

# CASE STUDY 7

## THREE MEMORY FRAMEWORKS ON CHERNOBYL

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In the wake of the 1986's Chernobyl accident, different actors and constituencies in Ukraine articulated multiple memory frameworks about the disaster. Each being endowed with distinct manifestations as heritage sites, spatial as well as immaterial, these frameworks reveal how Chernobyl's toxic legacy plays out at different levels, from the transnational to the local. Two of these narratives – the “radioactive hazard” and “national martyrdom” stories – emerged as dominant, while the “lost paradise” story remained local and marginal.

The “radioactive hazard” framework centers upon Chernobyl's pathogenic effects. The most cosmopolitan of the three, this memory narrative has found enduring resonance not only in metropolitan Ukraine but also among anxious international audiences. Through an array of Chernobyl-themed documentaries, works of fiction, videogames, etc., several of which enjoy international circulation, cosmopolitan – and mostly urban – actors remember and construe the 1986 disaster as the first major man-made global public health crisis, the ominous implications of which forebode the possibility of humankind's technogenic extinction (Heise 2006; Kit 2012; Fuller 2016). Remembrance here includes a warning: a planetary *memento mori* (Beck 1987; Žižek 1991). Central to this narrative are the tropes of illness and its sensationalistic twin: mutation. The hazard-centric Chernobyl memory regime incorporates elements from science (the epidemiological measurement of the accident's consequences) as well as science fiction (Chernobyl as a source of monsters), activist journalism (factual reports about survivors and/or ecological damage) alongside mythopoetic licence (Hollywoodesque sci-fi appropriations of the disaster). In terms of concrete heritage sites, the “radioactive hazard” framework finds its material and visual embodiment in the iconic ghost town of Pripyat, now the epicentre of an international disaster-tourism industry, as well as the countless pop-culture representations of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, often depicted as a post-apocalyptic hellscape.

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Operating at the nation-state level, what I call the “national martyrdom” narrative frames the 1986 disaster as the climax of the USSR’s misrule of Ukraine. Under this framework, a multitude of national storytellers (civil society actors, independent media outlets, official representatives, etc.) have mobilized the public health crisis in support of a moral-political argument about historical responsibility, with the Soviet regime’s ineptitude and Moscow’s disregard for Ukrainians occupying a central position therein (Petryna 1995; Phillips 2004; Zhukova 2018). This narrative casts the toxic legacy of the radionuclides unleashed by the Chernobyl fire as a materialization of the toxic legacy of Soviet rule. Memorialization efforts highlight Ukrainian heroism – personified by the firefighters who “saved the world” – and collective victimhood. Within this framework, Chernobyl is one of the battle sites of the “memory wars” raging across post-Soviet Eastern Europe: for example, the Ukrainian Wikipedia entry defines the disaster as the “Chernobyl catastrophe” using emotionally and morally connoted language, while the equivalent Russian-language page resorts to the neutral terminology of “Chernobyl accident.” Not by coincidence, Russia’s occupation of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and the Zaporizhzhia atomic plant during the 2022 invasion rekindled powerful associations with the 1986 disaster, touching the “atomic nerve” of independent Ukraine’s national consciousness. The national martyrdom framework is anchored to an array of *lieux de mémoire* that perpetuate national storytelling about the catastrophe. Memorials and statues dedicated to “Chernobyl heroes” and related themes can be found in Chernobyl, Slavutych (a purpose-built town designed to house Chernobyl workers after 1986), and Kyiv. Commemoration of Chernobyl as a quintessentially Ukrainian tragedy also takes place through eco-patriotic demonstrations, official commemorations, state media, and so forth (Dawson 1996; Nonjon 2020).

It is worth observing that these two narratives may interweave: the celebrated 2019 UK-US miniseries on Chernobyl – a powerful, if immaterial, transnational *lieu de mémoire* – combines scientific exactitude, inclusive of graphic depictions of acute radiation syndrome symptoms, with a stereotyped depiction of Soviet society rife with Cold War tropes. An important physical heritage site such as the Chernobyl Museum in Kyiv also appears to draw on both memory frameworks, as it documents the ecological and epidemiological ramifications of the 1986 accident while also emphatically depicting the country’s heroism and suffering.

The third framework, which is almost entirely absent from national and international conversations about the Chernobyl disaster, reflects the intimate experiences of the rural communities inhabiting the territories around the power plant, in the region of Ukrainian Polesie. After the explosion, the local population was hastily relocated from the most contaminated areas. As a result of this large-scale population transfer, necessary but marred by poor logistics and communications that compounded the trauma of uprooting, a vast chunk of Polesie was turned into a no-go zone studded with decaying ghost towns. Doing ethnographic research on representations and memories of Chernobyl at the ground zero, in Chernobyl-scarred Polesie (2008, 2012–2013, 2016), I soon realized that when many local

survivors talk about the disaster, they tend to refer first and foremost to the evacuation (*pereselenie*) that forever changed the Polesian landscape. Chernobyl's "catastrophe of places" (*katastrofa mists'*) affected both evacuees from the Exclusion Zone and the communities located in the "Outer" Zone – a territory, inhabited to this date, which borders the depopulated area. Evacuees and Outer Zone residents share a common sense of place based on a sense of belonging to the same Polesian "native land" (*ridnyi kraj*).

These demographics jointly partake in processes of memory-making, with Polesian cultural activists based in the diaspora or the Outer Zone playing a key role in memorialization practices. Local commemorative activities, overwhelmingly grass-roots, often involve the self-production and circulation of poetry, folk music, and artworks bemoaning the disappearance of an emotional geography that Polesians often nostalgically described as their "lost paradise" (*vtrachenyi raj*). For example, many Polesian painters and photographers produce memory-infused landscapes combining realistic elements, childhood recollections, evocations of idyllic pre-catastrophe village life, and mournful intimations of loss. Some of the finest examples of regional poetry, carrying such titles as *Native River*, *The Land of Childhood*, or *My First Address*, bring back to life, frequently in painful detail, concrete sites – villages, courtyards, street corners – that have disappeared from the official map but remain very much present in the affective topography of Chernobyl survivors.

A panoply of local commemorative sites supported, sponsored, and animated by survivor communities spatially manifest the "lost paradise" memory narrative. The town of Krasiatychi, close to the Exclusion Zone, hosts a memorial complex with a cenotaph commemorating the dozens of abandoned settlements nearby (Figure 1):



**FIGURE 1** The cenotaph of lost villages near Krasiatychi. Photo by author.



**FIGURE 2** A local museum in Krasiatychi. Photo by author.



**FIGURE 3** The cemetery near the ghost town of Vilcha. Photo by author.

the markers, similar to gravestones, that surround a little onion-roofed chapel are engraved with the ghost villages' toponyms and maps. Several small historical-ethnographic museums exist in Outer Zone settlements (Figure 2), and in 2004 the Polesian diaspora opened a larger "Museum of Memory" in the city of Pereiaslav, home to a large evacuee population. Perhaps the most striking grassroots *lieux de mémoire* associated with Chernobyl, however, are the impeccably well-kept cemeteries that stud the Exclusion Zone (Figure 3). These sites predate the disaster, as do the ritual practices carried out therein, but they took on particular relevance in the wake of the disaster. As the ruins of deserted settlements become engulfed in vegetation, thousands of ordinary Polesian survivors, year after year, keep returning to their ancestral burial grounds to carry out maintenance and perform commemorative rituals, thereby turning a landscape of loss into one of remembrance and resilience (Benussi 2022). While the Exclusion Zone cemeteries are absent from mainstream heritage regimes in Chernobyl, nowhere else is the Polesian population's commitment to their lost paradise embodied so powerfully.

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