

8. Radiophobia

“It is unfortunate that this state of mind should have become evident in a certain part of the population – such people live in constant expectation of damage to their health caused by radiation, not by any particular dose, just by radiation in general.

“This state of mind I have called ‘radiophobia’, a fear of ionizing radiation as such, in the absence of any real grounds for fear”.

L.A. I'lyin

Member of the Academy of Medical Sciences of the USSR

Director of the Institute of Biophysics

Chairman of the National Radiation Protection Commission

in “Chernobyl: Events and Lessons”

(Political Literature, Moscow 1989) p. 178

Is it really fair to use “radiophobia” to describe the state in which hundreds of thousands of people find themselves after having lived 5 years in uncertainty, in the so-called “Strict Control Zones”?

From the first moments of the Chernobyl disaster the people's well being was seemingly left to fate. In the very first days the civil defense forces did not inform the populace of the threatening danger. High-ranking officials forbade raising alarm signals. Children from Pripyat and from hundreds of villages and settlements of Byelorussia, the Ukraine, and the Russian Republic, went to school on April 26, and on the following days, and took part in the May 1 celebrations. They played outside. They were outside when Block 4 was spewing millions of Curies of radiation into the atmosphere.

Is it any wonder that these “radiophobic” people think a crime was committed by those who made the negligent decision to suppress important, truthful information?

Preceding page, a technician uses a dosimeter to check the freight of a barge leaving Chernobyl.

8.1 The Head of the Regional Civil Defense

Ivan Petrovich Makarenko (M), the head of the Narodichi Regional Civil Defense since 1973, informed me (C) about the situation which arose in Narodichi Region in April 1986.¹

C: Could you describe what happened in Narodichi Region as a result of the accident at Chernobyl in April 1986? When did you find out about the accident? How? What action was taken?

M: On April 27, as it was a Sunday, I had started doing some work on my allotment. I was planting potatoes. I started at 9 a.m. At about 11 or 11:30 I suddenly felt unwell.

I had a dryness in the mouth and my throat felt sore – a sort of roughness. I thought I was coming down with something. My allotment was down by the marshes, the floodlands of the river Uzh, towards Chernobyl. I noticed that a sort of mist was moving along the flood-lands. A greyish-brownish sort of mist. It was quite transparent. I couldn't make out what it was – although it was a sunny day. I stopped work and came home. It was just after midday. As soon as I got home the telephone rang. It was Melnik, the first secretary of the Regional Committee of the Party. He told me to get over to the Regional Committee immediately. I went there and Melnik told me that the first Secretary of Polesk Regional Committee had rung him and told him, strictly confidentially, that there had been an accident at Chernobyl. Radioactive substances had been released.

C: Who should be passing on information to Regional Civil Defense – the regional Party Secretary or the Head of Civil Defense at province or republic level?

M: It is the Civil Defense network that should be sending messages about any danger that threatens.

C: But no such message was received about the radiation danger – neither from Chernobyl, nor from provincial Civil Defense Headquarters.

M: The alarm was not raised. There was just this casual, friendly phone call from the party secretary at Polesk to our own secretary. That's how we found out. I realized immediately why I had felt ill out in the field. We sent straight away for the head of the intelligence group. He was at a textile factory. He was given the job of going straight to the stores, getting the necessary instrument, a DP-5 monitor, and bringing them to the Regional Party office. He came back with the instrument at 16:00 hours.

C: Did you have an adequate number of these instruments?

¹ This interview was conducted in Narodichi on March 20, 1990.