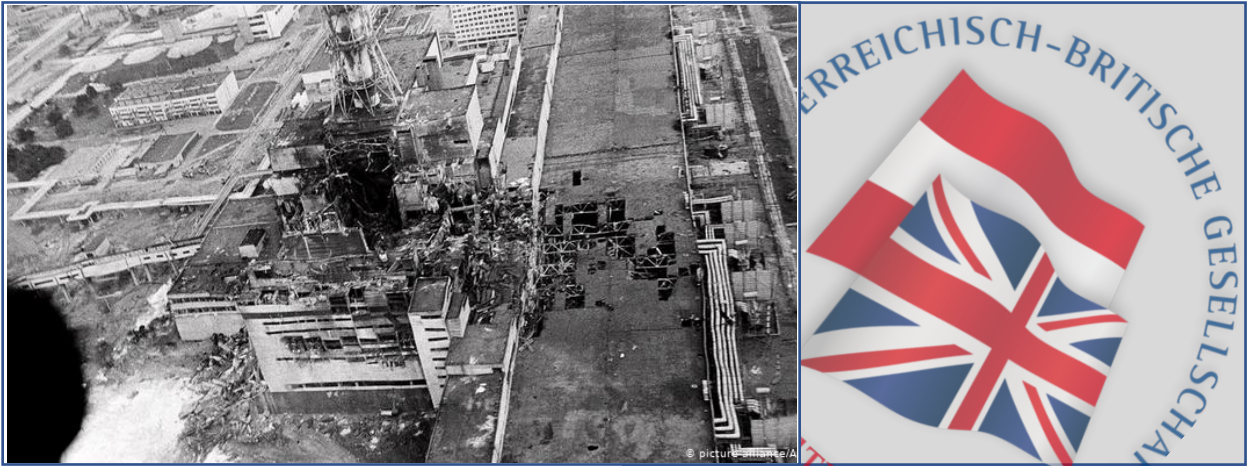


Chernobyl | Thoughts on the 35th Anniversary of the nuclear blast

by Melanie Sully



Thirty five years ago I sat in our living room in Middle England surrounded by quaint countryside but in the centre of the Potteries of Stoke on Trent. The song of the cuckoo echoed around the vales and dales and thoughts of Robert Browning's poem came to mind:

Oh, to be in England
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England - now!!

Most weekends were spent scrambling or fell walking in the Lake District and nearby North Wales. But suddenly a cloud appeared on the horizon which was to cast a menacing shadow over these idyllic thoughts. It was the radioactive cloud from Chernobyl.

As a child of the so-called nuclear age the destructive global threat that potentially could be posed was clear to me. The height of the Cold War and Cuban Missile Crisis had been some of the most nail biting moments of youth.

In addition, Britain had its own nuclear disaster in its history: Windscale in 1957 in the beautiful Lake District. A reactor caught fire releasing radioactive contaminants. Ian Breach writing in “Windscale Fallout” in 1976 recalled that a government report of the time did not fully disclose the seriousness of the situation, “Although suitably grave announcements were made to the public at the time, counselling the usual calm, the industry and the Government effectively went into a state of red alert”. I can vaguely remember being told not to drink the free third pint of milk that we got at school. There was no transparency, no clear crisis management and little information. Decades later we learnt that the then Prime Minister wanted to avoid panic in the population and did not want to spoil relations with the US. Britain could not afford to look like an unreliable nuclear partner. Scapegoats were found in the men who had in fact tried to avert the disaster.

Here is a link to the BBC documentary “Windscale”:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2iskVDifLo>

That flashed through my mind as I watched the approach of the Chernobyl cloud that perversely the wind was shuffling in our direction instead of as usual away from our Isles. Of course, it would rain. It always does. Radioactivity did affect parts of North Wales and the Lake District as indeed it fell across Europe.

Today there is greater transparency and some form of emergency management. But there is still a lot to be done. Austria is surrounded by nuclear power stations albeit for the production of peaceful energy but nevertheless close to earthquake fault lines. One of the points made clear in the drama feature film shown recently on Austrian ORF television, Chernobyl was the disbelief by Soviet scientists that something could go wrong because it could not go wrong. It was technically impossible. Well, it can go wrong, people make mistakes, technology can fail. If we have learnt anything from the Pandemic it is that we are unprepared to cope with a major crisis. And what are we going to do about that?

Let us have your views and comments!

About the author



Melanie Sully (Dr. Prof.) is a Board Member of the Austro-British Society, editor, writer and consultant, who was for many years professor of political science at the Diplomatic Academy, Vienna. Formerly Voice of America radio correspondent, Dr. Sully acts as a consultant on good governance projects for the Cultural Department of the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, Austria. Further she has worked as a consultant for the OSCE on projects such as parliamentary standards, comparative legislatures, as well as women’s political participation. She gave presentations on parliaments and ethics and legislative standards for parliamentarians in Tbilisi and for the Council of Europe, gave Guest Professorial Lecture, for politics at the University of London, and has given expert evidence to the House of Commons.

The opinions expressed in this article are entirely hers and reflect in no way the opinions of the ABS.