

Chernobyl's Aftermath in Political Symbols, Monuments and Rituals: Remembering the Disaster in Belarus

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Abstract: In spite of the still on-going health and environmental impact of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, this tragic event occupies only a minor place in the present-day political life of Belarus, the former Soviet republic most affected by the radioactive fallout. To understand the apparent weakness in public memory of the disaster, this paper provides an analysis of several kinds of commemorative events that have been organized by opposition political forces and by state officials since the end of the 1990s, and of the monuments dedicated to the Chernobyl accident in Belarus. It shows how these different forms of memory contributed to the erasure of the specific meaning of the accident by framing the disaster's past in terms of a tragedy among other national tragedies, and by reducing it merely to a tool to attack political opponents and legitimize one's own aspirations to power or by suggesting this past should be overcome as soon as possible.

Keywords: Belarus, Chernobyl accident, nuclear disaster, memory politics, political rituals

Introduction

In April 2006 for the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear accident Belarusian authorities dedicated a monument to the disaster in Vetka, situated 15 kilometers from Gomel in the south of Belarus close to the Ukrainian border. The monument, as pictured in an official photo-album (Belarusian State Committee on the Problems of the Consequences of the Chernobyl Catastrophe 2005:94), consisted of a bell topped with a cross and a large granite stone. On the latter one could read the names of the villages that lost their inhabitants and ceased to exist due to the high levels of radioactive contamination that resulted from the accident at the Ukrainian nuclear power plant. However, when I first saw the monument in December 2010, I couldn't see any inscription on the stone. Noticing my astonishment, the director of the local gymnasium who accompanied me told that the material from which the monument was made from was a little bit defective. When the stone got wet, the inscriptions became invisible.



A monument dedicated to the Chernobyl disaster in Vetka, Gomel region, Belarus, December 2010. Copyright: Tatiana Kasperski.

This monument, which regularly loses its meaning during course of rain and snow, metaphorically describes the way the Chernobyl disaster appears in the Belarusian public memory landscape. Every year officials and the representatives of the opposition organize commemorations of the Chernobyl accident emphasizing the huge impact it had on the country and insisting upon the necessity to remember its heroes and victims for the sake of future generations. But at the same time Chernobyl most often appears to be an empty form: everyone in Belarus recognizes its outline but its specific meaning remains unclear. Indeed, even if the disaster is all but forgotten by Belarusians it seems that public references to it by different political actors rarely provoke strong reactions among people. At the same time annual commemorations of the disaster have seen the number of their participants decrease dramatically over the years. Monuments to the disaster in different cities in the Belarusian southeast regions, which were the most affected by the radioactive fallout, appear to the inhabitants and visitors to be tourist sights, but not monuments.

To understand this apparent weakness in public memory of the disaster and its lack of connection with individual experiences of the catastrophe, this paper provides an analysis of several types of political ceremonies and monuments dedicated to the Chernobyl accident in Belarus. It will explore the ways they discard some aspects of the past while emphasizing others, and thus contribute to forgetting the disaster as not directly relevant to the present political life.

From heroic official account to the first contentious commemorations of the disaster

The Chernobyl accident did not become the object of memory politics until 1989. During the first years after the explosion at the Lenin Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine, Soviet authorities were entirely preoccupied by the “liquidation” (*likvidatsiia* in Russian) of the accident’s consequences. This official term of “liquidation” reflected well such aspects of the Soviet post-accident policies as treating the disaster as an external enemy that the Soviet people must fight and annihilate. It also described accurately Soviet authorities’ efforts

literally to erase, to make the traces of the disaster disappear both from the environment¹ and the public sphere.

Thus, in spite of the glasnost policy that the Communist party secretary general Mikhail Gorbachev announced in 1985, Soviet authorities largely dissimulated the scale of the nuclear accident that took place on April 26, 1986. During the first years after the accident Soviet citizens, including the inhabitants of the territories adjacent to the Chernobyl nuclear facility, received only sketchy and often simply false official information about what had happened and about the radioactive dangers the people were exposed to. Between May 1986 and the beginning of 1989 the official optimistic narrative about successful “liquidation” of the accident’s consequences and the return to a normal life remained dominant in the Soviet media. The press, radio and television which were totally under the control of the State and the Communist Party described heroic deeds of the emergency workers fighting radioactive contamination (the so-called liquidators), the solidarity of the Soviet people facing the disaster as one united family, and the efficiency of the central and local authorities in dealing with everyday problems related to evacuation, health control, and clean-up operations (Kasperski 2012:110-128).

This official optimistic vision of the successful resolution of the Chernobyl-related problems began to dissipate only by the end of 1988 and the beginning of the 1989. Writers, scientists, and inhabitants of the contaminated territories started openly to criticize Soviet officials who had downplayed on purpose the impact of the accident and risked the lives and the health of millions of Soviet citizens. The political liberalization introduced by the Gorbachev reforms facilitated the expression of the private, individual painful experiences of the disaster, which gradually turned into public claims. Thus, 1989 became a Chernobyl year in Belarus with dozens of rallies against the official dissimulation of the accident impact, the flows of critical publications in the media revealing the true scale of radioactive contamination and its mismanagement by the Soviet authorities, and hot debates about disaster-induced problems during the electoral campaign for the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. These events fuelled social and political mobilization against communist authorities and contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The first large-scale commemoration of the Chernobyl disaster took place in Minsk, several weeks after Soviet authorities published the maps of the radioactive contamination that resulted from the explosion at the Chernobyl NPP.² The ceremony was organized by the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), which represented the opposition nationalist movement that challenged the Belarusian governing elite at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. The commemoration took place during the third anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, on April 26, 1989; organizers called it “the hour of sorrow and silence.” Almost 10,000 people gathered on the Lenin square in Minsk, not far from the government headquarters. They carried posters with the names of the Belarusian districts affected by the radioactive fallout. After a short commemorative speech they lit candles and stood for almost two hours in silence listening to the sound of bells (*Litaratura i Mastatstva* 1989:4). Several months later, on September 30, 1989, the BPF organized an event called the “Chernobyl Path” (“Charnobylski shliakh” in Belarusian). Nearly 40,000 people took part in a march on Central Avenue toward Lenin Square, where a rally was held in which such prominent figures as Belarusian writer Ales Adamovich and Vice president of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR Evgenii Velikhov participated (Oreshko 1989:7–8).

These commemorations were among the first public gatherings that facilitated the expression of demands concerning the protection of the population against the risks of radioactive contamination, its relocation from the highly contaminated areas, the payment of compensation, and the punishment of the officials responsible for the dissimulation of the radioactive dangers. The participants associated these claims with demands for the

democratization of the country which they saw as necessary for a transparent and fair resolution of the Chernobyl-related problems. These demonstrations also corresponded to the moment when the disaster first appeared not as an unfortunate accident to “liquidate,” but rather as a tragic past to remember and to commemorate. The living, fluid, imprecise individual and group everyday experiences of the accident began to crystallize in different fixed forms of what Jan and Aleida Assmann called “cultural memory.”³ Formed under the influence of different political actors’ strategies, these forms would become points of reference visible in the public space and parts of the dominant narratives of the disaster. They also would serve as frameworks for the subsequent political uses of the accident and suggest how the disaster should be publicly remembered.

Opposition Commemoration of the Disaster: from Communist Crimes to “Political Chernobyl”

The commemoration march known as “Chernobyl Path” that the members of the Belarusian nationalist movement represented by the BPF organized on September 30, 1989, was a huge success. Tens of thousands of people from Minsk as well as from the towns and villages of the southeastern regions of the Belarusian Soviet republic that were radioactively contaminated slowly marched on the central avenue of the capital. This march was one of the culminating points of the popular uprising against the communist authorities. Since 1989 the “Chernobyl Path” has been taking place every year on the anniversary of the accident at the end of April. It became a political ritual in the sense that the ceremony has been characterized by a certain stability of its main constitutive elements, and has served to communicate in a symbolic form the relationships, including political ones, between the members of the community, providing them with meaning while appealing to emotions.⁴

Thus, this political ritual has had two main dimensions, a merely commemorative one and a protest one. The commemorative part has consisted of the honoring the victims of the disaster while inserting the latter in a particular national narrative of the past and promoting a certain vision of national Belarusian identity. The contentious dimension appears in the way the ritual has aimed at consolidating the political forces struggling to overthrow the existing political regime. Indeed, in 1989–91 its organizers strongly criticized communist authorities. Beginning in 1996 “Chernobyl Path” became a ritual for those who opposed the authoritarian regime of President Alexander Lukashenko.

The opposition commemoration consists of three main parts: first, a religious service to honor the victims of the disaster; second, a rally that mainly addresses present problems related to the disaster’s impact, and the political situation in general; and third, a procession which usually combines commemoration and protest. The procession illustrates the name that the members of the opposition nationalist movement gave to this ritual in 1989: the “Chernobyl Path.” During its two-decade history this political ritual related to the memory of Chernobyl disaster had different organizers and followed different itineraries. The number of its participants varied considerably, from several hundred to tens of thousands of people. These changes have reflected the balance of power of the moment, the probability of repression, the possibility of achieving the political goals of the organizers and participants, and the availability of other means of public protest (Kasperski 2012:307–315).

Through the commemoration of the Chernobyl disaster the opposition recalls, recreates and reinforces shared images of the past, the present and the future of the national community. Honoring the victims of the disaster, organizers speak out on behalf of the whole nation. The Belarusian past as it appears through the “Chernobyl Path” march is first of all a long history of losses and tragedies experienced by the nation. Its participants refer to the Chernobyl disaster as a crime of the Soviet system against the Belarusian nation which

successive imperial authorities have repressed for many centuries. This tragic past appears through the religious and funeral part of the ceremony. The church service and the minute of silence interrupted by the sound of bells allow the participants to recall the sufferings of the Chernobyl victims as well as the losses of the national community. Many religious and funeral symbols are present during the commemoration such as candles, bells, crosses, and the “Our Lady of Chernobyl Victims” icon that participants usually carry at the front of the procession. The procession itself symbolizes the suffering of the national martyr community as if following the Way of the Cross.⁵



The opposition’s “Chernobyl Path” in Minsk, April 1996. The “Our Lady of Chernobyl Victims” icon is visible beneath the black “Chernobyl Path” banner. Copyright: Melanie Arndt.

Many participants wear black bandages marked with the symbol of the radioactivity or carry black placards with the names of contaminated cities and villages. The religious character of this commemoration gives a sacred and even a messianic meaning to the suffering of the Chernobyl victims and to those of the whole nation. The religious symbols also contribute to emphasize the breakaway of the traditional Belarusian community from Soviet atheism.

The annual commemoration of the Chernobyl disaster also reminds participants and observers of the glorious pre-Soviet history of the Belarusian nation. Thus, the use of both the three-striped flag – white-red-white – and the coat of arms “Pagonia” (which can be translated from Belarusian as “chaser”) is a symbolic means to evoke its centuries-old glorious past. Their own history, as the opposition nationalists claim, is closely related to the history of the Great Duchy of Lithuania, which is seen as a golden age of the Belarusian past, and of the Belarusian People’s Republic.⁶ The common past as it appears through the disaster commemoration procession is thereby also symbolized by pieces of authentic popular traditions and culture such as the traditional hand-embroidered linen called “ruchnik” wrapped around the icon.



The opposition's "Chernobyl Path" in Minsk, April 1996. Copyright: Melanie Arndt.

Although the organizers of the "Chernobyl Path" claim that the purpose of their rally is to commemorate the disaster and its victims, uniting and consolidating the different opposition forces has remained one of the main functions of this demonstration. Since 1996, the ritual has indeed highlighted and strengthened the consensus among those rather heterogeneous political actors that try to challenge Lukashenko's regime. In the context of the Belarusian authoritarian political regime where the means of political activity are very limited, the commemoration of the Chernobyl disaster remains one of the rare ways when contentious political expression is more or less tolerated by the authorities. This may partially explain the fact that the protest dimension of this ritual has been gradually taking over its commemorative meaning.

This protest dimension already appears in the way the ritual is inserted into the city's space. The itinerary, which varies considerably every year, is always the result of a symbolic battle over the space between opposition forces and authorities, from whom the organizers have to obtain a permit. The city authorities rarely purely forbid the action, but rather try to limit the number of its participants and its visibility by different means. For example, they always give the authorization at the last moment, and they usually significantly modify the itinerary. While opposition forces want to lead the procession through the central part of the city, authorities try to move the opposition forces as far as possible from the main avenue of the capital. Thus, the organizers always have to compromise between the will to challenge the non-democratic rules of the game and the necessity to avoid police actions and to lower the cost of participation in the rally to attract more people.

The protest dimension appears even more visibly in the fact that the participants have focused primarily on criticizing the Lukashenko regime since 1996. First, they criticize the Belarusian authorities for downplaying the real dangers of the radioactive contamination for the population, for declaring more and more of the contaminated areas as clean and suitable for farming, and for depriving affected population groups of certain privileges they were

given in the early 1990s to indemnify them for the damages caused by the Chernobyl disaster. To remind everyone symbolically of the suffering of the victims of the radioactive contamination that the authorities have been neglecting and the risks that weigh on the health of many Belarusians, some demonstrators wear dust masks, t-shirts and ribbons with the symbol for radioactive danger.

But even more important, the opposition forces refer to a “political Chernobyl” to qualify the regime instituted by President Lukashenko. For them Chernobyl remains essentially a political problem not only related to the radioactive contamination of the country and which only the country’s democratization – and the removal of a regime they perceive as based on violence and lies – can solve. The frame “political Chernobyl” is also used as a metaphor to describe the current political situation of the country: the repression of the opposition, the violation of human rights, and the destruction of political and economic freedom (Milinkevich 2006). The slogans used by opposition figures during the rally on placards and in speeches aim at interpreting the disaster’s meaning in the light of the political events of the moment. They are intended to remind all people of the major concerns shared by the political opposition forces such as problems related to the state’s Chernobyl and health policies (“Provide Chernobyl victims with medicines,” 2002; “We want to be healthy,” 2006), political repression (“Freedom for Political Prisoners,” 2002; “No to Police State!,” 2006), and what they believe is Lukashenko’s highly misguided policy in favor of integration with Russia (“It is better to be rich and healthy with NATO, than sick and poor with Russia and Yugoslavia,” 1999; “Russification is a spiritual Chernobyl,” 2002).

At the same time, state authorities tried gradually to oust opposition forces from the field of public remembering of the disaster and partially succeeded to supplant the contentious commemorative ritual with official ceremonies. Two commemorative events that state officials organize every year on the occasion of the Chernobyl anniversary deserve particular attention from that point of view: an official commemoration ceremony organized by the Minsk city authorities and the state-sponsored touring festival “The Chernobyl Path – the Road of Life.” The third regular official event related to the disaster’s anniversary, which is discussed below, is the annual presidential trip to the contaminated regions. This ritual is a telling illustration of the official focus on the legitimization of the current political regime and of its policy aiming at the revival of the Chernobyl lands rather than at the maintaining of the memory of the accident.

State attempts to supplant contentious commemorative ritual by official ceremonies

Until the mid-1990s Belarusian state officials had shown little interest in organizing particular events dedicated to the disaster’s anniversary. The year 1996 was marked not only by a strong conflict between the president and the opposition⁷, but it also became a turning point in the official memory politics with regard to the Chernobyl nuclear accident. Since the second half of 1990s Belarusian authorities have indeed tried, on the one hand, to transform the disaster’s past into an instrument fostering people’s support for the state and its policies. On the other hand, they attempted to shift the focus of Chernobyl public memory from the tragic past to the bright future by emphasizing the necessary and inevitable return to normality for most of the lands contaminated by the radioactive fallout.

A series of important official commemorative events took place in April 1996. Among these was an official ceremony dedicated to the disaster, which Minsk city authorities organized in the park near the Bangalore Square situated several kilometers away from the center of the capital. The time and the place that the authorities chose for this event, in which Lukashenko took part, demonstrated their will to usurp from the opposition its leading role in disaster memory politics and to reduce the subversive potential of the disaster’s past. Thus,

the official ceremony in 1996 took place on the same day when the contentious commemoration, the “Chernobyl Path,” resulted in violent clashes with the police who arrested and beat hundreds of people (Dubavets 1996:8–9). Moreover, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the nuclear accident State officials chose the same location where in April 1991 during the Chernobyl march the members of the Belarusian Popular Front laid a memorial stone to honor the memory of the disaster’s heroes and victims. Also after 1996, a number of the opposition’s Chernobyl marches ended here since it was one of a very few places where opposition commemoration rallies were allowed by the authorities. Several months before the first official commemoration at this place, the construction of a chapel in honor of the Chernobyl victims began near the memorial stone on the initiative of the Association “The Chernobyl Shield” (“Shtchit Chernobyliu”) created by the employees of the Belarusian Ministry of the Interior who participated in the clean-up operation after the nuclear accident. Completed in 1997 with the “support of the Belarusian president,” as indicated on the commemorative plaque, the Chernobyl chapel became the place where Minsk authorities have organized a religious service and an official rally on the occasion of the anniversary of the disaster for fifteen years.

Only several hundred people are usually present during the official ceremonies. For most of them, such as the students of the secondary schools situated nearby, participation in the event is more or less compulsory. The event combines a religious service in memory of the disaster victims, a rally with commemorative speeches by state officials and representatives of some pro-government NGOs and the flower and wreath laying ceremony. The religious aspects resemble the opposition commemorative ritual. However, if the use of religious symbols during opposition commemorations since 1989, as noted earlier, have suggested a break with the atheist Soviet legacy and the spiritual revival of the Belarusian nation, then the religious dimension during official ceremonies translates first and foremost into the important role of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, supported by the state and loyal to the Lukashenko regime.⁸

Unlike the opposition forces’ commemoration, however, the official ritual includes a military-patriotic dimension. Cadets in military uniform take part in the ceremony and lay wreaths at the end of it to honor the Chernobyl “liquidators” and their sacrifices in the struggle to cope with the nuclear accident’s immediate aftermath. Some of the “liquidators” are also present, such as the representatives of the association of the Ministry of the Interior employees mentioned above. The military-patriotic dimension is consistent with the official heroic account of the accident as a battle with an external enemy that was dominant in the public sphere during the first months and years following the disaster. This narrative of the disaster, as well as the parallels between the Chernobyl disaster and the Great Patriotic War (World War II), reappeared in the official discourse since the mid-1990s. More generally, this aspect of the ceremony is also reminiscent of Soviet political rites, in particular those related to the celebration of the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War as they were described by Christel Lane (1981), among others.⁹

Another official event that demonstrates the authorities’ attempts to replace the protest rally by a state-sponsored ritual is a touring festival also called “Chernobyl Path.” It consists of concerts, a song-contest, and an entertainment program, all of which take place in a large number of radioactively contaminated towns and villages. During the Soviet period authorities organized a lot of concerts in the Chernobyl-affected districts. These concerts had no commemorative intent. Rather, their main purpose was to convince the population that their life in the strongly contaminated areas was returning to normal. But since April 1994, shortly before the first presidential elections in Belarus, those state-sponsored concerts received the title of “Chernobyl Path.” Since then they have acquired a commemorative dimension and now always take place around the disaster’s anniversary date. In the

framework of Lukashenko's new policy of rehabilitation of Chernobyl-affected territories the festival became a major cultural event for those regions, which generally have a rather impoverished cultural life.

The state's attempt to supplant the opposition commemorative ceremony appears most obviously in the name of the festival, which is the same as that of the opposition annual march: the "Chernobyl Path." Since 1997–98, the title has been slightly modified to become "Chernobyl Path - the Road of Life," thus reflecting the new state's approach to the management of the disaster's consequences, which promotes the rehabilitation of the contaminated lands. Another interesting detail about the festival's title is that the word "path" (*shliakh* in Belarusian) is used in Belarusian even in the predominantly Russian official discourse. It clearly indicates that the Belarusian officials borrowed the title from the Belarusian nationalist opposition which has been employing it for its commemorative marches dedicated to the Chernobyl disaster since 1989. However, this title appears much more frequently on the local level, in the districts affected by the radioactive fallout where people are often poorly informed and rarely interested in the political demonstrations taking place in the capital: in the capital most citizens understand that "Chernobyl Path" refers to the opposition. National official media rarely mention "Chernobyl Path" to describe state festivals, but refer to it mainly to criticize the opposition for their useless and aggressive rallies in the capital (Belarus' Segodnia 2007). This deliberate confusion contains an important political message: while the opposition forces organize commemorative farces trying to benefit from the people's tragedy and to hold Belarus in its grim past, the state really cares about Chernobyl victims, trying to make their life better and to lead them on a true "Chernobyl Path" into the bright future.

The expression "Chernobyl Path" sometimes appears in the official media with regard to the presidential visits of the contaminated lands (The Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus 2003) which became an important political ritual since the end of 1990s. This ritual illustrates more than other official events related to the disaster's anniversary that official memory strategy is to depict the Chernobyl disaster as a tragedy of a past which has been successfully overcome and has little to do with the present. In fact, Lukashenko's trips seem to focus mostly on praising his own achievements and leadership and on promoting the revival of Chernobyl lands. The first presidential visit of sorts took place in April 1996. Since 1998 the April trips to the radioactively affected areas have become annual events typically lasting several days. The president visits not only the administrative centers of the districts, but also some remote villages. The geography of the journey is thus supposed to demonstrate how important every little corner of the country is for the head of the state.

The presidential trips to the Chernobyl-affected areas also serve to stage the unity and solidarity among the Belarusian people and their support to the state Chernobyl policies. The consensus is represented through the gatherings of the local inhabitants that welcome the president. Using an old Slavic tradition, the employees of different institutions, enterprises or collective farms greet the president with bread and salt. Villagers usually gather on the central square in front of a school, the local authorities' headquarters or a local monument to the victims of Chernobyl or to the heroes of the World War II. These gatherings generally include a purely commemorative part: a wreath laying ceremony, a ceremonial speech by the president and local officials paying tribute to the victims of the disaster, or a little performance by school students including poems or songs evoking the tragic past.

During this commemorative ceremony which is usually short and rather formal, Lukashenko and other authorities lament not only the victims of the disaster, but also the losses due to the relocation policies of the beginning of the 1990s that have exacerbated the exodus and the abandonment of contaminated lands. The commemoration of these losses

becomes an occasion to remember the early years of Lukashenko's presidency and his decision to bring back to life the territories that suffered from the radioactive fallout, which officials depict as proof of the president's courage and good sense.

Indeed, in 1989–91, in response to the strong popular protest movement against Soviet authorities' mismanagement of the Chernobyl accident aftermath in the end of 1980, the Supreme Soviets of the USSR as well as those of the Ukrainian and Belarusian Soviet republics adopted a series of large-scale measures to cope with the consequences of the disaster. They included among others the plans for relocation of hundreds of thousands of people from the highly contaminated lands¹⁰ and the payment of compensation to different groups of disaster victims: "liquidators" and relocated people and their children. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the funding from the union budget was suspended and the republics were left to deal alone with the accident's aftermath in the conditions of a severe economic crisis. During the first years of independence Belarus experienced severe problems in implementing the measures that the authorities of the BSSR had previously adopted to mitigate the consequences of the radioactive fallout.

Since coming to power, Lukashenko has insisted on a new approach to the post-accident management. He suggested that Belarusians should not passively undergo the disaster consequences or admit losses in land, housing and employment. Instead, the country would focus now on the recovery of the affected areas and allow the return of the people to these lands (Lukashenko 1996). State officials framed this new policy in terms of revival and consolidation of the Belarusian people in the heroic reconstruction of the injured homeland. Neglecting the multiple risks of living and working in contaminated areas was the underside of this new approach.

Since the end of the 1990s Lukashenko has highlighted the success of these policies during his annual trips to the affected territories. He presents himself as a strong, proactive leader capable of consolidating the people and performing what his predecessors had failed to achieve: the overcoming of the disaster and the reconstruction of the national community. His visits seek to emphasize the contrast between the past and the present of the radioactively contaminated districts: the head of state points to the rebuilt houses, schools and hospitals, and he visits what the official newspapers describe as flourishing enterprises and farms that were once on the brink of bankruptcy (Kriat 2004a, 2004b). The presence of children at the meetings with the head of the state is also supposed to symbolize this new life of Chernobyl-affected towns and villages and their radiant future.

Those visits also recall and reaffirm collective values, often inherited from the Soviet era, that are of particular importance for the functioning of the current political system: work, optimism, and solidarity within the community. The Belarusian president thus always ritually rewards individuals and groups that successfully achieved the rehabilitation of an enterprise, a farm unit, or a village thanks to their devotedness to the work. These work heroes allow the president to show to the inhabitants of the Chernobyl-affected territories that the real improvement in their living conditions depends only on their own efforts.

This exaltation of work comes together with the devaluation of political activity. The main problems that resulted from the contamination of large territories appear thus as ones that cannot be solved by political means, but call above all for individual willingness to work for the homeland and its people. Official discourse sets labor and hard work against political activity, and this antithesis mirrors the one between the president and the opposition (Romanova 2001). During his traditional annual trip to the contaminated regions Lukashenko often accuses the opposition of seeking to use the Chernobyl disaster to destabilize the Belarusian society, provoke conflicts inside it, and prevent the government from helping the Belarusian people to return to a normal life.

Apart from promoting the policies of intensive recovery of the contaminated territories, Lukashenko's ritual trips seek to legitimize the very paternalist and populist style of government that several observers (Eke and Kuzio 2000; Goujon 2002) describe as Belarusian "authoritarian populism." Indeed, presidential visits highlight the direct relationship between the president and the people and the rejection of all the forms of political mediation which could hinder this connection (Goujon 2002:31). The ritual journeys also aim at demonstrating the president's political will to overcome the consequences of Chernobyl and at the same time his central place in the political order in general. They remind the local residents that the entire political system could not exist without the president, his courage, his energy, and his dedication to the people.

Through these visits the head of state appears to be the one who distributes or redistributes resources to the disaster's victims, decides upon post-accident policy priorities, and gives direct orders to different state bodies and officials. The president's instructions (Rus. *porucheniia prezidenta*) are one of many examples of the ritual elements of Lukashenko's visits that suggest his central role. Thus, during the meetings with local residents, which sometimes take the form of small, carefully staged walkabouts, people communicate their concerns directly to Lukashenko by pointing to concrete problems, for example to the lack of busses for local schools. After attentively listening to these concerns, Lukashenko immediately prepares instructions for the state agencies in charge of the post-accident management to solve the problems. These agencies have to fulfill the president's rather spontaneous instructions before all other measures of post-accident management planned by the legislation in this domain (Belarusian State Committee on the Problems of the Consequences of the Chernobyl Catastrophe 2005:33). Such instructions often take the form of material objects that the president solemnly offers to the local population. More generally, the presidential visits are always accompanied by multiple donations. Through those donations state expenditures in the contaminated territories appear to come exclusively from the extraordinary generosity of the head of state taking to heart all the Chernobyl victims' difficulties. The president also has the power to award large amounts of money to local enterprises or institutions without specifying the origin of these financial resources. These gifts serve as a demonstration of the almost magical powers of the head of state, who is able to turn his subjects' desires into reality.

Finally, Lukashenko examines the work of local officials, directors of local enterprises and farms, and publicly distributes reprimands and praises. These personal judgments clearly indicate everyone's place in the political hierarchy: the president takes his omnipotence from the people who entrusted him directly with the task of protecting their interests. In this capacity he requires obedience from all the officials, personally evaluates them, and may punish them any time he decides that they do not serve people's interests as he defines them. It is, of course hard to measure directly the effect of those rituals in fostering real consensus around the current political order. Nevertheless, by defining the nature of the latter, the ritual contributes, as Stephen Luke (1975:301-305) pointed out in his analysis of the integration function of the political rites, to "define out" the alternatives to the existing state of things, making them appear less attractive or achievable.

Chernobyl monuments

For more than two decades Chernobyl commemorative rituals and ceremonies have been the most visible forms of public memory of the disaster, even if, as was described above, the dimension of the past in them has been continually shrinking. Chernobyl monuments, on the contrary, are much less visible in the public space, but their materiality makes them less dependent on the changing political context. They are not only the products

of memory and memory politics, but are also a kind of pre-existing set to all attempts to reconstruct the representations of the disaster. They serve as what Maurice Halbwachs (1994) has called “social frameworks of memory,” common points of reference that individuals and communities use to localize their images of the past. They frame and, therefore, can reinforce, or conversely, limit the influence of commemorative rituals and practices.

Those monuments started to appear during the Soviet era, but the majority of them were unveiled in the second half of the 1990s and in the beginning of the 2000s, especially on the occasion of the tenth and the twentieth anniversaries of the disaster. They now exist in almost every administrative center of the contaminated districts. There are two main types of Chernobyl monuments: the monuments to the “liquidators” of the disaster, and those to the abandoned villages. The former are dedicated to the people who participated in all kinds of emergency tasks in the nuclear disaster area (fire extinction, evacuation, cleaning-up, and so on) in 1986–88 and were exposed to high levels of radiation. Monuments commemorate specific persons who lost their lives fighting the Chernobyl disaster’s consequences, as in the case of the monument to Vassilii Ignatenko in the town of Bragin. Ignatenko was part of the fire brigade that was the first to arrive at the accident site after the explosion at the Ukrainian nuclear power plant. However, in most cases monuments honor the “liquidators” in general, like the big Chernobyl memorial near Mogilev.

The monuments dedicated to the “liquidators” depict them as heroes, as those who achieved an amazing feat and, very often, voluntarily sacrificed their lives to save others. This picture of soldiers in a war against an invisible enemy is strongly reminiscent of the way the heroes of the Great Patriotic War during the Soviet era are portrayed. Indeed, as many researchers have previously demonstrated (Tumarkin 1994; Ferretti 2005), the Communist Party transformed the memory of the war into a cult of the Soviet victory over fascism. This cult celebrated the heroic deeds of the Soviet people, emphasizing the state’s grandeur and praising the merits of the Stalin regime while putting aside the memories of the war atrocities and sufferings. The official Soviet narrative of the Great Patriotic War also contained many blank spots, half-truths and lies, such as the extermination of the Jews, the Katyn massacre of the Polish officers on the order of Stalin in 1940, and the fate of Soviet war prisoners that Soviet authorities accused of treason and sent to labor camps after the war was over. In a similar way, the Chernobyl monuments created to maintain the memory of hundreds of thousands of disaster “liquidators” encourage oblivion. They say nothing about the absurdity of many of the sacrifices and the fact that the extremely high human costs of the disaster are due to the unpreparedness of the Soviet authorities for such an accident, their attempts to downplay and to cover up the real scale of the disaster, and their will to return to normal as soon as possible at all costs. The monuments in fact ignore many of the liquidators--those who are alive, those who are sick, and others who simply could not prove that they were in fact “liquidators.”¹¹ Finally, they also give the Chernobyl disaster a masculine face, forgetting about the women who took part in the emergency tasks related to the mitigation of the disaster aftermath and worked in the immediate proximity of the site during the first months and years after the accident.

Monuments to the “liquidators” are often combined with those to abandoned villages. The latter, which appear today as the most popular format for the Chernobyl monuments, can be found in almost every administrative district of the most affected regions of Belarus. Like the monument with the disappearing script described in the beginning of this essay, they usually consist of gravestones or marble plaques with the names of the highly contaminated villages that were evacuated and ceased to exist. In the framework of the official memory of the Chernobyl disaster those villages appear often as a replica of villages burned down with their inhabitants by the German invaders during World War II. In the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, these destroyed villages became a very important symbolic element of the

official memory of the War. Indeed, in 1969 a huge memorial complex was erected about 50 km from Minsk at the place of a village named Khatyn. According to the official account on March 22, 1943, the fascists destroyed this village and burned alive its 149 inhabitants.¹² The memorial contains among other things the so-called “villages’ cemetery” where 185 gravestones symbolize 185 other villages which, like Khatyn, were burned with their inhabitants during the Second World War. This site seems to have inspired the monument to the abandoned villages of the city of Slavgorod, Mogilev region, made in the form of an alley with a number of small gravestones along both sides, each with the name of a district’s buried village.

Apart from creating a parallel between the Chernobyl disaster and the Great Patriotic War, the theme of the abandoned, buried, perished villages points to yet another important aspect of the official Chernobyl memory. With the notable exception of the monuments to the “liquidators”, it pays little attention to human victims. Instead, the homeland became the main victim. The official memory reifies and reveres abandoned villages, houses and lands rather than men and women who are dead or may die from various diseases caused by radioactivity. This shift of attention is consistent with the official memory strategy and the policy of the revival of the contaminated territories. Indeed, the major difference between a human and a village is that the death of the latter is not necessarily irreversible.

Conclusion: Memory Obscured

The years of the rather unsuccessful attempts of the Soviet authorities to liquidate the disaster’s impact, including people’s memories of the disaster, were followed, beginning in 1989, by a period characterized by large-scale contentious commemorations of the disaster and strong popular protests against the radioactive contamination cover-up. The Belarusian nationalist movement became the main political force leading this protest directed against communist authorities. In the long run, however, it did not succeed efficiently to voice the Chernobyl victims’ discontent. Indeed, since the end of the 1980s, as the analysis of the “Chernobyl Path” commemorations above has shown, Belarusian nationalists framed the disaster aftermath in terms of the tragedy for the nation as a whole, disregarding the specific problems of the people most directly affected by the radioactive fallout (“liquidators,” relocated people, and inhabitants of the contaminated territories).

Moreover, since the second half of the 1990s, the political conflicts between the members of the Belarusian Popular Front and other opposition political forces and President Lukashenko and his authoritarian regime have contributed to the transformation of the commemorations of the disaster into merely protest rallies. Those rallies have focused on general political problems such as repression, violations of human rights and public freedoms, rather than on specific issues related to the accident’s radiological impact. At the same time, the state authorities have tried to monopolize the public memory of the disaster and to delegitimize the opposition in its pretensions to play the role of the Chernobyl victims’ defender. However, official commemorative rituals related to Chernobyl did not contribute to maintaining public memory of the disaster’s tragic past but rather dismissed the importance of the latter by promoting the revival of the contaminated lands.

As for the monuments dedicated to the disaster, they also help shift the focus from concrete causes of the accident and its ongoing health impacts to more abstract ideas of national fate, tragedy and losses. One of the illustrations of this shift is the way some of these monuments interpret the disaster through the experience of the Great Patriotic War, which was the pillar of the Belarusian Soviet identity and remained crucial for the official definition of the Belarusian national identity after Lukashenko’s arrival to power.

Thus, the monuments and commemorative events dedicated to the disaster fail to address the specific issues connected with the consequences of the nuclear accident and the problems that the inhabitants of radioactively-contaminated territories have to deal with on a daily basis. Indeed, and paradoxically, they contribute to the disregard for serious questions related to the use of the nuclear energy and to political responsibility for technological choices that have had such a devastating impact. These forms of public memory fail to maintain a meaningful connection between the tragic past and the present, in the same way that the names of abandoned villages temporarily disappear from the Chernobyl monument described at the outset of this essay, and thus obscure the tragic experience of their former inhabitants.

¹ One thinks here, for example, of the spectacular attempts of hundreds of thousands of people, mostly Soviet soldiers of different branches of the armed forces, to achieve the clean-up of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant site and of the nearby heavily contaminated territories and villages. Those clean-up operations included among other things the removal and subsequent burial of the debris from the damaged reactor and Chernobyl nuclear facility site, of the contaminated top-soil, bushes, trees, grass and autumn leaves, the suppression of dust, laying asphalt washing of the buildings with special liquids, and the removal of the roofs from some of them (Medvedev 1990:89–103).

² The first and very approximate maps of the contamination of the territories of Ukrainian, Belarusian and Russian Soviet Republics by radioactive cesium-137 appeared in Belarusian newspapers on February 8–11, 1989. See, for example, Gomelskaia Prauda (1989).

³ Aleida and Jan Assman (Assman 1995) suggested making a distinction between two main forms of social memory: communicative and cultural memory. The first type of memory is recollections of the past as remembered in the everyday communication. This memory is fluent, changing and has a limited temporal horizon. This everyday communicative memory may also crystallize into different forms of “objectivized culture” such as texts, rituals, monuments, objects of art and literature and become “cultural memory.” The latter becomes the store of knowledge from where social group draws its norms, values, the consciousness of unity and specificity. “Cultural memory” serves thus the “concretion” and the reproduction of group identity.

⁴ I refer here to the characteristics of political rituals as defined, among others, by Christel Lane (1981:11–18) and David Kertzer (1988:8–14).

⁵ In one of his essays the former leader of the Belarusian Popular Front Zianon Pazniak (1994:8) described symbolically the tragic history of Belarus in the following terms:

If we look back, we will see that the history of the Belarus is a history of suffering. Belarusians have been bearing their martyrdom cross and sufferings for centuries already—contempt and betrayal, fascism, communism, genocide, and now, on their shoulders, the wormwood star. Our souls themselves already radiate strontium.

The “wormwood star” here is used as a metaphor for the Chernobyl disaster. This metaphor is very frequent in Belarusian as well as in Ukrainian literature on Chernobyl and confers a

religious meaning to the disaster. The latter is interpreted as the affirmation of the prophecy from Revelations 8: 10-11, mentioning a star called “Wormwood” that would fall from the heavens and poison the water. As Sarah Phillips (2011) notes, however, this metaphor relies upon confusion between Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), called “chernobyl” in Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian, and Wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*).

⁶ Indeed, Pagonia was the official coat of arms of the Great Duchy of Lithuania until the annexation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by the Russian Empire in 1795. The legendary origins of the white-red-white banner are related to the battle of Grunwald when the armies of Poland and the Great Duchy of Lithuania defeated the German knights of the Teutonic Order and a white bandage soaked with blood was used as a victorious banner. But historically the white-red-white flag first appeared only in 1918. The Pagonia and the white-red-flag became the official symbols of the short-lived Belarusian People’s Republic (Lial’kou 2002).

⁷ Shortly after his election to the Belarusian presidency in July 1994, Alexander Lukashenko sought to consolidate his power by authoritarian means, gradually transforming the executive branch, silencing critical independent media, and intimidating and persecuting the participants of the protest rallies. In November 1996, he used a referendum to amend the 1994 constitution in order to broaden his powers and to obtain more control over the parliament and the Constitutional Court. This fraud-tainted referendum also allowed Lukashenko to restart his five-year term, extending his rule to 2001, and to create a new House of Representatives by removing dozens of the most critical parliament’s members, who had unsuccessfully tried to impeach the president, from the current parliament. Lukashenko has been since twice re-elected to the Belarusian presidency in 2006 and in 2010.

⁸ The Belarusian Orthodox Church depends upon the Moscow Patriarchate and represents the union of Russian orthodox eparchies on the territory of Belarus led by the Filaret, Metropolitan of Minsk and Slutsk. It is the largest religious organization in the country.

⁹ Christel Lane (1981:140–152) described Victory Day as the main Soviet holiday that focused on the affirmation of the military-patriotic tradition aiming at fostering loyalty to the Soviet State, creating a sense of political community in spite of internal diversity, while keeping alive the memory of the World War II. The celebration of Victory Day consisted of a vast all-Union commemoration as well as small-scale ones in every town and in many villages. Those local celebrations included public gatherings near monuments dedicated to the Great Patriotic War with short memorial speeches reminding attendees of heroic war deeds of the Soviet people, music, declamation of poetry, a minute of silence and the laying of wreaths. The ceremonies usually involved the presence of different generations: elderly people, veterans of war, younger soldiers and children. In addition to those gatherings a military parade or a march of veterans through town’s central streets could also be held.

¹⁰ According to the “State Programme on Liquidation of the Consequences of the Chernobyl Accident in Belarus” that the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR adopted in the end of 1989, about 120,000 people were to be relocated during the period 1990–95 in addition to those who were evacuated in the first weeks and months after the disaster. A total of 135,000 people were finally moved to the regions of Belarus considered as not contaminated (UNDP and UNESCO 2002:23).

¹¹ Taking into account the Soviet authorities' cover-up of the Chernobyl accident consequences as well as rather chaotic post-accident management, a large number of individuals who were assigned to take part into different emergency tasks did not know what they were exactly doing, nor did they receive official documents certifying their participation. As a result, those persons later had a lot of difficulties to prove they had the right to obtain the status of the "liquidator." In her book *Life Exposed*, Adriana Petryna (2002) provides a poignant account of the struggle of some Ukrainian liquidators to get official recognition and to be entitled to state compensation for the disaster victims.

¹² The official account of the Khatyn massacre can be found on the web-site of the Khatyn memorial : <http://khatyn.by/en/tragedy/>, accessed April 28, 2012.

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