



Ablaze

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In *ABLAZE: THE STORY OF THE HEROES AND VICTIMS OF CHERNOBYL*, Piers Paul Read, author of *ALIVE: THE STORY OF THE ANDES SURVIVORS*, brilliantly re-creates the Soviet Union's Chernobyl atomic reactor disaster of 1986, an event that shocked and frightened the entire world.

While Read more than adequately discusses the scientific and technological aspects of the Chernobyl facility, *ABLAZE* focuses primarily upon the human dimension of the tragedy. According to Read, there were few outright villains. Rather, the Soviet system itself was at fault, with paranoid and compartmentalized secrecy and pressure to produce results at all costs endemic in that authoritarian society. There were, however, many heroes, particularly those who lost their lives in coping with the reactor's explosion. And of course there are the radiation victims who still face suffering in the years to come.

While the Chernobyl explosion exemplified the failures of the Soviet system, it is likely that the disaster quickened the fall of the Soviet Union. The old order had begun to change under Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of glasnost and perestroika, but Chernobyl caused Gorbachev to revert to secrecy and denial until the evidence became too overwhelming. Not only the Marxist old guard but also the communist reformers and thus the Soviet Union itself lost legitimacy.

It is, perhaps, not unusual that the Soviets attempted to deny the disaster, since most governments have been inclined to cover up such events. The United States had its Three-Mile Island incident and the British government experienced nuclear difficulties at Windscale, but neither democratic government was eager to publicize the possible implications of those tragedies. Admittedly the magnitude of Chernobyl and its aftermath have been greater; few today, at least in the West, any longer claim that nuclear power is intrinsically safe of the inevitable solution to the world's energy challenges.

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