

# What if the Chernobyl Disaster Had Gone All the Way?

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After reactor four exploded at the V.I. Lenin Nuclear Power Station in 1986, first responders, never told the nature of the accident, thought they were fighting a conventional fire and started dumping massive amounts of water on the reactor building. This, along with water from the damaged cooling system, ultimately pooled underneath the reactor as its now molten nuclear fuel, or corium, slowly burned through the base. Had the fuel come in contact with the water, it would have flashed to steam and caused a massive explosion, resulting in a spread of radioactivity and mass destruction way beyond the nightmare that people remember today. But engineers waded through the contaminated water to open valves to drain it away. Later, miners who were also exposed to massive doses of radiation tunneled underneath, and the void they created was ultimately filled with concrete to prevent the fuel from potentially reaching the water table.

## An Alternate Scenario

On April 26, 1986, the explosion at Chernobyl reactor #4 severely cracked the base of its containment building, and the corium oozed and burned its way through relatively quickly, reaching the water that had pooled below from the cooling system and firefighting efforts. The resulting steam explosion obliterated the entire plant, including its three remaining reactors and their spent fuel storage, causing a rain of nuclear material and irradiated debris for miles around.

Almost everyone in or anywhere near the plant was killed instantly. The town of Pripyat a few miles away suffered blast damage, including many blown-out windows, followed shortly after by a cloud of highly radioactive fallout, meaning most of the residents had no chance of survival.

Trying to contain the disaster was basically impossible because the lethal levels of radiation for miles around the plant meant no one could get anywhere near it without shortly thereafter dying of radiation poisoning. The Soviet government still mobilized thousands of troops to deal with the aftermath, very few of whom survived, and fires still raged for months spewing more and more radioactivity into the atmosphere.

The Soviet authorities took almost a week before they even started to evacuate Minsk, Kiev, and the other towns and cities in the region. These delayed evacuations degenerated into total chaos, and hundreds died from the evacuation process alone as radiation levels increased. Moscow and Warsaw nearly had to be evacuated as well, but radiation levels, despite being more than double what the authorities claimed, were easily survivable if not safe, at least discounting the thousands of extra cancer cases that would result years later. Many of the survivors with the worst radiation exposure were quietly euthanized, their bodies buried in mass graves and covered in concrete.

High levels of radiation were also detected in Riga, Helsinki, and Stockholm, and this was ultimately blamed for many cases of cancer too, while most crops and livestock in Scandinavia had to be destroyed. The situation was similar in much of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and northern Italy, and to a lesser degree, the Balkans and Greece.

Within weeks of the disaster, almost the entire populations of Belarus and Ukraine were fleeing. The Red Army set up many blockades and checkpoints to try to control the chaos, but these had little effect, and

many of the soldiers themselves fled their posts as the central government started to lose control. The army also set up massive refugee camps in northeastern Russia, while hundreds of thousands of refugees poured into the other Eastern Bloc countries, causing a massive strain on those governments as well.

Riots broke out in cities across the Eastern Bloc as food and fuel shortages worsened and most other goods became scarce. What was left of the population of the Baltic states was among the first to go into full revolt. East Germany, in chaos, started to implode, and the Red Army tried to occupy it, though fuel shortages made it impossible for many of the troops sent even to reach it. Most of the governments in Eastern Europe also started to disintegrate.

Meanwhile, back at the remains of the Chernobyl plant, all flora and fauna for miles around had died from the radiation. It was clear that it would be impossible to grow food in the breadbasket of the Soviet Union for thousands of years. The worst of the fires were finally burning themselves out, and plans for some kind of containment started to be implemented.

However, by that point, the Soviet government itself had already started to collapse. The army was poorly supplied and stretched hopelessly thin. Most of the country was in chaos as people scavenged in the streets for food. Paranoid that NATO would take advantage of the situation and attack, a group of generals arrested General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and instituted as much of a clamp down as resources allowed, shifting their focus on the Soviet republics and leaving Eastern Europe to its own devices. News about the situation within the government was scarce, and Western armies went on high alert wondering who was in control of the Soviet nuclear arsenal.

Refugees started pouring into Western Europe in huge numbers, and the Berlin Wall and Inter-German border were overrun. The refugees were herded into hastily constructed camps in France and West Germany. East Germany, meanwhile, basically ceased to exist as a nation, and its territory was occupied by the forces of West Germany.

Among the generals who had launched the coup against Gorbachev, by this point, a clear leader had emerged. Terms of aid from the West to try to contain the disaster were also negotiated. Troops from Western armies started to assist in the construction of containment buildings at and around the plant site, though it was somewhat futile because so much of the nuclear material was spread out for so many miles around the wreckage of the plant. Out of necessity, a new era of detente emerged between the Soviet Union and the United States as the latter absorbed much of what was left of the Soviets' former sphere of influence.

Up to the present day, much of Europe looks like sub-Saharan Africa: poverty-stricken, starving, and dotted with refugee camps. Most of Eastern Europe is hopelessly contaminated, and the world is desperate to find ways to stop the contamination from continuing to spread. Most efforts so far have had to be abandoned due to radiation levels making working conditions impossible, while pockets of contamination in the north and west of Europe have also had to be permanently sealed off. The Soviet Union continues on ostensibly as a unified country though dangerously unstable and its superpower status lost. World food supplies have never recovered and are subject to constant radioactivity scares, leading to levels of famine not seen since before industrial times. There is also a drastic worldwide increase in birth defects and cancer. All this was still not enough to inspire the end of nuclear weapons, though no nuclear power plant will ever be built again.