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From Nuclear to *Human Security*? Prerequisites and Motives for the German Chernobyl Commitment in Belarus

*Melanie Arndt**

Abstract: »Von nuklearer Sicherheit zu Human Security? Voraussetzungen und Motive des deutschen Tschernobylengagements in Belarus«. This paper analyses the involvement of West German initiatives in Belarus following the Chernobyl disaster, with special regard to the social construction of human security. It focuses on the prerequisites for this involvement and the New Social Movements of the 1960s and the 1970s, in particular the “new” peace and anti-nuclear power movement. Based on the change in the emotional regime in West Germany, where fear was increasingly being openly expressed, civil society groups committed themselves to mitigating the consequences of the disaster. The paper explores perceptions and the criteria of security/certainty and, more specifically, the criteria of insecurity/uncertainty by which those actors were governed in their involvement.

Keywords: security, Chernobyl, civil society, fear, commitment, atom, nuclear energy, New Social Movements.

“We need another profound transition in thinking – from nuclear to human security”, postulated the United Nation’s Human Development Report in 1994.¹ Thus it marked the new challenges and perceptions which followed the clear-cut division of the world during the Cold War era. Even if we are far away from guaranteeing either nuclear or human security, the latter phase of the Cold War marked a crucial shift in the perception of security not only in the political realm, but also in civil society. The understanding of security moved away from a concept which was mainly military and directed at nation states to a concept which focuses on individual security and the “freedom from fear and want”² as “legitimate concerns of ordinary people (...) in their daily lives”, as

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¹ United Nations Development Programme 1994, 22.

² “Freedom from fear and want” were already key aspects in Roosevelt’s and Churchill’s Atlantic Charter of 1941 and the preamble of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. Later on they were turned into major components of human security. United Nations Development Programme 1994, 24.

the Human Development Report states.³ These concerns became especially virulent and influential after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 which became a metaphor for many of the challenging processes taking place at the end of the Cold War.

As early as the 10th anniversary of the disaster, the oft-cited Belarusian writer Svetlana Aleksievich declared that Chernobyl had already become “a metaphor, a symbol”.⁴ The 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident has indeed become a manifold metaphor for many issues – whether directly related to the disaster or not. At the heart of these issues lies a deep uncertainty, undermining belief in technological progress, our ability to control risky technologies, and the relative security of everyday life. The “symbolic fallout”⁵ of the Chernobyl disaster, as anthropologist Sarah Phillips put it, comprises, among other things: “anthropological shock” (Beck), the nuclear age, industrial and environmental disasters, the end of the Soviet Union, radioactive contamination, incomprehensible (in the most literal sense) afflictions, new forms of adventure tourism, ambiguity, fear, disability, and disease.

However, Chernobyl has been more than a “semantic catastrophe”, as a German nuclear physicist succinctly surmised.⁶ The disaster not only disclosed the limits of technical progress, but also the limits of the state’s power to protect its own citizens. As a “focusing event”⁷ Chernobyl changed prior conceptions of science, technology, security, and citizenship. The disaster⁸ accelerated the breakdown of state socialism⁹, which claimed to have taken on a wide range of social provision, which had previously been provided by families. However, Chernobyl did more than just question the authority of scientific expertise and the Cold War rhetoric of technological progress in socialist systems. This “politicization of knowing” also produced many laypersons, such as worried parents, and also experts who began to perceive themselves as citizens and as citizens with concerns about the environment: what the anthropologist Krista M. Harper called a “politicization of caring”.¹⁰

While the *discussion* about the dangers of nuclear energy in the Federal Republic of Germany had started long before the incident in the Ukrainian nuclear power plant, on the 26th of April 1986, the hitherto only hypothetical case of

³ United Nations Development Programme 1994, 22.

⁴ Aleksievich 1998, 25. In the paper I use scientific transliteration from the Russian and Belarusian languages – with the exception of commonly used terms, such as “Chernobyl”.

⁵ Phillips 2008, 159.

⁶ Quoted in Lenk 1996, 363.

⁷ Birkland 1996.

⁸ Disaster is here to be understood in the sense of the sociologically dominated *Disaster Studies* as process and not merely event.

⁹ Here I doubt the assertion of Herfried Münkler that the breakdown of the socialist regimes was a consequence of maximized security and the corresponding perceptions of the population. Münkler 2010.

¹⁰ Harper 2001, 114.

the “maximum credible accident” actually occurred, the conciliatory “remaining risk” became an everyday danger and existential threat. Thinking in terms of categories of positive security was displaced by a negative understanding of security – the general certainty that the consequences of the disaster will last, and the radiation released will cause health threats and limits on quality of life without the possibility of having concrete certainty about these consequences in the near, as well as distant, future. This all-embracing uncertainty expressed itself not least in experiences of paralysis and fear.¹¹

At the same time, Chernobyl marked a clearly perceptible turning point in the transnational commitment of civil society. Though it did not immediately follow the catastrophe, step by step, *perestroika* opened up methods and forms of involvement which had not existed in Cold War thinking, but which were at the same time an expression and result of those processes which had occurred since the 1970s in the environmental and peace movements. Alongside all the lugubrious metaphors, “Chernobyl” has therefore also become a symbol of a movement of solidarity reaching beyond Europe’s borders, a symbol of civil society involvement consisting of innumerable smaller and larger groups. Besides the US, Italy and Japan, the Federal Republic of Germany provided the largest part of private help for the afflicted of Belarus.¹²

Since the beginning of the 1990s, more than 1,000 larger and especially smaller organisations have been established in Germany, which are concerned with helping the victims of the Chernobyl disaster. They invited hundreds of thousands of children from radioactively contaminated areas to recuperate and/or get medical attention for some weeks or months in “safe” and “clean” environments. Even if the number of children invited has been declining, around 10,000 Belarusian children still spend their holidays in Germany every year.¹³ At the same time that the recuperation of children was taking place abroad, recreational centres in “clean” Belarusian areas arose, for example “Nadezhda” (Hope), which is directed by the German-Belarusian organisation of the same name. Additionally, the initiatives brought countless trailer-loads of donations – clothes, medicine, medical and technical equipment, toys and the like – to the most affected countries. Together with the recuperation of children, this has represented only the most visible part of the intensive cooperation between German and Belarusian civil-society organisations. Addition-

¹¹ I prefer the use of “fear” and “anxiety” instead of the highly connotated term of “angst”. Furthermore, I share Joanna Bourke’s scepticism about the usefulness of the dominant distinction between “fear” (as referring to an immediate, objective threat) and “anxiety” (as referring to an anticipated, subjective threat) in historical research and thus will use the terms synonymously. Bourke argues: “The distinction between fear and anxiety too often rests on a distinction between the rational and the irrational. However, there is no strict division between reason and emotion.” Cf. Bourke 2003, 126.

¹² Sahm 2006, 108.

¹³ Ibid.

ally, training courses were organised for Belarusian farmers, nurses and doctors. German citizens' groups used German money to build entirely new settlements using alternative energy concepts for evacuees and resettlers from radioactively contaminated areas in Belarus.

At the centre of this paper is the involvement of German¹⁴ Chernobyl initiatives in Belarus, which will be analysed with special regard to the social construction of (human) security. In particular, the prerequisites for this involvement – which are to be found in the New Social Movements of the 1960s and the 1970s and especially in the peace and anti-nuclear movement – shall be presented and historicised. A central issue is the question: by which perceptions and criteria of security/certainty and particularly insecurity/uncertainty were actors governed in their involvement? How did they apply the concept of human security to their actions without even referring to it by name? The paper starts with a short sketch of the ambiguous nuclear euphoria of the 1950s. The following section will be a brief outline of the anti-nuclear power plant movement (anti-NPP movement) and the “new” peace movement, to which the majority of the initiatives and actors attached themselves. The outline thereby emphasises the changing perceptions of fear and security as an impetus for civil societal involvement in the late Cold War phase. After a short survey of the scale and consequences of the incident at the Ukrainian nuclear power plant, finally, the German commitment, its supporters, and the motives involved will be examined.

I assume a very broad understanding of security as a (basic) need and emotion¹⁵, which will be unlocked by a broad semantic field of complementary counter- and extension terms (such as certainty, insecurity, uncertainty¹⁶, threat, risk, and danger). Fear as a consequence and, at the same time, expression of insecurity and uncertainty takes on a special position, because it can be neither regulated nor suppressed on the level of society. In the all-embracing situation of uncertainty and insecurity, fears not only become increasingly verbalized, but at the same time also an important engine for political involvement and civil society mobilization. Fear will be understood not as an anthropological

¹⁴ This paper concentrates on West German initiatives, but their East German counterparts are also part of the larger research project.

¹⁵ Febvre 1990, 116.

¹⁶ As Bauman correctly stated, the German concept of “Sicherheit” is “considerably more inclusive” than the English word “security”. It encompasses – at the very least – all the dimensions of “security”, “certainty” and “safety”. Since the “effects of weakened security, certainty and safety are remarkably similar” with “symptoms being virtually indistinguishable”, as Bauman also noted, it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate between these three dimensions and most authors actually tend to use them simultaneously. Nevertheless, I try to distinguish between these various dimensions (and their respective negations) by applying “certainty” in reference to positive assurance and confidence in a certain outcome and “security” in reference to policy-related issues, and the physical realm. “Safety” will be used in technical terms only. Cf. Bauman 1999, 17-18.

constant, but rather as a phenomenon becoming manifest and thus measurable in different historical and social constellations by its public expression.¹⁷

From Atomic Age to Atomic Angst?

As infernal as the metaphors for the Chernobyl disaster turned out to be, just as many hopeful pictures were connected to the *causa efficiens*, the “atom”¹⁸, against the background of devastating World War II experiences and the front-lines of the Cold War in the 1950s.¹⁹ From today’s point of view, these extended well into the realm of fantasy and were tied to the enthusiasm for radioactivity of the 1920s. The peaceful use of nuclear power was promoted as an “integration ideology” in the 1950s.²⁰ If nuclear power had served only for electricity production, the “myth of the ‘atomic age’” would never have arisen.²¹ It was precisely these utopian metaphors which fuelled the enthusiasm for radioactivity. At the same time they seemed to be a useful means of relativising the horrible memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and turning people’s attention to a literally – and, at this time, still positively – radiant future.²²

Apart from some electricity producers, scientists, politicians and writers were also captivated by the all-embracing use of the atom in biology, medicine, agriculture, and even tourism. The capabilities of nuclear physics seemed to be almost unlimited: from the revolution in the chemical industry through radiochemistry via desalination of seawater and desert irrigation, culminating in the development of the Arctic. Small nuclear power reactors were planned for use not only in ships and submarines, but also in aeroplanes, trains, cars and air conditioners.²³ Thus, such prospects were not limited to hotheads and it was not just a shallow, media-fuelled phenomenon without further repercussions, as Radkau proved.²⁴ While in Germany the population at large, affected by the Hiroshima pictures, remained rather sceptical and fearful, there were many

¹⁷ Cf. Zill 2007; Greiner 2009, 18.

¹⁸ The oversimplifying term “atom” corresponds with the use in the period described and stands synonymously for the whole complex of its capabilities. For a discussion of the changing usage of the term see Jung 1994.

¹⁹ Cf. for the importance of the World War II and Cold War experiences in this development: Nehring 2004.

²⁰ Rusinek 1993, 14; Radkau 1983, 78.

²¹ Radkau 1983, 78.

²² Cf. for the French case: Hecht 1998.

²³ Cf. Rusinek 1993, 14; Radkau 1983, 79-100; Engels 2006, 344-346; Tiggemann 2004, 54-57; Müller 1990, 3-12. Recently Microsoft founder Bill Gates attracted attention with his plans for the resumption of mini-reactors. Cf. “Bill Gates will mit Mini-Meilern die Kernkraft revolutionieren”, *Spiegel online*, 23.3.2010.

²⁴ Radkau 1983, 87.

supporters, in particular amongst the intellectuals. In the course of this euphoria, alternatives to the use of nuclear power fell prey to repression.²⁵

The political reality in the “long 1950s”²⁶ regarding nuclear power was anything but free of fear: the threatening and aggressive competition between the nuclear states involving ever more precarious bomb tests induced a change in the assessment of nuclear energy in the hitherto passive West German population in 1956.²⁷ The Atomic Ministry even spoke of a “psychosis of radiation fear (...) here and there”.²⁸ Even if the diagnosis was exaggerated, people did indeed begin to articulate anxieties, which also opposed peaceful uses and which started to penetrate into everyday conversation. In the light of the emerging knowledge of the devastating consequences of American nuclear weapons tests at the Bikini atoll for uninvolved Japanese fishermen, fear of radioactive fallout became a topic beyond the “hot” war for the first time. According to a survey in 1959, only a small proportion of the West German population (eight percent) supported the unrestrained use of nuclear power. 17 percent suspected that the development of its civil use would one day lead to atomic war.²⁹

In the 1950s, instead of an undamped euphoria, there was rather atomic euphoria accompanied by a simultaneous public insight into the dangers connected with nuclear weapons.³⁰ Worries about damage to health by released radionuclides were increasingly expressed – worries that could already have emerged after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but which only took shape ten years after. This perceived insecurity found its first institutionalized expression in the Pugwash conferences against nuclear weapon tests and the Göttingen Manifesto, where 18 German nuclear scientists warned about the “life-destructing effects” of nuclear weapons, against which there is no protection at all.³¹ While in 1968 the majority of the West German population still predominantly associated “atom” with the bomb and only in exceptional cases with nuclear power plants³², in the course of the 1970s the topic became strongly symbolically loaded and increasingly encompassed the civil use of nuclear energy. Consequently, the nuclear discourse took a central place in the emerging environmental debates at a time when “security” became one of the key notions in the domestic political discourse.³³

²⁵ Radkau 1983, 78-89.

²⁶ Abelshauser 1987.

²⁷ On the change of the emotional regime in postwar West Germany see also: Biess 2009, 215-243.

²⁸ Radkau 1983, 98.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Radkau 1983, 92. Cf. for a comparison with Great Britain: Nehring 2004.

³¹ Göttinger Manifest 1957.

³² Cf. Radkau 1983, 435.

³³ Cf. Weisker 2005, 211; Nehring 2004, 154.

The development of the anti-nuclear power movement, one of the largest protest movements in the history of West Germany, had passed through four phases by the end of the 1970s.³⁴ The early phase started with the building of the first research reactors in Karlsruhe and Jülich in 1957. This phase lasted until the end of the 1960s and was limited to the locality. It carried its protest out through official channels. Mayors and city or municipal councillors were the leading figures. Initially, they concentrated less on the specific dangers of radioactivity, and more on general transformations of the landscape and the local economic structure. With the opposition against the nuclear power plant in Würgassen at the end of the 1960s, the protest movement expanded beyond the regional level for the first time and referred increasingly directly to nuclear power. The threshold to extra-legal methods had not yet been passed in Würgassen. Only with the anti-nuclear power protest in Wyhl in 1975 did the movement transform into a mass movement and develop elements of campaign protest, which today belong to the standard repertoire.³⁵ Wyhl became a “symbolic term”³⁶ for the anti-NPP resistance movement. However, even here the motives for the protests initially did not directly correlate with the planned nuclear power plant, but were aimed above all against the creation of a “Ruhr region on the Upper Rhine”, which was associated with foreign infiltration, destruction of the agricultural landscape, and deterioration of the Kaiserstuhl wines by the wafts of mist produced by the plant’s cooling towers.

In Wyhl the local resistance for the first time formed a series of influential alliances – with the political Left, the sciences (above all Freiburg University) and the so-called “atomic tourists”. Thus, it succeeded in attracting attention on a supra-regional level and in formulating new lines of argument against nuclear energy. Additionally, the movement increasingly addressed the problem of hazardous incidents – something which reactor safety experts had done long before, but which had not entered the public sphere. The escalation phase of the protests in 1976 and 1977 was particularly defined by violence. With the establishment of the Gorleben “nuclear disposal park”, the protest focused on the unsolved problem of atomic waste.³⁷ During this phase, the nuclear power controversy developed into a central socio-political issue. Numerous publications appeared, more and more voices could be heard and fuelled a broad discourse of fear and individual concerns. A mere month before the reactor explosion in Chernobyl the anti-NPP movement experienced yet another climax in Wackersdorf on the Easter weekend of 1986.³⁸

³⁴ The following according to Radkau 1983, 434-455.

³⁵ For details see, for example, Engels 2006, 346-376; Engels 2003, 103-130; Engels 2002, 407-424.

³⁶ Weisker 2005, 210.

³⁷ For details concerning Gorleben and the disposal problems see: Tiggemann 2004.

³⁸ Cf. Kretschmer and Rucht 1987, 134-163.

The anti-NPP movement was formed in the context, which Frank Biess described as the “incubation time of a new subject culture” in the 1960s and 1970s, where a “new subjectivity defined by fear” and an increasingly “ubiquitous fear” spread.³⁹ Thereby the “fearful self” of the 1970s reacted to the increasing number of real dangers in the age of economic recession, ecological degradation, and terrorism. At the same time, the “new subjectivity” only created those patterns of perception by which the meanings of these dangers could be made accessible for individuals. Central to this was the articulation of personal concern and emotionality in as authentic a manner as possible which – in contrast to the emotionally silent traditional culture – gave fear a tongue. Thus, the key concerns of the human security concept, individual “human life and dignity”⁴⁰, came to the fore. Personal emotional concern and perceived insecurity could thereby become the trigger for political and societal involvement – also, and in particular, through anxiety.⁴¹ To be sure, this does not mean that every single West German citizen felt fear in the 1970s. As Biess showed, fear was rather just *one* dimension in the “subjective balance of emotions”, namely at the normative level of subject culture as well as at the level of everyday emotional practices. Precisely this increasing acceptance and ability to verbalize emotional concern were essential preconditions for the involvement with Chernobyl.

Fear and the perception of insecurity were also central benchmarks of the “new” peace movement. They appeared almost as a direct response to the atomic (war) danger.⁴² The movement bundled a multitude of fears and fundamental threats: the fear of a third world war, the threat of environmental deterioration as well as fear of technology and the uncontrollable consequences of its use. The campaigners moved beyond pure protest and demanded an alternative way of life, which should possess more solidarity, be more peaceful, and be more ecologically appropriate. In this way the peace movement partially overlapped with the environmental or anti-NPP movement, a development which found its expression in their self-identification as the “Ökopax”⁴³ movement. The “new” peace movement was – in opposition to the so-called “first” peace movement of the 1960s – ideologically heterogeneous; however, its protagonists mainly had Christian, pacifist, left-wing or alternative backgrounds. Because their principles were the far-reaching renunciation of force and the focus on symbolic actions, they gained credibility and reputation well

³⁹ Cf. Biess 2008, 52.

⁴⁰ United Nations Development Programme 1994, 22.

⁴¹ Cf. United Nations Development Programme 1994, 23.

⁴² Cf. Schregel 2009, 508; more in detail on the peace movement: Wasmuth 1987, 109-133.

⁴³ “Öko” is an abbreviation of “Ökologie” (German: ecology), and “pax” (Latin) stands for “peace”.

into the conservative camp and could rest on a “thick cushion of sympathy” in almost all sectors of the population.⁴⁴

An important prerequisite for the later involvement in Chernobyl was not only the increase in “atomic fear”, but also the decrease in “fear of the Russians”. As a basis for legitimizing the Western armament effort and also partly because of the discussion of alternative – and in many cases this also meant communist – concepts of life, its credibility in terms of national security became increasingly eroded and thus, little by little, tended to be excluded from the “repertoire of legitimate emotional expressions”.⁴⁵

Particularly within the Ökopax movement, fear “as a politicized and politically accepted emotional condition” merely described an intermediate stage on the way to action. As a semantic counterpart of fear, campaigners did not elect the direct negation (“no fear”), but rather made use of allegorical antonyms such as “bravery” and “hope”, making involvement appear almost compulsory.⁴⁶

The Occurrence of the “Remaining Risk”: the Chernobyl Disaster

Even today not all technical, physical, biological, medical, and psychological consequences of the reactor explosion of the 26th of April 1986 are disclosed in detail; only conflicting and imprecise representations are available.⁴⁷ What is certain is that a planned test triggered the explosion, radioactively contaminating large areas of Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia, but also parts of the rest of Europe and far beyond its borders. Today’s Belarus which, in the public and scientific perception of Chernobyl, is still in Ukraine’s shadow, received approximately 70 percent of the total radioactive fallout. 23 percent of the Belarusian territory was contaminated with more than one Curie Caesium-137 per square kilometre.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Brand et al. 1986, 263.

⁴⁵ Schregel 2009, 518.

⁴⁶ Schregel 2009, 515-518.

⁴⁷ As introduction see the special issue of the journal OSTEUROPA on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the disaster or the short introduction by Brüggemeier 2006; Brüggemeier 1998, 7, 33.

⁴⁸ Caesium-137 with a radioactive half-life of thirty years was the most widely distributed long-lived radioactive element after the incident. Maps and descriptions therefore usually refer to it, although it is only one among approximately 40 other radionuclides. The contamination per square kilometer is given either in the former unit, Curie (Ci), or in Becquerel (Bq). Both units indicate how much radiation is measured by Geiger counters in these areas. One Bq is equivalent to one nucleus decay per second. The value “over 1 Ci/km² caesium-137” does not in itself indicate how much radiation is absorbed by the people living in these areas. As experts estimate, people living in an area contaminated with 1 to 5 Ci/km² absorb an average of less than 1.0 millisieverts (mSv) per year. mSv and

Shortly after receiving the first announcements from Scandinavia, rumours also circulated in Germany about a Soviet nuclear incident with devastating consequences. While the federal government urged calm, the federal states assessed the dangers very differently, partly issuing panic recommendations. Open-air pools and swimming lakes were to be avoided, children were not to play outdoors, outdoor shoes were to be left at the front door, and also adults were not to expose themselves to rain without protection. With every new directive, insecurity, uncertainty, and disorientation increased. In addition to the difficulties of measuring radioactivity and its impact on human beings, radioactive pollution is highly variable and thus complicates risk assessment. Locally it can vary strongly even within a single settlement. It is out of question that life could continue in “the normal way” in the most affected regions, as the Belarusian president Aliaksandr Lukashënka never tires of stressing.⁴⁹ In Belarus, it is not only the case that settlement patterns have been changed by evacuation, relocation, and resettlement since Chernobyl – it is also perceptions of landscapes, nutritional practices, and cultural practices which have altered.

Even more difficult to judge than the radioecological impacts are long-term medical consequences. Indeed, cancer – and here particularly the previously very rare forms of childhood thyroid cancer – as well as respiratory, eye, blood, heart and gastrointestinal diseases, diabetes, immune defects (“Chernobyl Aids”) and various forms of dystonia (a neurological movement disorder) and encephalopathy (a collective term for different brain disorders) increased considerably following the disaster. However, to draw a direct connection to the catastrophe is often problematic, because there are several other factors which might have triggered the disease. Furthermore, every human organism reacts differently to radiation. Expert statements concerning the additional cancer deaths resulting from the emanated radioactivity fluctuate between several hundreds and hundreds of thousands because of the different methodical approaches.⁵⁰ These imprecise indications, together with the use of consistently differing numbers and references, form the sounding board of manifold uncertainties, fears, and also panic.

Sieverts (Sv) are the internationally recognized units used to measure the harmful effects of radiation on the human body (biologically effective dose). According to most sources, only when soil contamination is over 5 Ci/km² are people likely to absorb more than 1 to 5 mSv per year. As a comparison: within the European Union, 1 mSv per year is the dose limit for people living near a nuclear power station. Cf. Internationale Kommunikationsplattform zu den Langzeit-Folgen des Tschernobyl Unglücks. <www.chernobyl.info> (accessed August 5, 2010).

⁴⁹ Lukashënka 2006. Cf. also Arndt 2006.

⁵⁰ Cf. Sahm 1999, 191-192.

From the Expression of Fear to Involvement

“Fear always demands a counterdraft (*Gegenentwurf*)”, Bernd Greiner points out, because in the long run it is bearable neither for individuals nor for collectives.⁵¹ While individuals can sustain psychological damage, societies can meet the limits of political integration and cohesion if the state fails to fulfil its own unique task, namely to provide security and freedom from want, fear, and uncertainty.⁵² The involvement of German civil society initiatives in the mitigation of the consequences of Chernobyl in Belarus can be seen as one possible countercurrent. Thus, from the very beginning, German uncertainty stood in a mutual relationship with the fear on the Belarusian side. The emotional concern was linked to a moral commitment to getting involved. Here one ought to consider that benevolence as “individual pro-social action” contains an accentuated subjective component. It aims at helping people who, in the eyes of the benefactor, appear to be needy. Thus, the changeable horizon of values of those involved is critical.⁵³

Instead of speaking of a dichotomy between pro-social motives of action such as solidarity, helping or orientation towards common welfare on the one hand, and concern about individual welfare, improving one’s self-esteem or self-realisation on the other hand, it is much more appropriate to look at benevolence not as a burden, but as a “potential gain” for the initiatives. Thus, pro-social behaviour and self-interest are not mutually exclusive.⁵⁴

Because of diffusion via the mass media, the West was better informed about the possible consequences and dimensions of the incident, which also led much more quickly to a perception of insecurity amongst large parts of the population than in Soviet Belarus.⁵⁵ There, the fear of those not directly affected took shape only bit by bit, as the statement by Henadz’ Hrushavys, the head of the Belarusian organisation “For the children of Chernobyl” confirms:

Fear did not come immediately. It did not go with the peaceful atom in our consciousness. Our world view looked like this: the martial atom is a baleful mushroom in the sky such as in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, people who burn into ashes in one second; the peaceful atom in contrast was as harmless as a light bulb.⁵⁶

If, in the very beginning, the involvement in Chernobyl was not a reaction to a “call for help” from Belarus, an explanation is needed for what it was, in fact, a reaction to. In the involvement with Chernobyl, one also finds such “positive

⁵¹ Greiner 2009, 21.

⁵² Greiner 2009.

⁵³ Cf. Lingelbach 2009, 14.

⁵⁴ Lingelbach 2009, 20.

⁵⁵ For the perceived threat after Chernobyl in Western European countries see the survey based study of Tønnessen et al. 2002.

⁵⁶ Gruschewoi 2006, 7.

psychological gratification” as significant individual psychological motives, which Lingelbach elaborated for the West German market for charitable donations:⁵⁷ commitment to others – be it by charitable donation or the temporary accommodation of a “Chernobyl child” – allows the acting out of paternalistically motivated feelings of pre-eminence. It is accompanied by the affirmation that one does not belong to those who are in need of help. Involvement can turn into an effective tool for coping with fears, if those involved put themselves empathically in the place of those in need and thus identify with the uncertainty and anxiety of the others (or at least their own perceptions of it). In turn, via this involvement, feelings of insecurity can be reduced.

“Reconciliation with rolled-up sleeves” is what the journalist Johannes Voswinkel called the German involvement in Chernobyl.⁵⁸ The inception of the involvement stood in close connection with the partial opening of the Soviet Union in the course of *perestroika* and the coming to terms with the crimes committed by Germans on Soviet territory under National Socialism. Official Soviet statistics number the deaths at more than 2.2 millions in Belarus alone.⁵⁹ The Germans razed to the ground more than 209 Belarusian towns and 9,200 villages/settlements.⁶⁰ In 1988 and 1989, the first Protestant pilgrimages into the still-existing BSSR took place to ask for “peace and reconciliation”.⁶¹ A large part of the German Chernobyl involvement originated in the Christian reconciliation work.⁶² By this route, the first links to the hitherto unknown country were made, where the memories of the atrocities of WWII are top issues even today and often mentioned in the same breath as the memory of Chernobyl. The vanguard of the Chernobyl initiatives could rely on substantial experience in reconciliation work, for example in Israel, Poland, or Norway.

Here one can observe a far-reaching impact of the 1960s’ and 1970s’ culture of remembrance on the actors. The emotionalized, subjective discussion of the German past was amplified by the increasing media exposure of the issue.⁶³ Attention to the sufferings of the Belarusian people brought most notably the broadly recognised 1985 movie produced by Mosfilm and Belarusfilm “Idi i smotri” [“Go and look“], which was voted “movie of the month” by the “Jury of Protestant film work” in West Germany in 1987. Based on the work of the

⁵⁷ Lingelbach 2009, 400-409.

⁵⁸ Voswinkel 2003. He referred to the mud brick building project of “Heim-statt Tschernobyl”. But other associations can also be subsumed under this motto, not least the volunteer service “Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste” (Action Reconciliation Service for Peace), which has been sending volunteers to Belarus since 1992.

⁵⁹ See also Gerlach 2000.

⁶⁰ Marples 2001, 150.

⁶¹ Steinacker 2001, 24.

⁶² For East German, non-Christian initiatives this aspect obviously did not play such an influential role. They built their commitment on contacts already established during GDR times, as the results of a survey show (archive of the author).

⁶³ Cf. Biess 2008, 60.

Belarusian writer and later Chernobyl activist Ales' Adamovich, it tells, dramatically and through the eyes of the boy Florya, of the atrocities committed by the National Socialists in Belarus.

The reservations of older Belarusians in particular with respect to the German donors is an expression of the multidimensional area of conflict “victim of National Socialism/winner/victim of the atomic disaster versus offender of National Socialism/defeated/helper after the atomic disaster”, whose further exploration and historicization through research looks as though it would be very rewarding. To look at it through the Cold War prism of friend and foe does not explain it entirely; rather it is necessary to break down the complex processes of victimization on the one hand and heroization on the other.

Between Knowledge of the Affected and Expert Knowledge

The discussion of the disaster's consequences within the German initiatives, as well as their interplay with their Belarusian partners, was from the very beginning influenced by the tension between the subjective, mainly emotionally based knowledge of those affected (uncertainty and fear of disease and death), and the claimed factual objectivity of expert knowledge.⁶⁴ Even if, far into the 1970s, the development of nuclear energy in the Federal Republic was presented as a non-political issue, as determined by factual rationality and expertise alone, it was extremely difficult to distinguish those who were experts and those who were not.⁶⁵ Even if confidence in experts had decreased during the course of the development of the “New Social movements” in West Germany, in tandem with additional uncertainty, the “experts” opinions gained in power immensely following Chernobyl. The demand for reliable, reassuring numbers in a time full of uncertainty and the increasing importance of human security seemed to be boundless. Statistics on disease, contamination, and deaths played, and still play, an important role in the arguments of both the helping and receiving initiatives. It is particularly remarkable with regard to disease and, especially in this case, cancer statistics. The search for criteria to classify the non-classifiable and simultaneously to legitimize the honorary involvement contributed to the amalgamation of highly complex factual arguments with value convictions.⁶⁶ Experts, above all physicians and physicists, were granted considerable confidence in advance.⁶⁷ Statistics became a resource in the competition for support in Germany, as well as for German assistance in Belarus. Sometimes it seemed that scientific arguments were of superficial importance

⁶⁴ For expert culture see, for example, Kurz-Milcke and Gigerenzer 2004; Fisch and Rudloff 2004.

⁶⁵ Radkau 1983, 14, 85.

⁶⁶ Cf. Weisker 2004, 416.

⁶⁷ Cf. Weisker 2005, 203; Weisker 2004.

only and could become independent when scientific and humanitarian aspects were intermingled. The initiatives used the statistics in an appellative and mobilizing way to gain aid money, supporters or new activists, and to reassure themselves of the legitimacy of being involved. Cases of overstatement, inappropriate comparisons or the passing on of stereotypes also occurred.⁶⁸

At the same time, the initiatives generated a new group of experts for themselves: the activists and those involved. According to them, they became the real Chernobyl experts, with their own eyes and ears.⁶⁹

Discourses on health and increasing concern about physical and mental well-being played an important role in civil society mobilization in the environmental movement in the 1970s. A paradigmatic change in the area of conflict between environment and health took place. The definition of health became much more socio-ecologically induced and linked closely to normative concepts of security, well-being, quality of life, environmental awareness and sustainability. Cancer took the central place in these discourses. A discussion of the “disease of civilisation” occurred in literature, popular science, and science, and was often accompanied by an autobiographical component and an understanding of the environment as pathogenic. This development fostered a sensitization to invisible carcinogenic substances in the environment and in food. The subjective discussion concerning disease had a strong socio-critical component; it granted political criticism a new form of “existential exigency and emotionality”.⁷⁰

The “Chernobyl Children”

“When the children come to Germany, they bring along their own message. Their bodies and souls are the witnesses of the largest industrial disaster of history and the beginning of nuclear genocide, an unmistakable warning for all of us. Their message reads baldly and simply: I want to live.”⁷¹ With these metaphorical and empathic words the former first chairperson of the federal association “For the children of Chernobyl”, the former Protestant priest Burkhard Homeyer, described the foundation of the commitment of the largest German Chernobyl network. By far the largest part of the German Chernobyl initiatives, numerically speaking, has dedicated itself to the “Chernobyl chil-

⁶⁸ Thus, one initiative answered on the question of what they are aiming for with their commitment: “To show the children that there is another life – without vodka, with regular work and so on.” Archive of the author.

⁶⁹ Homeyer 2006.

⁷⁰ Biess 2008, 63. Compare also his notions about the paradoxical consequences of the increasing medical check-ups, which eventually tend to cause more fear than they reduce. Biess 2008, 68.

⁷¹ Homeyer 1995, 2-3.

dren”, as is also expressed in the names of the organisations involved. As in Belarus, a multitude of initiatives in Germany have chosen almost identical names. Even today, the organisation of the disputed recuperation holidays is the most common form of involvement.⁷²

The amount given as charitable donations in the Federal Republic is, according to Lingelbach, generally at its largest when it is aimed at the helping of children. This is also true in the case of Chernobyl, if “donation” includes the involvement of volunteers. Children are seen as especially “worthy”, innocent, and vulnerable. They call up instincts of help and patronage. At the same time, they also produce a feeling of power and feasibility for those involved, which tends to be much more limited in the case of adults who are in need.⁷³ In the external communication concerning the Chernobyl children, there are, on the one hand, optimistic, pro-life metaphors such as “bridge to peace”, while on the other hand there is also nihilistic, stigmatising rhetoric such as “children without future”, “the moribund” or “generation Chernobyl”.

With regard to visual depiction, at times the boundaries of the “pornography of misery”⁷⁴ were overstepped by exhibiting handicapped, deformed children, who were even naked in some cases, without any need of doing so.⁷⁵ Even if there is a medical-educational motivation behind it, it does not explain why such pictures are used in non-medical works. The use of such pictures obviously serves to win attention, which, for the initiatives, is connected with the hope of inducing others to help.

The classical principle of childcare as an investment for the future is in some initiatives also connected with political ambitions. With regard to the authoritarian regime in Belarus, hopes for democratization are particularly resonant for those involved. Many initiatives hope that the experience the children have gained with their West German host families will contribute to a democratization of the political situation in Belarus. To what extent former “Chernobyl children” have indeed internalized Western democratic values, whether they really are connected with their stay in Germany, whether those values have matured into action, and whether “Chernobyl youth” does indeed stand for a

⁷² The dispute about the usefulness and appropriateness of taking child-recuperation abroad was – and in some cases still is – divided into defined supporters and opponents. The supporters stress among other things the importance of the multifaceted (democratic) experience they gain abroad, while the opponents fear a “cultural shock” and emphasise the advantages of recreation in “clean” areas in Belarus. Cf. for example: Schuchardt and Kopelev 1996, 22-38.

⁷³ Lingelbach 2009, 398.

⁷⁴ Liebel and Wagner 1986, 18.

⁷⁵ See, for example, the illustration of a paper by Sebastian Pflugbeil with a picture by Igor Kostin. Pflugbeil 2006, 95. A latest example is the photo exhibition “Chernobyl – living with a tragedy”, photos by Rüdiger Lubricht and Gerd Ludwig, 18.9.-30.10.2009, Loft-galerie Berlin.

democratic public as some initiatives explicitly aspire to in their aims, still needs to be investigated.

Summary

There can be no understanding of the German Chernobyl commitment without taking into account the development of the New Social Movements in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly the anti-NPP movement and the “new” peace movement. The “new culture of expressive emotionality”⁷⁶, which was closely intertwined with an increasing sense of ecological insecurity, had a decisive influence on the forms of action, self-interpretation, and the communication styles of the associations. East and West were thereby united in some respects: The commitment to the mitigation of the disaster’s consequences was not solely based on the perception of the direct consequences, which were in any case not entirely comprehensible, but were also based on a general feeling of insecurity, uncertainty and an increasing sensitization during the “environmental age”. As has been shown, the expression of fear – in particular fear of disease and loss of well-being – played a central role. Fear became capable of being verbalized and displayed, contrasting and intermingling with expert knowledge, and thus developing its potential for mobilization. The underlying shared assumption of the necessity of human security, taking individual anxieties and concerns seriously, thus enabled action and social practices beyond the framework of conventional understandings of security. Human security, with its proclaimed focus on the actions of non-state actors and the protection and empowerment of individuals⁷⁷, impedes efforts to establish clear cut divisions between the different dimensions of security and actually tends to offer an opportunity to include all of them. Thus its meaning becomes even vaguer. This, however, might still be a fitting reflection of the complex processes taking place in the “environmental age”.

At the same time, the change in the emotional regime also affected the remembrance culture, which gave a crucial, albeit indirect, stimulus to the commitment. The majority of the associations define themselves not only as initiators of reconciliation, but also – and often in the same breath – as reminders of the atomic disaster. They were successful in taking the threats of the use of nuclear energy far into the provinces. Furthermore, the transnational consequences of the disasters and the commitment automatically heightened awareness of Europe as a geographical space where ecological hazards do not stop, even when they run up against an iron curtain. Ecological security is not a

⁷⁶ Biess 2008, 53.

⁷⁷ Cf. Commission on Human Security 2003, 6.

matter of nation states and cannot be dealt with using conventional concepts of security.

The various forms of civil society commitment and the formation of transnational alliances at the level of civil society, partly even with state financial support, can be read as a new form of security and foreign affairs within a *global civil society*. In this global civil society the perspective of the mass media is dominant and the active commitment of non-governmental organisations weakens the competences of the state. The focus of this global civil society is human security, concentrating attention on the (security) needs of individuals instead of states, and closely linked to discourses on civil and human rights as well as international development. The social networks which were manifested following Chernobyl not only led to transnational interpersonal contacts, but also developed skills on all sides for coping with situations of uncertainty and thus strove for something which might be called human security.

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