

Miniseries about the 1986 nuclear disaster

HBO's *Chernobyl*: The Soviet working class pays for the crimes of Stalinism

By Andrea Peters
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The recently released HBO-Sky UK miniseries *Chernobyl* is a valuable recounting of the nuclear disaster that occurred at a Soviet power plant near the Ukrainian-Belorussian border in April 1986.

Swedish-born director Johan Renck and creator-scriptwriter Craig Mazin effectively capture the terrifying reality of the explosion that tore open the facility's nuclear reactor core and spewed radioactive material over large swathes of the western USSR and Europe. The film's generally sympathetic portrayal of the Soviet people is notable, particularly in the present climate of anti-Russian hysteria, although Renck and Mazin are in over their heads with regard to larger historical questions.

Chernobyl opens with Soviet scientist Valery Legasov (Jared Harris) making preparations to commit suicide. We learn that Legasov played a leading role in managing the response to the near-meltdown of the reactor. He leaves voice recordings of his memories of the events, stores them for safekeeping and then hangs himself two years to the day after the nuclear disaster. He is being watched by the Soviet secret police.

Chernobyl then travels back in time and takes the viewer through the events that led to Legasov's tragic end, starting with the horror of April 26, 1986. That night, a long-postponed and poorly designed safety test at the power plant sets off a series of system failures that blow apart the reactor core.

The personnel cannot comprehend what has just happened at the power plant. Their boss Anatoly Dyatlov (Paul Ritter) arrogantly and stupidly issues commands that result in workers' deaths. Firefighters are called in without any warning that they are dealing with a nuclear explosion, much less any protective gear. Acute radiation sickness cases begin to occur. The hospital is overwhelmed. Officials will not admit what has taken place. The situation is on the edge of spinning out of control.

Finally, Soviet higher-ups mobilize resources, even as they seek to conceal the true scope of events. Suspicions over what has occurred arise in the West due to the drift of nuclear fallout over Western Europe. Legasov, a prominent inorganic chemist and member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, as well as others are brought in to deal with the still uncontained radiation erupting from the exposed reactor core. Hiroshima-sized radiation releases are going off every hour. Extraordinary and heroic measures are taken, largely by ordinary men and women, to save

millions of people. Officials continue their efforts to cover up the causes and consequences of the accident. Lies and deceit abound. Chernobyl is a crime, not just a disaster.

No one who watches the miniseries will take a light-minded attitude towards nuclear Armageddon, which US politicians today threaten and promise as a necessary consequence of American foreign policy. In this respect alone, the filmmakers have made a contribution. The miniseries sensitizes the viewer to some of the horrifying reality that would accompany a nuclear war.

Chernobyl, drawing heavily on a documentary account published by Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich, effectively portrays different aspects of Soviet life as well as the nuclear calamity. We see the city of Pripyat with its apartment complexes and gardens, and its residents who wish only to enjoy the spring and who look forward to the future. Their lives are destroyed. Smug bureaucrats who could not care less about ordinary human beings alternate between bullying, indifference, conceit and scrambling to deal with the catastrophe, which the viewer senses is largely of their own making. There is something terribly wrong with the Soviet economy. The explosion is partly a consequence of cost-cutting measures. A design flaw that contributed to the disaster was known years earlier, but kept secret. Nothing can be fully admitted on the world stage, and so the country is unable to get adequate aid from abroad.

And yet, this crisis-ridden society somehow manages to carry out a massive clean-up operation. Overnight, hundreds of thousands of tons of containment materials are dispatched. Six hundred thousand so-called human "liquidators" are sent into the evacuated fallout zone. Miners work naked around the clock, exposed to atomic radiation, digging tunnels equipped with only shovels to prevent a complete nuclear meltdown. (It is too hot in the tunnels for them to wear clothes.) Recruits physically destroy irradiated household pets. In one of the most frightening scenes, soldiers working by hand remove radioactive rubble from the roof of the destroyed power plant.

The filmmakers clearly have an admiration for the Soviet people, whom they generally portray as self-sacrificing victims of an undemocratic political system. There are moments, however, when the miniseries plays with—and to—anti-communist stereotypes. A tottering, aged bureaucrat in Pripyat declares his commitment to "Leninism" and demands the city be sealed off so

no one can get out and supposed “misinformation” is contained. Soldiers, speaking a bit like automatons, declare their undying commitment to the Soviet cause, even as they are dispatched without adequate protection to deal with the radioactive mess. Rough-talking miners make quips that imply their situation is equivalent to that under the Tsar. An elderly peasant woman forced to evacuate draws an equivalence between Bolshevism and Stalinism, which are allegedly the same in their persecution of the population.

At issue here is not in and of itself the veracity of these particular episodes—according to historical accounts, some are true—but the way in which they are presented. They give the viewer the sense that there is a straight line between 1917 and 1986. This is false. The Chernobyl disaster did not have its roots in the 1917 Russian revolution, during which the working class overthrew both capitalism and feudalism in an initial effort to liberate all of humanity from the exploitation of man by man. Its origins lie in the betrayal of that revolution led by Joseph Stalin, who systematically exterminated the Left Opposition and all those committed to the egalitarian principles of international socialism.

The Soviet bureaucracy lived as a parasite on the conquests of the working class, feeding off the latter until it destroyed them. Their parasitism, privilege and self-promotion were an enormous tax on the Soviet economy, infrastructure and social resources. Guided by the nationalist policy of building “socialism in one country”—which was both impossible and reactionary—the Stalinists pursued industrial development on the basis of national autarky and under the pressure of capitalist encirclement. They played fast and loose with nuclear power in an effort to meet the country’s energy needs.

Of course, an important dimension of the Chernobyl disaster, with which the miniseries does not and probably cannot deal, is what followed it. By the end of December 1991, there was no Soviet Union. The Stalinist bureaucrats and KGB agents, whom the miniseries shows so doggedly trying to prop up a political set-up collapsing under the weight of lies and crimes, dissolved the USSR. In the process, they stole everything that was not nailed down and much that was.

In short, the crime of Chernobyl was followed by an even greater crime—the liquidation of everything that the Soviet working class had fought for over seven decades. The result was mass unemployment, the shuttering of industries, the depopulation of the countryside, a huge spike in alcoholism, falling life expectancy, a massive growth in social inequality and widespread human suffering. The Soviet bureaucrats restored the market and transformed themselves into the proprietors of post-Soviet capitalism before the working class was able to assert its political independence and defend its own interests.

The miniseries concludes with a court scene in which Legasov and fellow scientist Ulana Khomyuk (Emily Watson) indict not just the power plant’s operators (Dyatlov and several others eventually went to prison) but the Soviet system. While the trial did happen, its content, by the director’s own admission, is not accurately portrayed in the miniseries. There was no final reckoning with the Soviet leadership over Chernobyl, nor could there have been without a political confrontation between the

Soviet working class and the bureaucracy. The apparatchiks and secret agents who appear in *Chernobyl*, in many cases, continue to occupy the Kremlin today as servants of a capitalist regime. They also continue to feel threatened by what happened in April 1986. The HBO miniseries has garnered sufficient interest that there are now plans to release a Russian-made miniseries about Chernobyl that blames the disaster on an American agent working at the power plant.

By way of artifice, the filmmakers unsuccessfully try to hand over to a couple of individuals the task of exposing Stalinism. The character of Ulana Khomyuk is created for this purpose. A nuclear researcher, Khomyuk defies Soviet officialdom, confronts bureaucrats, asserts the superiority of science and uncovers secrets. The unconvincing presentation of this figure, created by the filmmakers as a stand-in for the hundreds of scientists who actually mobilized in response to the Chernobyl disaster, is a flaw of the miniseries and one of its weakest elements.

Through Watson’s character, the film falls back into a tale of an individual crusader speaking truth to power, which is something of a disservice to all those who worked to save humanity from Chernobyl’s consequences. Capturing cinematically the involvement of the Soviet—and international—scientific community in the Chernobyl response would have been valuable, albeit challenging. Given the wholesale destruction of Soviet science as a result of the restoration of capitalism in the USSR, it would have also imbued the viewer with a much deeper sense of what has been lost.

On the whole, *Chernobyl* is worthy of the interest and enthusiasm it is garnering.

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