

How It Was (Kak Eto Bylo)

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Houston, Texas, Mission Control for NASA space flights: This is where James Oberg, the author of the recently published book "Uncovering Soviet Disasters", works. His lengthy book describes hundreds of tragic events which occurred from the 1930's through current times. Explosions at factories, shipwrecks, unsuccessful rocket launches, terrorist acts and even foot-and-mouth disease which raged in the Urals and Siberia--all of these are touched on in this unique chronicle.

Of course, a majority of these facts, especially those related to the period before perestroika, were not covered by Soviet media. Oberg has compiled a detailed list, using western sources and unclassified 'documents which are maintained by military and intelligence agencies of the U.S.

What caused him to take up his pen and devote himself to such unusual work? "I have long been interested - since childhood - in Soviet technology. My fascination began with the launch of the first sputnik. At that time I was 12 years old," says Oberg. "Why do I dig up the information which I dig up? It is my way of challenging those who want to keep such things secret. Remember, there will always be someone who wants to find out a secret. Such is human nature. Second, and more importantly, we must learn from each other's experiences--including disasters."

Q: Aren't you afraid that your book will quickly become obsolete? Glasnost allows for the publication of many things in the Soviet Union. Now, even in our country, one can find people who are uncovering secrets on their own...

A: "Certainly, some of what I talk about in this book has already been made public in your press recently. But there are still many points which are important."

"On the 18th of July, 1981, Russian Air Defense Forces Captain V. Kulyapin brought down a transport plane belonging to an Argentine airline. The plane was a cargo charter used to secretly smuggle weapons from Israel through Cyprus to Iran. On board were 3 Argentine crew members and an English representative of the firm that was shipping the weapons. The plane was shot down while returning from Teheran to Cyprus when, as a result of a navigational error by the crew, the plane showed up over Azerbaijan instead of staying in Turkish airspace, as was intended. The plane flew along the border over Soviet territory for between 10 and 20 minutes, and was rammed by Kulyapin."

Q: But how can you confirm what you have written?

A: "Indirectly -- even through Russian sources. Eventually Krasnava Zvezda released an account of what happened. Their finding was that Kulyapin was a hero who had repulsed an enemy's

feeble attempt to cross the border illegally. But I am convinced: the incident could have been avoided if the Soviet military authorities had established contact with the plane."

"Unfortunately, important details were left out of the official Soviet statements: that the destroyed plane was Argentine, for example," James continues. "That is amazing: the Argentine ambassador in Moscow went to the scene of the shootdown, and in the wreckage at that time was the tail of the plane with Argentine flag markings intact...A year ago I brought back a poster from Moscow which shows Kulyapin and his plane ramming something that looks a lot like a B-52."

All in all, there is a copious amount of information in the book, related to the secret agencies of our country, about a whole range of extraordinary events. Unfortunately, verifying many of these accounts is difficult, even now -- for example, the explosion at several warehouses in Severomorsk, which was widely reported in the Western press.

But this next "space" story was confirmed by international organizations. June, 1985. Trouble arose in a rocket carrying a payload into orbit: the engines shut off prematurely. The rocket fell back into the atmosphere, but certain pieces of the final stage went into orbit. The pieces were so small, Oberg writes, that they were not spotted by Soviet radars, although they were picked up by American radar. When the Soviet Union gave its next monthly launch report as required by international agreement, no mention was made of the rocket's launch. Apparently, according to government officials, the launch simply never took place. In this way, Moscow ignored its international commitment and duty to inform the U.N. of the launching of any rocket into orbit. True, these fragments left their orbits and burned upon reentry soon thereafter -- but it was this fact alone, in Oberg's opinion, that helped the Soviet Union avoid a major scandal.

"There has been much talk in recent times about the explosion in the Salang Tunnel in Afghanistan in 1979. Based on the information I have on the incident, 100 people died in the explosion. Yet, to this day the Russian people know nothing of this catastrophe."

But times are changing (and for the better): clearing up this tragedy wasn't so difficult. Judge Advocate General Col. V. Shein, special inspector at the Head Military Procurator's office, had this to say: "To begin with, there has never been an explosion per se in the Salang [Tunnel]. The tragedy referred to must be the one which occurred on November 3rd, 1982. I have in my possession materials from the court case. Reading them, what happened is clear: because of snowfall on both sides of this (more than 4 km) long tunnel, a large number of Soviet and Afghani trucks were backed up at the entrance. A starter from the group operating the tunnel gave the go-ahead, and a convoy of vehicles started into the tunnel from the south. But at the same time, since the northern road was jam-packed as well, a south-bound convoy was started into the tunnel. The two columns of vehicles moved straight towards one another. Suddenly, two cars collided in the center of the tunnel. A pile up involving over 100 vehicles began immediately. Our truck drivers don't turn off their engines--they know their batteries are weak. Carbon monoxide gas from the diesel engines accumulated in the tunnel. As a result, 64 Russian soldiers perished: 2 senior officers, 6 low ranking officers, 2 ensigns, 5 sergeants, and the rest--enlisted troops. But according to data from Sarandoya, 112 Afghans died as well."

But even before this incident similar serious incidents occurred in the Salang Tunnel. In December, 1979, 12 servicemen died; in the spring of 1980, 2 more people died. After the 1982 disaster it was decided that traffic should flow in a single direction through the tunnel -- either north or south, but not both. Strict monitoring has been established so that in the future such losses can be avoided.

Oberg's book contains many facts about fires at Soviet Atomic Power plants which occurred before Chernobyl. Clearly, our newspapers were silent about these incidents as well. For answers we turned to the Nuclear Society of the Soviet Union and the National Firefighting Administration (Ministry of Internal Affairs, USSR).

A fire broke out at the Beloyarskiy Nuclear Power Plant on New Year's Day, 1978. The fire alarm at the plant fire station went off at 1:50 am. Moreover--the Central Fire Dispatch Station at Sverdlovsk did not receive word of the fire for almost an hour--the long distance line was busy, and there was no direct hookup. Unfortunately, no attempts were made to control the fire before the arrival of the firefighters. The fire was extinguished at 11:30 pm the next evening. Taking part in putting out the fire were 35 units and 270 firemen (150 of whom were trained to combat gas and smoke fires). As a result of the accident, 25 plant employees were overcome by smoke and a number of people suffered frostbite. 960 square meters of the roof of the engine room collapsed. Damage due to the fire was estimated at 280,000 Rubles.

Barely mentioned in our press was the fire at the Armenian Nuclear Power Plant; now we can finally give a detailed account of it. At 10:10 am on the 15th of October, 1982, duty personnel called the fire department at the power plant. The foam extinguisher system which plant personnel tried to use would not work. Firefighters arrived in 3 minutes, but their strength alone was clearly insufficient. Attempts to call other departments were unsuccessful: here, too, the telephone system proved to be totally defective. Help arrived only after more than an hour had passed. At 12:00 things suddenly took a turn for the worse -- two turbo-generators were connected to the power grid, causing a massive short circuit, which in turn caused an explosion. The engine room was in danger of burning to the ground. New fire departments were called in, and the fire was eventually put out at 4:58 pm. Damage was estimated at almost 1 million Rubles.

Yet another "blank spot" was the fire at the Zaporozhskiy Nuclear Power Plant. The fire was first detected at 5:15 pm on January 27th, 1984. Several engineers attempted to put out some burning cables with their jackets, since there were no fire extinguishers available. But smoke immediately enveloped the whole room, and they were forced to flee. Actual efforts to fight the fire were not begun until 10:30, when the fire departments of Zaporozh'yo and neighboring cities arrived at the plant. Here, too, the delay resulted from a breakdown of communication; word of the fire was not received in Zaporozh'yo for almost 2 1/2 hours! The fire was not extinguished until 11:10 am the next day. Direct damages totaled almost 1 1/2 million rubles. This fire was extremely dangerous, and as a result of this, specialists believe, even the reactor safety systems were in danger.

One may, of course, believe or disbelieve the American investigator. One could refute him by "catching" him on various inaccuracies. But how could there not be some inaccuracies? After all,

those who were thoroughly knowledgeable of the details of every incident remained silent. Many who would protect their administrative and personal comforts are silent still.

What is important in this book, it seems to us, is something else: the attempt to set the record straight on these events. For as life shows, silence condemns us to repeat these terrible mistakes. An unlearned lesson is like a new hand grenade with the pin pulled. On the other hand, Oberg has demonstrated for the nth time that no one has ever been able to keep the truth hidden for very long. Information leaks out one way or another, forcing its way into the open. But it is imperative that this happen more quickly.

"If we in the United States had known about cosmonaut Bondarenko's death," Oberg insists, "we could have avoided a similar accident in which 3 astronauts died. Now look at the other side: if you had carefully examined the accident which occurred at Three Mile Island, the catastrophe at Chernobyl could quite possibly have been avoided."

We came to still another conclusion while talking with this investigator and studying the documents he has published. Today our media are rife with information about catastrophes and tragedies -- small ones and large ones -- in transportation, in the military, in industry and in everyday life. One gets the impression of an avalanche of trouble, which all at once has befallen the country. Oberg's book leads toward one inescapable conclusion--"unusual events" in the USSR have always been a regular occurrence. It is at the very least stupid to blame [these] on the democratic reforms occurring in this country. On the contrary, the disclosure of these facts is the only way for us to reach conclusions, and thereby learn from our mistakes.