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Correct: James E. Oberg , a space engineer in Houston, is the author of Uncovering Soviet Disasters: Exploring the Limits of Glasnost.

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE CHERNOBYL DISASTER. By David R. Marples. St. Martin's Press; \$35, cloth; \$14.95, paper%3B

THE onset of the new Gorbachev policy of "glasnost," commonly mistranslated as "openness" but closer in connotation to "candor" or "publicizing," has complicated the task of Soviet secret-keepers and has allowed substantial new Western insights into Soviet society. David R. Marples' new book, his second on the Chernobyl accident of April 26, 1986, is a shining example of the best type of non-Soviet analysis into topics that only recently were absolutely taboo in Moscow's official circles. The author, a British-educated historian and economist, is a research associate with the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta, and the academic style of the book is undisguised. However, its intended audience is the general public, and anyone interested in nuclear power, or Soviet economy and society, or human drama, or just plain sleuthing state secrets, will find hitherto unpublished revelations and explanations of the event and its continuing aftermath.

The effects of Chernobyl reverberated throughout so many facets of Soviet society that a continuous coherent narrative is probably impossible. Marples discusses half a dozen major themes arranged in a fairly arbitrary order (as indicated by the frequent and helpful cross-references throughout the text) and succeeds in mapping out his main themes. First in the world's attention, and in the text, is a discussion of the human victims of the accident. The official tally is 31 (only about 20 names have ever been released), but Marples suspects that there were other short-term radiation victims. A large number of late-term abortions were also performed on local women, and by rights those unborn babies count as casualties. Widespread "radiophobia" led to restricted diets that created malnourishment and subsequent disease in thousands of people. The tens of thousands of people taking part in cleanup operations were never included in official totals of those exposed. Since the book went to press, Soviet military sources have referred to at least one death in the actual reactor entombment program.

But the greatest toll is likely to occur with the delayed deaths. Here, Marples encounters for the first time the soon familiar theme of official Soviet myth-making around the event: Reality is twisted to serve state policy objectives, which include calming an alarmed public with assurances that all is well when it isn't.

Thus, when sober Western medical estimates placed the future "excess cancer deaths" at several tens of thousands, both in the Soviet Union and in Europe (a few tenths of a percent elevation of the natural cancer rate), the Soviets reacted furiously. The estimates are branded "nonsense" and the estimators are dismissed as "panic-mongers" promulgating

"anti-Soviet venom."

Subsequently the author addresses themes of environmental impact, economic and political repercussions, public images and the recovery operations. Along the way, Marples provides a damning list of examples in which Soviet officials attempted to retreat behind old-style cover-ups and outright lies. False information was issued on radiation levels, on subsequent accidents at the site, on contamination levels of the Kiev water supply, on severe discipline against non-volunteer cleanup personnel, on reactor entombment schedules and on operator training levels.

A severe 1986-1987 countrywide electrical power shortage was officially denied, although it was real enough to compel the restart of three Chernobyl reactors in explicit violation of Soviet safety regulations. Design deficiencies of the Chernobyl-style reactors were downplayed and human errors were declared to be the primary culprit.

Ultimately, observes the author, "It is ironic that in an era of openness, Chernobyl may have been both the pioneer of "glasnost "under Gorbachev and then subsequently its first casualty."

The July 1987 trial of reactor personnel marked a full circle of disclosure. Journalists were allowed into the scripted first and last days, but the weeklong deliberative sessions were held in secret and no word of their substance has ever been released.

The propaganda purpose of the trial and surrounding official publicity, he maintains, had one goal: "To divert culpability from the party hierarchy, in Kiev and especially in Moscow."

That is precisely the theme I have also encountered in my own investigations of aerospace accidents of the past. Where individual human failings led to catastrophe, a sanitized story may eventually be released, but where Kremlin policy led to disaster (such as the Nedelin catastrophe of 1960 or the Soyuz-1 disaster in 1967), the entire event remains absolutely off-limits to "glasnost."

The closing blow-by-blow description of the nuclear power debate presages a dramatic event that occurred too recently for inclusion in this first edition. Viktor Legasov, tagged by the author as one of the country's two leading pro-nuclear advocates, actually was sinking into private despair over the poor implementation of safety standards. In the end, he made his final and most eloquent testimony to this despair on the second anniversary of the accident, by committing suicide.

For several weeks the Soviets tried to sit on the circumstances of his "tragic death," even issuing official non-explanations which asserted that the death was not due to medical effects of radiation. Finally, crusading journalist Vladimir Gubarev, with access to Legasov's notebooks, broke the story in Pravda.

Readers of this book will come to know these and other characters so well that the suicide fits right into the "big picture" of the catastrophe's social impacts.

For an author to describe so accurately a social milieu that subsequent unpredictable events only enhance his insights is testimony to the highest quality of scholarship. Readers of Marples' book will rarely be surprised as the Chernobyl catastrophe's consequences continue to unfold in the future.