did take place, and the film's authors quite meticulously recreated the hall of the Chernobyl cultural centre which was used for the needs of the trial held in 1987 on the spot of crimes perpetrated by defendants. In reality, Legasov did not appear at the trial. Yet, no one else but him was able to tell the viewers of the series and the ruling bench how an RBMK reactor power plant works as well as what combination of events had led to the disaster. It is worth emphasising that the series main character does it in a very clear way, so that even a person without much knowledge of chemistry and physics is able to follow his presentation. It is here that Legasov utters his famous words that "every lie we tell incurs a debt to the truth" and "sooner or later the debt is paid".

The above described departures from the facts are deliberate and they serve accomplishment of important goals, vesting the production with adequate dramaturgy and allowing the creators to

focus on the main plot without a necessity to increase the number of characters or introduce multiple side threads.

The second group of opinions criticising the series consists, first and foremost, of articles authored by nuclear power and radioactivity experts. They draw attention to, among others, an excessively dramatic presentation of radiation sickness effects, above all else including its allegedly very contagious nature, or an overestimation of the number of people adversely affected by the catastrophe. Obviously, these factors incite strong emotions in viewers, but they may also simultaneously fuel unnecessary fear of the nuclear power itself. The series creators dissociate from such a message, but perhaps some embellishments of the course and aftermath of the disaster could have been avoided?

Craig Mazin confirms that the series is “anti-Soviet government, and it is anti-lie, and it is pro-human being”. I agree that it is lies and not the nuclear energy that is something we should be afraid of having watched the five episodes. Moreover, the series has given an impulse for creation of a substantial number of materials based on scientific research which can be used should someone decide to take advantage of *Chernobyl* episodes to fight against nuclear power. It is also worth drawing attention to the fact that in today’s Russia, under Putin’s government, lies and fear of oppressive power continue to remain strong which makes it similar to the Soviet Union. Perhaps it is the reason why HBO’s production was so critically received in Russia, also in the circles of power, while NTV, a Kremlin-friendly TV station announced a response to the series which will show, among others, the CIA involvement in causing the catastrophe. And so, in reaction to the TV series about lies, more lies and manipulations are to be created.

### **And What After the Series?**

Although the media were rife with speculations about the second season, the creator of *Chernobyl* Craig Mazin cut through these with a definite “No” communicated via Twitter. However, if someone wanted to continue learning facts about the history of the catastrophe, and also to feel the Chernobyl reality even better, the mini-series’ success offers many opportunities to do so. It is worth starting with [podcasts](#) recorded to accompany each episode in which the series creator Craig Mazin tells Peter Sagal and listeners about the series production process, confirms authenticity or fictitiousness of certain scenes and recounts what he himself has learned about the disaster and participants of those events.

Mazin recommends to refer to such publications as *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, by Svetlana Alexievic, *Chernobyl 01:23:40: The Incredible True Story of the World’s Worst Nuclear Disaster*, by Andrew Leatherbarrow, or *Ablaze: The Story of the Heroes and Victims of Chernobyl*, by Piers Paul Read. The Internet abounds in a multitude of articles and films treating about the series and the Chernobyl disaster, obviously including those dedicated to facts and myths pertaining to the series’ reality.

*Chernobyl* may also be a traveller’s inspiration. Even before the screening of the first episode I envied some of my friends whose photographs from trips to the Exclusion Zone I saw on Facebook. Then Chernobyl had the image of an exotic location – both due to its location, somewhere on the border of Ukraine and Belarus and the fear of radioactivity which, however, in places visited by tourists has not been a threat for a long time. The Internet contains numerous offers of trips to the Exclusion Zone and information regarding the principles of accessing the Zone. The number of tourists visiting

the location of the power plant has grown steadily in the recent years, but the HBO series will result in a sharp, even if only short-lasting, increase in interest in this place.

In July 2019, the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenski signed a decree which is to allow tourists easier access to the site. “To begin with, we will create a 'green' corridor for tourists and remove the prerequisites for petty corruption; there will no longer be huge lines at the checkpoint and sudden denials of which people learn when they arrive at the checkpoint”, [Zelenski said](#) which may come as yet another incentive to take the trip. The President of Ukraine has also announced, among others, abolishing prohibition on taking photos and filming in the zone (not always enforced). During my last visit in Paris, I had a chance to see *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci surrounded with a cordon of people taking selfies with the famous painting. We have to be aware that the “ghost town” as Prypiat used to be called, may become a town of cordons composed of selfie authors surrounding the most famous sites within the Exclusion Zone.

We are therefore faced with a dilemma whether to go there now, however, with a risk of experiences reminiscent of [queues to Mount Everest](#), or to perhaps wait hoping that the post-series inflow of tourists will not trample this space down under their feet?

Instead of Ukraine, we can go to Lithuania. Several weeks ago my social media displayed a [commercial sponsored by Vilnius](#). The commercial encouraged visits to locations where the film was shot. One of them is Fabijoniškės, a district of Vilnius offering a good portrayal of an idealist socialist city which for the needs of the series became the film Prypiat. The prison scenes were shot in the Vilnius KGB headquarters, presently housing the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, a lot more popular than Fabijoniškės. There are more sites in Vilnius where the series scenes were shot, while the Internet abounds in offers of accommodation in a Fabijoniškės apartment reflecting the spirit of Communist reality and trips to Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant which in the series played the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant.

### **Poland Is Not Facing the Risk of the “Second Chernobyl”**

Opponents of nuclear power may use the HBO’s TV series as a scare against the “second Chernobyl”. Discussion concerning construction of a nuclear power plant in Poland should be based on facts, cost analyses, and advantages offered by a mix of energy solutions, but not on post-TV series emotions. Let us remember that if such a power plant were to be built in Poland it will not be based on an RBMK reactor, whose construction combined with Soviet manufacturing defects contributed to the disaster. Both Poland and the European Union (it was among others in connection with Lithuania’s accession to the EU that the power plant in Ignalina erected in the Soviet era was closed down) have put in place entirely different higher standards in terms of safety, health, or protection of environment. The history of real socialism and communism has shown that these economic models were less effective in protecting the environment or citizens’ health. Hence, these systems are not worth reverting to, regardless of sources of our electric energy used.

What poisons the public life and is connected with the TV series’ reality is the lie. In podcasts recorded to accompany each episode, the creator of *Chernobyl*, Craig Mazin refers to the phenomenon of fake news also generated by many politicians. This is why it is of utmost importance to keep an eye on the quality of public debate, transparency of the public sector, to check facts, and breathe down the necks of those in power. If a nuclear power plant is ever built in Poland the risk of the “second Chernobyl” virtually does not exist, but if we allow authorities to use lies and fear to

rule, we are facing a risk of a pretended rather than successful lives, as Leszek Balcerowicz described differences between lives under socialism and free market capitalism in his 1989 speech in Polish parliament. As Valery Legasov said in the series: sooner or later, lies must be paid for.

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*[Polish version](#) of this article appeared in [Liberte magazine](#), No. 37, in August 2019.*