

Aliaksandr Dalhouski, *Tschernobyl in Belarus. Ökologische Krise und sozialer Kompromiss. 1986–1996*, Wiessbaden: Harrassowitz-Verlag 2015. 220 pp.

In this book, Aliaksandr Dalhouski traces the impact of the Chernobyl catastrophe on the relationship between the authorities and citizens over the space of a decade, spanning from five years before through to five years after the Soviet collapse. The main part is devoted to an analysis of the public negotiations conducted between Soviet citizens exposed to radioactivity and the leadership of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). Dalhouski's analysis sharpens our understanding of the relationship between the 1986 Chernobyl disaster and the end of the Soviet Union. The author is not claiming a causal relationship between the two events, but he does show how Soviet rule changed as a result of both perestroika politics and the impact of the Chernobyl catastrophe. In the years after Chernobyl, the growing public perception that people's lives had been placed under threat by the negligent policies of the Soviet authorities was an important factor shaping the evolution of the relationship between the BSSR's leadership and citizens. The key elements of this change were the emergence of new spaces of public debate combined with the use of more traditional forms of social protest, namely, letters written to high officials. Archival research into the practice of *skarha* (Belarusian for a written petition to official (in this case, Soviet) structures) provides a sound empirical basis for Dalhouski's analysis. As he convincingly shows, inhabitants of the south-eastern territories of the BSSR were surprisingly effective in requesting and attaining the relocation of resources in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster.

The book's core argument is that in the direct aftermath of the explosion there still existed an unwritten social contract between the inhabitants of radioactive areas and the Soviet authorities at the local, oblast', and republic levels. This contract granted both a relative stability and the redistribution of social and medical goods in exchange for loyalty. Dalhouski is right to focus on practices of public negotiation on the part of those who had to leave the 30-kilometer exclusion zone and other heavily polluted parts of the BSSR. The author argues that because of this *modus vivendi*,

until 1988 the catastrophe was perceived not so much as a national as a regional problem. It was only the relocation of inhabitants from the radioactive areas to other districts across Belarus and the ensuing conflicts over housing which made the Chernobyl disaster a republic-wide catastrophe in a majority perception.

Dalhouski's study of late Soviet society in the BSSR and the emerging post-Soviet society in the Republic of Belarus is an edited version of a PhD thesis defended at Justus-Liebig-University of Gießen. It shows how the conflicts over the redistribution of housing in the wake of Chernobyl made the catastrophe a republic-wide issue. It was only at the very end of the 1980s that an interpretation of the catastrophe as a source of national suffering started to mobilize a larger number of Soviet citizens. More research could be done to find out to what extent this was an impact of stronger and earlier national popular movements and the evolving environmentalist activities in the Baltic Soviet republics, particular in Lithuania to the north and the Ukrainian SSR in the south. But Dalhouski's strict limitation to the Belarusian case does not undermine his argument, because he shows clearly the narrow scope of the national movement after 1991, when the Republic of Belarus emerged in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The author explains the rising degree of politicization of Chernobyl as a negative point of reference for public protest against more recent state practices. It becomes clear in the final part of the book that after the election of Aliaksandr Lukashenka as the first elected president of the republic in 1994, there was still some negotiation about redistribution of public goods. Ultimately, however, Lukashenka managed to fully nationalize the logistics of the official distribution of social capital.

Last but not least, the reader learns that it was not just perestroika as such, but the changing modes of public debate—the shifting boundaries of the Sayable—associated with glasnost', which allowed the relationship between citizens and the state to change over time. The new level of press freedom (albeit within a media landscape which was still far from being unregulated), was used to highlight the second wave of Chernobyl-related disease, which appeared two or three years after the radioactive fallout. For the first time, concrete data about the levels of radioactivity were

now made public. The collapsing macroeconomic network added to the problems involved in providing healthy food and consumer goods to the inhabitants of the south-eastern part of the BSSR during this period. Thus, starting from 1988, subjective feelings of insecurity rose significantly, and the social contract came to be perceived as less binding than before.

This book, the fourth volume in a series on Belarusian history edited by Thomas M. Bohn and his Gießen based collective, shows that it is possible to formulate empirical questions with regard to the BSSR without retro-nationalizing the republic. The fact Dalhouski does not exaggerate the national bias of the popular post-Chernobyl critique means that he is able to provide some evidence for continuity between the earlier 1990s and the rise of Lukashenka. At the core of this argument is continuity in the state's public redistribution of goods to the resettled population. This is described by Dalhouski as an ongoing effort to provide compensation, both symbolic and material, with a view to mitigating the long-term impact of the disaster. In the final, somewhat briefer and less detailed section of the book, Dalhouski shows how Lukashenka has included Chernobyl-related issues into *his* vision of a social welfare state embodied by the president, presented as personally responsible for the redistribution of social goods. This is striking, because in the same period the level of guarantees provided by the state in fact decreased. Thus, since coming to power, Lukashenka has continued to manoeuvre between the symbolic public acknowledgement of group demands, and, in parallel, pursuing his drive to cut the costs of medical care and housing provided for those who had to resettle out of the contaminated zone.

One prominent form of popular commemoration, the "Chernobyl Way," a march held on 26 April every year since the tenth anniversary in 1996, has been used to express concerns about the state's ability to guarantee ecological security to all of its citizens. Dalhouski recounts the history of this march and its increasing instrumentalization. In the mid-1990s the level of politicization around the memory of Chernobyl was high, but with his presidential apparatus Lukashenka managed to contain and pacify successive public outbursts related to Chernobyl. For actors related to various opposition parties and a broad range of NGOs, the Cher-

nobyl Remembrance Day is a recurring occasion used to make public political claims. But the presidential apparatus has also made use of this anniversary. Lukashenka himself has by turns ignored the “Chernobyl Way” and used it as an opportunity to publicly bash the protesters in the state media. His administration has subsequently managed to reduce the march’s public presence over the years, without, however, ever succeeding in fully marginalizing it. In the mid-1990s the “Chernobyl Way” was attended by tens of thousands of people. A decade later the numbers dropped to a few thousand. Today, in an overall climate of ongoing planned depoliticization, the march is still perceived by many as a significant annual political event.

Aliaksandr Dalhouski analyzes a broad range of sources. Most impressive is his study of *skarhi*, an official way to communicate with the Soviet authorities and to bring individual concerns to the agenda of the Communist Party. The author shows that, far from disappearing after 1991, this practice of social communication was in fact institutionalized in the Belarusian Republic. In 1995 Lukashenka organized a referendum to introduce a new constitution, in which the *skarha* was written into the legal system of the Republic of Belarus. As an outcome, to this day resettles and others from the south-western part of Belarus still write *skarhi* to address everyday problems. The state organs are on the one hand constitutionally obliged to react, and on the other, take care not to allow these claims to be translated into political agendas. Dalhouski sees a certain degree of continuity in the bargaining, expressed in the *skarhi*, which still provides some room for semi-public negotiations between the population and a paternalist state.

Dalhouski’s convincing argument about the emergence of an unwritten social contract between the BSSR authorities and Soviet citizens and its transformation is empirically grounded in a broad range of sources. In pointing to a range of continuities his book is an important starting point for further research on late Soviet society in the BSSR and beyond.

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