The Crises Research Project

Chernobyl Nuclear Accident

Timeline - Chernobyl Disaster

Source: "Chernobyl: Timeline of Events,"
https://www.atomicarchive.com/science/power/chernobyl-timeline.html

April 25, 1986, 1 a.m.

Chernobyl's operators begin reducing power at reactor No. 4 in preparation for a safety test, which they have timed to coincide with a routine shutdown for maintenance. The test is supposed to determine whether, in the event of a power failure, the plant's still-spinning turbines can produce enough electricity to keep coolant pumps running during the brief gap before the emergency generators kick in. Ironically, this safety test brings about the reactor's destruction.

April 26, 1986, 1:23:58 a.m.

The first explosion, to be quickly followed by at least one more, blows the 1,000-ton roof off the reactor and shoots a fireball high into the night sky. A blackout roils the plant as the air fills with dust and graphite chunks, and radiation begins spewing out. Walls and equipment collapse, and dozens of fires start up, including one on top of the neighboring reactor.

April 27, 1986: 2 p.m.

After telling residents nothing about the disaster for some 36 hours, Soviet officials finally began evacuating roughly 115,000 people from Pripyat, as well as nearby towns and villages. Residents are informed it will be temporary and that they should pack only vital documents and belongings, plus some food. Soon after, however, an exclusion zone is set up around Chernobyl that prevents their return.

April 28, 1986

Swedish air monitors detect a large amount of radiation in the atmosphere, which is traced back to the USSR. Soviet officials admit that there's been an accident, but they falsely state the situation is under control.

April 29, 1986

Spy satellite photos provide U.S. officials with their first glimpse of the devastation wrought by the Chernobyl disaster.

May 6, 1986

Radioactive emissions drop sharply, possibly because the fire in the core has burned itself out. Meanwhile, Soviet officials finally close schools in Kiev and advise residents to stay inside and to not eat leafy vegetables.

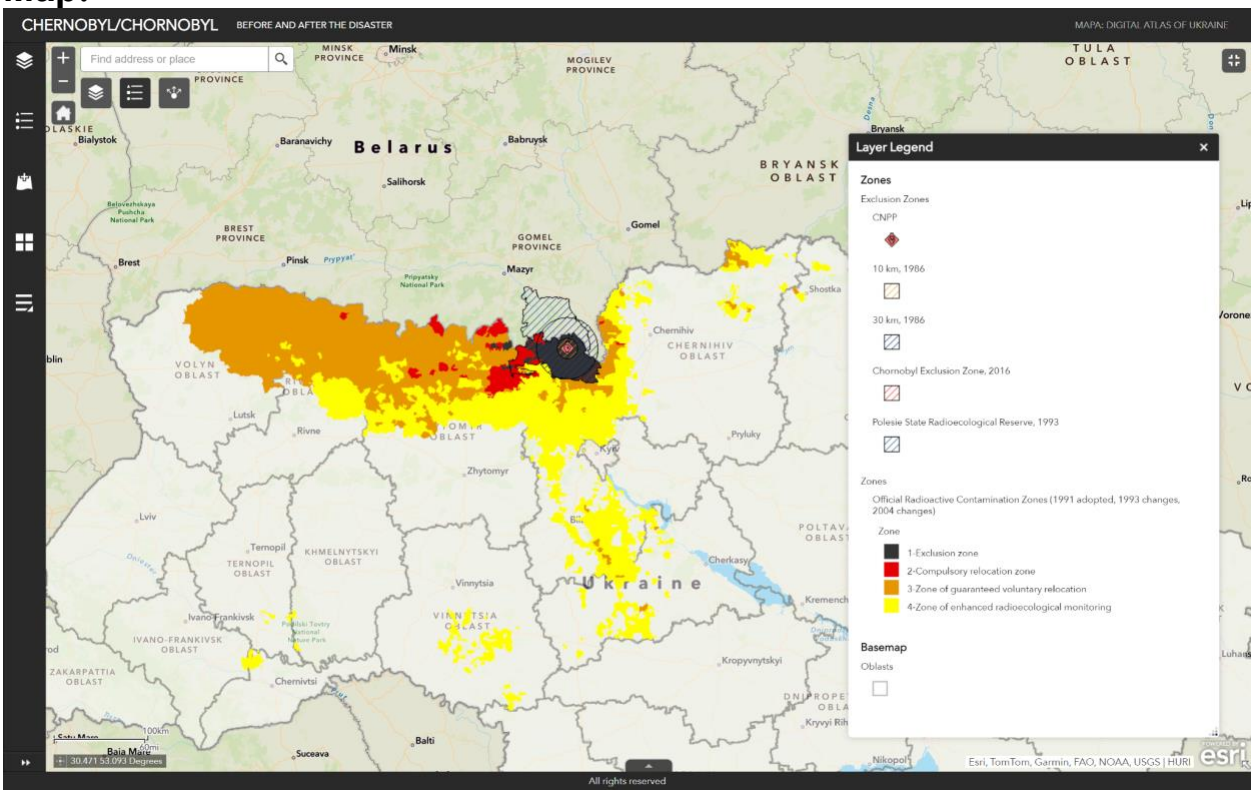
May 14, 1986

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev speaks publicly about the incident for the first time, saying on state TV that "the worst is behind us."

August 25-29, 1986

The International Atomic Energy Agency hosts a conference at which scientists blame the accident not just on human error and a subpar safety culture, but also on Soviet reactor design flaws.

Map:



Source: Chernobyl/Chornobyl Project, "Chernobyl/Chornobyl Web Map," accessed on November 20, 2024, https://harvard-cga.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=5143021e6379448c966900096f21b5e3.

To learn more about the Chernobyl/Chornobyl Project, visit https://www.gis.huri.harvard.edu/chornobyl.

Documents:

1. Telegram From the Department of State to Secretary of State Shultz in Tokyo - Subject: Information Memorandum: Soviet Nuclear Accident: A Strategy for U.S. Response, May 3rd, 1986[1]

Summary: The nuclear accident at Chernobyl has left the Soviet Union in a weakened position—at home and abroad. We can benefit from these Soviet difficulties, but we must proceed with some caution, lest we open ourselves to charges of self-righteousness when current European anger at the Soviets cools. The memorandum that follows outlines the strategy to guide our reaction to the Chernobyl disaster in a way which maximizes Western interest…

Gorbachev's leadership style and credibility domestically, in the Warsaw Pact, and in the West is further undermined…

Soviet mastery of and reliance on nuclear technology will be under intense scrutiny throughout the world…

From the U.S. perspective, we are vulnerable to being accused of exaggerating and exploiting the Soviet disaster for our own purposes. Our democratic society may actually cause us to take even more severe steps to limit nuclear technology than the Soviets take. Public opinion may also put even heavier pressure on us to make concessions on limiting nuclear arms than it does on the Soviets…

In the area of regional conflicts, we may be able to make some headway by looking for means to increase the costs to the Soviets of supporting their clients in a time of economic vulnerability…

The concerns of Eastern and Western Europeans are already high. The impact of the accident on their relations with the USSR may be greater by letting them reach their own conclusions without making this an East-West issue and a loyalty test to the Soviet Union.We need to take positive measures such as the IAEA and aid initiatives mentioned above. We need to demonstrate by contrast how we and the Soviets deal with nuclear accidents, particularly with respect to timely disclosure. Then let the record speak for itself.

Justification: *This telegram is an example of internal discussion and operation by the U.S. in respect to how they could capitalize on the Soviet Union's failure to maintain a stable nuclear energy source. This presented an opportunity on the foreign relations front to maintain leverage and stay on the top of International nuclear policy in the context of the Cold War.*

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[1] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988,* Volume V, Soviet Union, March 1985–October 1986. 941-942. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v05/d225

2. Minutes of CC CPSU Politburo Session from Anatoly S. Chernyaev's notes, 3 July 1986, recording the Politburo Session regarding Chernobyl and its consequences.[2]

"…RYZHKOV: How could something like this happen here [in our country]?... At the dawn of NPS's, everything was built strictly and reliably. Gradually, the nuclear power industry spread beyond Slavsky (i.e. beyond the boundaries of responsibility of the head of the Ministry of Medium Machine-Building), but the discipline did not follow with it. And besides, we pumped up the reputation of Slavsky and Aleksandrov too high. We lowered oversight at all levels, and our vigilance got dull. There has not been a single year without accidents at NPS's….

GORBACHEV: We suffered huge losses, not only economic, not only human. The political damage is great: now people are doubting whether our energy program is at an adequate level. They are throwing in the idea about discrediting the USSR, Soviet science, technology, alleging that our nuclear energy [industry] is deformed.…

The draft resolution is missing the international aspect. [We should] add it, and inform the socialist countries, the IAEA, all the world public honestly. Whatever is not a specifically military issue should not be kept secret. All peoples should know about the consequences and about our measures. We cannot be cunning here. Here, secrets would be to our own detriment. Openness would be a great victory for us. We will lose if we don't tell everything fully. [We should] give maximum information to the world, especially since they know the factual state of affairs in the West.…"

Justification: *This document is a recording of a Politburo meeting written by Gorbachev's foreign-policy advisor for, likely private, later perusal, giving a deeper look into the Soviet leadership at the time. By looking at what Chernyaev deemed important to note down to look at later, it is possible to see what shaped the Soviet, and especially Gorbachev's, foreign policy in regards to Chernobyl, such as upholding Glasnost.*

[2] "Minutes of CC CPSU Politburo Session (Anatoly S. Chernyaev notes)," July 3, 1986, *National Security Archive*, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/19502-national-security-archive-doc-15-minutes-cc.

3. Inventory of Information Subject to Classification, 8 July 1986, on Issues related to the Accident in Block #4 of Chernobyl Atomic Energy Station.[3]

"...Of information subject to classification on issues related to the accident in block # 4 of the Chernobyl atomic energy station (ChAES)...

1. Information revealing the true causes of the accident in block # 4 of ChAES…

5. Information about the results of individual measurements of radiation conditions and the isotope composition of soil, water, etc.…

9. Information about new, effective means and methods of decontamination.…

13.Summary information about the irradiation of the station personnel or repair personnel from involved organizations or populations.…

16.Information about the results of treatment of radiation sickness with new methods or means.…

18.Summary information about ecological evaluations of the effects of the accident.…"

Justification: *This source shows off the Soviet Union's leadership's critical dilemma between secrecy and accountability for the Chernobyl accident. Leaders would face pressure to protect the USSR by controlling information but this secrecy would risk alienating both the public and global community.*

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[3] "Inventory of Information Subject to Classification on Issues related to the Accident in Block # 4 of the Chernobyl Atomic Energy Station (ChAES)," July 8, 1986, *Wilson Center Digital Archive*, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/inventory-information-subject-classification-issues-related-accident-block-4-chernobyl