

The Bible adds a new dimension to Chernobyl accident

By Serge Schmemmann
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A Russian writer, recently produced a tattered old Bible and with a practiced hand turned to the Apocalypse.

"Listen," he said, "this is incredible. And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; and the name of the star is called wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter."

In a dictionary, he showed the Ukrainian word for wormwood, a bitter wild herb used as a tonic in rural Russia: chernobyl.

The writer, an atheist, was hardly alone in pointing out the apocalyptic reference to the star called chernobyl. With the uncanny speed common to rumor in the Soviet Union, the discovery had spread across the land, contributing to the swelling body of lore that has shaped the public consciousness of the disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Ukraine.

In the three months since an explosion ripped open the fourth reactor at the plant, Chernobyl has become an indelible part of Soviet life. The dangers of radiation, at first played down in the press, have finally become a topic of open discussion. On July 17 the newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda published a detailed article on the various radioactive elements and their characteristics, including the threat of cancer.

Poems and even a novel have been published on the horror of the atom gone out of control and the heroism of those who battled the inferno through the early hours of April 26. Most of the 28 who died are being buried in a special heroes' plot in a cemetery at Mitino, a village outside Moscow.

Ukrainian newspapers have written about farmers who try to avoid the radiation checks mandatory at markets, and have warned against eating currants or gooseberries in a broad area around Chernobyl.

Rumors persist, despite denials in the press, about the dangers of radioactive rain or the powers of vodka, and especially cabernet wine, to flush radiation from the body.

Among many Russians, that passage from the Apocalypse — formally known as the revelation of St. John the Divine — has touched a strong penchant for superstition in the national character, giving Chernobyl the quality of an almost supernatural disaster.

The scope of the disaster has been driven home by the almost daily accounts in the press of huge projects underway to undo the consequences of Chernobyl.

A Politburo report published this week reported about 2 billion rubles in direct damage — about \$2.7 billion. But the indirect cost of the struggle to seal the ruptured reactor, to safeguard water supplies, to build new towns and to decontaminate more than 1,000 square miles of farmland and villages is incalculable.

Last week Pravda reported work on an entire new town called Zeleniy Mys for 10,000 Chernobyl workers, indirectly acknowledging for the first time that the settlement of Pripyats, adjacent to the power plant, had been abandoned. Other newspapers have reported work on other, smaller new settlements.

About 112,000 people were moved out of contaminated areas, and many remain in temporary housing and in temporary jobs. Newspapers have reported brigades of workers transported daily from Kiev, 60 miles away, while other Chernobyl workers have been settled on river cruises moored on the Pripyats River.

The loss of electricity from Chernobyl has posed serious problems for the Ukraine. Tass has reported that factories have been ordered to take special measures to conserve power, including staggered shifts and days off, to compensate for electricity lost because of the disaster.

The authorities have pledged to have the first and second reactors back in operation by Oct. 1. But the third, sharing common generating facilities with the fourth, has been shut down for an indefinite period.

Papers have reported round-the-clock work to entomb the ruptured fourth reactor in concrete and to decontaminate the station. A first stage, tunneling under the reactor and laying a concrete "cushion," has already been completed.

But Soviet television reported Thursday that work on the actual concrete shell must await construction of a protective concrete barrier that would enable workers to approach closer to the highly radioactive reactor. Special remote-controlled bulldozers and cranes have been produced to move earth and pour concrete in areas still considered too dangerous for people.

The newspapers also have described extensive efforts to preclude the spread of contaminated groundwater or rainwater to rivers. One project under way is to drill 73 wells of up to 120 feet in depth to intercept groundwater before it reaches the power plant, and to pump it into the Pripyats River.

Tass reported that a special detachment of weather aircraft had been assembled to sprinkle clouds over the 18-mile danger zone with compounds that prevent rainfall. "Within a week of the first scattering of such 'meteorological bombs,' the considerable precipitation over the 30-kilometer zone practically came to a complete stop," Tass said.

"Chernobyl Fallout: Apocalyptic Tale." The New York Times, July 25, 1986