

Melanie Arndt

"Chernobyl is everywhere." The Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster as a Transnational Process

“Tscherobyl ist überall” (Chernobyl is everywhere)—the slogan the West German Green Party used for the first time shortly after the Chernobyl disaster—was and still is applied in many variations at demonstrations against the use of nuclear energy and against nuclear weapons. The opposition of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) employed a similar motto to address the dangers caused by radiation in the early spring of 1986 in a petition to the GDR government: “Tscherobyl wirkt überall” (Chernobyl has an impact everywhere). Even if the German phase-out of nuclear energy did not happen after “Chernobyl,” in 1986 the West German Green Party and the Social democrats made the first attempts to abandon the use of this technology. In East Germany, as in many other socialist countries, Chernobyl led to the consolidation of an opposition concerned with environmental problems and human rights. In the end, it was Fukushima that finally triggered Germany’s historic decision to abandon the use of nuclear energy. And yet, without the prior experiences associated with Chernobyl, this policy shift would have been impossible. Chernobyl continues to play its part today, even thousands of kilometers away and far beyond the borders of what used to be known as the Iron Curtain.

The legacies of Chernobyl are manifold, and they are closely intertwined with the Cold War. The perception of the disaster, and the ways in which states and communities dealt with it, were clearly bifurcated by Cold War divisions; but like many things, they also transcended them geographically and temporally, reaching far into contemporary discourses.

The transnational process of the Chernobyl disaster is at the center of my research project. I analyze these interconnections at the micro-level through the example of the so-called Chernobyl children—children from Belarus who traveled to Germany for weeks or even months to recuperate in the early 1990s. I pay special attention to the dynamics of the transfer processes, the motivations and expectations of both the children and their “German parents.” Many of the Belarusian children who went to Germany were aided and supported by host families. Both they and their hosts were confronted with foreignness and forced to deal with cultural and social differences stemming, in particular, on experiences from two wars: the Cold War and the Second World War. I try to show the complexity of these processes, in order to demonstrate the far-reaching implications the disaster had not only on the directly afflicted, but also on people who had barely been touched by either Eastern Europe or the risks of using nuclear energy before the disaster. The international and transnational involvement in the mitigation of the disaster’s consequences played an important role in the transfer of knowledge and resources. Through these processes, the Chernobyl children and also their German parents became important “carriers of knowledge”¹ of (post-) Cold-War-knowledge.

¹ Middell, Matthias, Kulturtransfer und Historische Komparatistik. Thesen zu ihrem Verhältnis, *Comparativ*, 10 (1999), 7-41.