

Putin's "Chernobyl": The tragedy of the Russian submarine disaster in the Barents Sea

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23 August 2000

The tragedy of the Russian nuclear-powered submarine *Kursk* in the Barents Sea has lasted over a week. Millions of people all over the world have been witness to an unbelievable display of incompetence, spinelessness, arrogance and hypocrisy on the part of the Russian political elite and military, with President Vladimir Putin at their head.

Their action—or rather their inaction—borders on a crime. Day after day they allowed every possibility to elapse of saving the lives of the 113 sailors entombed in the *Kursk*, who died slowly and painfully on the seabed at a depth of 100 meters.

As important as it is to establish the concrete causes of the disaster, this is nevertheless a secondary issue. It would have been more important to exhaust all possibilities for effecting the crew's rescue. That was not done, however. Some possibilities were not even attempted. In this situation, the most valuable commodity, time—when even minutes count—was allowed to pass.

Why did this happen? Why was information about the tragedy not transmitted immediately to Russian and international press agencies, but delayed for days? Why did prominent representatives of the army and government—Secretary of Defence Igor Sergeev, naval boss Admiral Vladimir Kuroyedov, Vice-Premier Ilya Klebanov and others—try for so long to hide the extent of the tragedy from the Russian and international public?

Why did the rescue operation only begin after three days? Why was foreign assistance only accepted at the last moment, when it was already clear that all efforts had failed to save the sailors with Russian resources and no other solution remained?

Why, finally, did President Putin keep quiet for five days and remain at his holiday resort on the Black Sea, instead of going to the scene of the accident?

The answers to these questions can be found in the course of the events themselves. The ruling elite in Russia has demonstrated that as far as their psychology and their morals go, nothing has changed since Brezhnev's times. As then, the

lives of ordinary people are their last consideration.

The tragedy on the *Kursk* has torn away the mask from the new generation of Kremlin politicians. It has made clear that they are incapable of evaluating problems independently and acting accordingly. They are not even in a position to render an account of the significance of current events.

There are historical events which put political leaders to the test. The accident on the *Kursk* is such an event. It requires more than routine action or bureaucratic responses. Russia's leading politicians and military—and above all the Commander-in-Chief and president—failed this test.

Innumerable generals, with or without fancy epaulettes, only concerned themselves with their own pragmatic aims, and acted according to the principle: “Behave as if nothing had happened”. They obey a bureaucratic herd instinct, according to which success is only possible for those who behave “moderately and correctly”, who do not rush their superiors and for whom the prejudices inside the apparatus are more important than complex reality, where there are firmly established instructions and state commands.

It has long been known that the Russian army is saturated with corruption, theft and a lack of talent. But until recently it appeared as if at least the force of inertia still operated and the army was, though sick, nevertheless still a functioning organism.

Now it is obvious that this is not the case. Russia's military technical abilities have become increasingly outdated, and are repaired only in a most provisional way. Whole swathes of equipment, which exist on paper, have already been either shut down for a long time or sold off by corrupt officers for their personal enrichment. Thus it proved impossible to find divers in the entire Russian fleet, or the whole country, who could have dived down to the *Kursk*. While the army leadership steals and is corrupt, the majority of ordinary soldiers and sailors see no sense in their service and are completely demoralised.

The army is not separated from society by an impenetrable wall. Quite the opposite. Many social problems can be found in the army in a particularly exaggerated form. The

lamentable incompetence that became visible in connection with the accident on the *Kursk* not only testifies to the crisis and decay of the Russian army; it expresses the political and social bankruptcy of the entire regime that arose from the ruins of the Soviet Union.

A year ago it might have seemed that, in Putin, an energetic politician had replaced the frail, limited and self-obsessed President Boris Yeltsin. Putin acquired a carefully designed image as a lively and independent figure, versed in the problems of the world, who could lead the country out of the dead end in which it found itself.

This image never corresponded with the facts. Putin has no significant political biography and is to the core an apparatchik and a policeman. He is an accidental figure, who was unexpectedly carried to the heights of power by lady luck. Although he at first doubted his good fortune, he quickly made the new role his own. He tried to present himself as a Napoleon Bonaparte, a Julius Caesar, a Peter the Great and even a “modern” version of Stalin. His lack of comprehension was presented as wisdom, and the absence of any clear ideas as a sign of deep thought.

At first he still enjoyed the sheen of effective public gestures. On the frosty New Year's Eve just after Yeltsin's voluntary resignation, he emerged unexpectedly on a military landing strip in Chechnya and delivered a short speech to the soldiers. In February, after the sudden death of Anatoly Sobtschak, considered one of the “fathers of Russian democracy”, Putin appeared at his funeral in St. Petersburg and shed a few tears for the television cameras.

The almost demonstrative emotional coldness with which Putin has reacted to the disaster on the *Kursk* stands in stark contrast to this previous display of compassion. While the families of the victims, millions of Russians and the world public followed the tragedy with shock, Putin reacted with days of delay, saying only that the situation was critical and that everything possible was being done to rescue the sailors. He did not even travel to the site of the accident and justified this with the words: “Everyone must remain in their places.”

What is the reason for this behaviour? Could it be that in February, when Putin was not yet president, he wanted to be “liked”, and now, when this is no longer necessary, he can act as he really is? It cannot be explained purely from Putin's personal motives. The problem goes deeper. There exists a connection between the personal qualities, mental outlook and the abilities of those who direct the Russian ship of state, and the social basis on which they rest—the layers whose interests they represent.

The incompetence, arrogance and narrowness of Russia's rulers is, in the end, a function of their objective socio-political and historical role. They personify the inviability of the abortion that is Russian capitalism. Ignorance,

coarseness, pitilessness and disdain towards the ordinary people are the characteristics of the “new Russian” capitalists, and these qualities are brought to the surface of social life by Putin and those around him.

In April 1986, the leadership of the Soviet bureaucracy under Mikhail Gorbachev tried to hush up the disaster at the Chernobyl atomic power plant. Only the impossibility of concealing the consequences forced them to bring this event to public attention.

How did Putin react this time? In exactly the same manner. Or more accurately, he reacted according to the same principle: first protect national “prestige” and only then people. In the last 15 years nothing has changed in the behaviour of the governing elite. From the standpoint of the state, the lives of ordinary people do not have any real significance.

Those trapped on the *Kursk* would have expected rapid and effective help; but this was absent. In a certain sense, the entire Russian population is in a similar position to the submarine's crew: they are suffering; they look for a way out of the dead end and hope for assistance. Instead the government proposes to wait and is afraid of acting at all because it is in a state of paralysis.

The tragedy of the *Kursk* is not simply a human disaster. It is a blow against the myth that after 10 years of capitalist “reforms” Russia is blossoming anew. The event will leave a deep impression in the consciousness of the people. It must act as the most bitter lesson and provide political insight, without which the country cannot move forward in a progressive fashion.



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