
Book Review

Fallout from Chernobyl

L. Ray Silver, Toronto: Deneau Publishers & Company, 1987.

The worst nuclear power plant accident in history has led to a wide variety of publications that seek to inform, frighten, confuse, advance social causes, make money, garner political power, or direct attention from other issues. In *Fallout from Chernobyl*, Ray Silver seeks to show how the Canadian reaction to the accident fits into the framework of our highly political nuclear policy. Despite the title, therefore, this book is directed toward a Canadian audience, who will see a side to the nuclear debate rarely seen in newspapers or on television. The book has given Silver, a veteran writer on nuclear issues, an opportunity to champion the nuclear industry, and in particular the CANDU reactor.

The book begins with a short description of the accident itself, in which Silver struggles to give an account of a complex sequence of events to a lay audience. Success in this goal is limited, as the short illustrated glossary of nuclear terms cannot be expected to educate the public on the concepts of nuclear power technology. The author works around this problem by comparing the reactor's condition and response to those of machines with which the public has broad familiarity, e.g., the similarity between the unstable nature of a RBMK-type reactor at low power, and a slow-moving airplane on the verge of stalling.

Praise is heaped on the Soviets, particularly Mikhail Gorbachev, who is lauded for his frank discussions of the accident situation. The efficiency of the Russians in entombing the damaged reactor and getting the remaining power plants quickly back on line is starkly contrasted to the drawn-out western response to Three Mile Island. The detailed first-hand accounts by the Russians who fought to bring the damaged reactor under control make fascinating reading, and provide a unique study of human behaviour under conditions of severe stress.

In the following chapters, dealing evacuation efforts and the international spread of contamination, there are intermittent jumps to the Canadian nuclear scene.

Both past and current issues are described in a somewhat random order, as the book eventually shifts completely to a description of Canadian nuclear policy (or lack of it). More than one book has been placed inside this single cover; the Chernobyl accident and development of the Canadian nuclear industry each merit their own by-line. This uneasy combination of two themes, and the apparent rush to bring the book to press, contribute in places to a somewhat uneven editing job; numerous events and data are unnecessarily repeated, and there is an excessive 'hopping' from one scene, and one time period, to another.

Three Canadian groups come under particularly strong attack by Silver, not only for their response to the accident, but for their entire approach to nuclear issues. He condemns much of the press for their sensationalist tactics, distortion of statistics, and poor professionalism in not checking their sources; he has little trouble in finding numerous examples of these faults. The press is willingly used by the second targeted group, anti-nuclear activists. Together, they do more to hurt than help the public, both by prolonging debate when decisive action is required, and by causing unwarranted anxiety. Silver tells of one frightened woman who called a government hot-line after reading headlines on the Chernobyl fallout: '... the lady was hysterical. She had been caught in the Toronto rain without an umbrella the previous day. Would she get cancer? Should she burn the clothes that got wet?'

Politicians form the third group to earn Silver's condemnation. Particularly at the federal level, they are generally described as being ignorant of nuclear issues, opportunistic in their reaction to the Chernobyl accident, and lacking any policy except to mouth epithets they judge will appeal to blocks of voters. The message is that political forces are destroying Canada's chances to make significant contributions to international reactor safety programs, or to help the Russians cope with the aftermath of Chernobyl. Indeed, Silver claims that members of the Mulroney cabinet are deliberately hoping to shut down the Canadian nuclear industry – not by a frontal assault, but by attrition and by evasion of responsibility. The few hardwork-

ing champions of nuclear power – Ontario Hydro, Jon Jennekens, a few isolated politicians, and the CANDU reactor itself – face an uphill battle against Ottawa stonewalling.

The conspiracy theory (the press, organized labour, activists, the NDP, and several other politicians are out to 'get' nuclear power) may be pushed too vehemently for the good of Silver's cause. Despite his condemnation of the press, Silver himself falls into the trap of unnecessarily dramatic language to describe the Chernobyl accident victims, 'Some had been burned by a flameless fury; some were unmarked, but an unseen and unfelt fire cooked the marrow in their bones.' Choice phrases such as 'cancerous rays' and 'curies of errant energy' from fallout, or bombs 'slicked to slip through supersonic air faster than sound'. show how easy it is to sacrifice correct terminology and accuracy in favour of dramatic effect.

Despite some shortcomings, this book may prove invaluable in exposing the public to a perspective on the nuclear debate which receives little press. Certainly, if the book can help stir politicians to adopt a consistent nuclear policy, this alone would be a tremendous triumph. Perhaps the most important message that Silver leaves with the reader is that 'there is no free lunch' – Nuclear power is not risk-free, but its record, including the Chernobyl accident, show that it has made a tremendous positive contribution to humanity.

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