

## FILM REVIEW

***The Battle of Chernobyl*, First Run Icarus Films. Directed by Thomas Johnson. U.S., 2007; color; 94 minutes. VHS, DVD \$440.00. Rental/VHS: \$125.**

In the early morning hours of 26 April 1986, in the Ukrainian city of Pripjat, a reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded. Soviet technicians at the No. 4 unit, paralyzed by the fear of responsibility and failure (though not of death), delayed to inform the highest authorities, including General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, until the surrounding population and countryside had been saturated with high levels of deadly radioactivity that has rendered the region around the abandoned city uninhabitable now and into the future.<sup>1</sup> *The Battle of Chernobyl* documents the accident, the local and national efforts to both combat and contain the disaster, the medical consequences, and the aftermath of this unprecedented event through contemporary footage, interviews with participants, and computer graphics. The film presents the nuclear disaster as analogous to the Great Fatherland War of the 1940s as well as the final battle of a Soviet Union on the precipice of collapse. This review will examine these various issues and comment on the film's usefulness in the classroom.

*The Battle of Chernobyl* begins with footage of the No. 4 unit's destruction as the reactor explodes and shatters the roof of the containment building, spewing radioactive debris both across the adjoining structures and as a deadly and invisible skyward plume. A local workman is embarrassed to describe the explosion's effects in the night sky as "a rainbow ... it was beautiful." A quick cut to Mikhail Gorbachev, who remembers his initial information about the disaster being confined to vague references to "a fire" and "some accident," establishes the film's ambition and credentials as director's scope extends throughout the Soviet hierarchy, from the proletariat to the General Secretary.

Running through *The Battle of Chernobyl* is an ominous undercurrent that builds tension in a story whose ending its audience already presumably knows. Since the disaster, Soviet and Russian authorities sought to keep secret a potentially catastrophic second explosion that was avoided at the cost of thousands of Russian miners, firefighters, military personnel, and everyday citizens' lives. The narrator informs the viewer that this second explosion would have been "ten times worse than Hiroshima" and "would have wiped out half of Europe." Indeed, it is the "heroic" efforts to prevent this apocalyptic outcome that transforms a nuclear accident into a life and death "battle" on the Chernobyl "front," recalling the Nazi invasion whose ravages remain in the memories of the city's elders.

For teachers of twentieth-century history surveys, *The Battle of Chernobyl* opens avenues of discussion along three lines: the other-worldly, or science fiction, quality of the response of the Russians to the radioactive foe, how the fear of panic led to

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<sup>1</sup>According to Robert Gale and Thomas Hauser, *Final Warning: The Legacy of Chernobyl* (New York: Warner Books, 1988), Chernobyl was "one of the 179 towns and settlements evacuated in the wake of the worst nuclear accident in history," 23.

secrecy and fatal blundering until the reactor disaster provoked mobilization for war upon the Chernobyl "front," and, finally, nuclear disaster as metaphor for both modernity's unfulfilled promise and the Soviet Union's sudden, surprising demise. These foci of discussion center round the idea of "modernity" and the new society promised by Soviet leaders who believed themselves the vanguard of technological and political progress. The lesson is one of irony as the Enlightenment is derailed upon human foibles that predate and, indeed, transcend the Soviet experiment in Russia.

Iurii Shcherbak asserts that the accident at Chernobyl ushered in "a new period in the development of civilization, a period about whose possibility only writers of science fiction had conjectured vaguely and intuitively."<sup>2</sup> The film's narrator speaks ominously of the ineffectiveness of "tons of water on a strange fire." Circling the site in a helicopter the following morning, a photographer describes "a black hole, a tomb, and deadly silence." At Chernobyl, "mortal danger does not even have taste, color, and smell."<sup>3</sup> This alien quality continued after the Soviet authorities finally mobilized the nation with the complaint that Chernobyl "was worse than war; here you couldn't see the enemy." May Day celebrations went ahead as planned with a march of the living dead as the latency period of radioactive poisoning allowed one last public demonstration before the collective body of Pripyat began to disintegrate. During the so-called "liquidation" of the radioactive site, men and robots' deaths were pre-ordained: miners and soldiers were declared "national heroes" as they entered the maw; robots went awry because of the ambient radioactivity and disobeyed orders by throwing themselves into the chasm burning with radioactive magma that threatened to penetrate the containment building and precipitate a second and more devastating explosion. Afterwards, contaminated earth is bulldozed into huge ditches and covered with concrete—images indicative of the novelty of nuclear containment.

The ignorance attendant to the Chernobyl disaster had much to do with both the exoticness of nuclear power and of somehow failing the test of modernity that the ruined reactor represented in both its promise and precariousness. Ignorance reverberated up and down the Soviet hierarchy, shaking the system to its foundations. Ignorance exacerbated at every level by widespread secrecy designed to prevent panic. Panic, of course, could cast doubt on both Soviet technical competence and political legitimacy.

Grigori Medvedev described Chernobyl as marking "the final, spectacular collapse of a declining era ... aggravated by a deliberate policy of downplaying its

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<sup>2</sup>Iurii Shcherbak, *Chernobyl: A Documentary Story*, translated from the Ukrainian by Ian Press (Alberta, Canada: Macmillan in association with the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1989), 3.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

dangers, as well as by the secrecy that surrounded the Chernobyl tragedy."<sup>4</sup> Three days after the accident, while Gorbachev was still trying to gather information, United States satellites began to take pictures of the ruined reactor. In the film, Gorbachev admitted that "such ignorance had dramatic consequences for our approach to the problem." May Day celebrations went ahead as scheduled, in part, according to Gorbachev, "to avoid panic." Back at the site, the consequences of mismanaging modernity was made plain by the lingering taste of radioactive iodine on the palates of those trying to stifle the strange fire. Gorbachev would finally resort to the traditional remedy of Russian leaders by sending the KGB to the site to report back to him everything the gathering scientists had to say. The film is especially effective at ratcheting up the tension as both institutional ignorance and radioactive magma plumb their respective depths, the former contributing to the latter's potentially catastrophic explosion with dire consequences for all of Europe and elsewhere.

For the teacher of twentieth-century surveys—U.S., Western, and World—*The Battle of Chernobyl* is an effective accompaniment to lectures and discussions about the complexities of modernity, the Chernobyl accident as analogous to war, and the disaster as a metaphor for the demise of the Soviet Union.

The Chernobyl disaster occurred five years before the startling end of the Soviet Union. Students and instructors could investigate links between these two events through *The Battle of Chernobyl* as the film reveals the character traits of Soviet society, from top to bottom, in its various assumptions and actions—both absurd and heroic. Established arguments concerning President Ronald Reagan's role in dispatching the "evil empire" by outspending the Russians might be complicated by a closer examination of the Soviet response to this nuclear accident.

Finally, discussions both of modernity and Cold War history should not neglect the long-held secret of the potentially disastrous second explosion had the radioactive magma penetrated man-made containment to reach the ground water. The consensus, had this occurred, would have meant the abandonment of much of western Eurasia as the contamination would have reduced Europe to a status similar to that of 1492. And yet we continued to debate the efficacy of nuclear weapons when we have witnessed the consequences of Chernobyl—only one nuclear explosion when any full-scale nuclear exchange would envision many. Chernobyl is the perfect poster-child for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

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<sup>4</sup>Grigori Medvedev, *The Truth About Chernobyl*, translated from the Russian by Evelyn Rossiter, with a Foreword by Andrei Sakharov and Author's Preface to the American Edition (New York: Basic Books, 1989), ix.