

Rebecca Hartje from Hannover in Germany worked on this contribution. She presents the first articles about the Chernobyl catastrophe from three different German newspapers. All articles were published on 29th April 1986. The “Hamburger Abendblatt” is a local newspaper for Hamburg and the region around. The “Welt” is one of the most important national serious newspapers and “Bild” the most important newspaper for the boulevard.

Hamburger Abendblatt (29th April 1986):

Heavy nuclear accident in the Soviet Union

In a nuclear power station in the Ukrainian town of Chernobyl north of Kiev a heavy accident has happened. We assume that many people were hurt or killed. A radioactive cloud emerging in Ukraine has spread over large parts of Scandinavia. In the central Finnish town of Tampere, about 1500 km away from Chernobyl, radioactivity five to ten times higher than usual has been measured since Sunday. Sweden measured equally high concentrations. Denmark, measured higher radioactivity, too. Danish experts say, there might have been a large catastrophe; it is possible that the core of the reactor has melted. The American scientist Jim McKenzie in Washington has the same opinion. He said he came to this conclusion as the radioactive cloud in Sweden contains radioactive Iodine and Cesium.

The Hamburg police alarmed the environmental office after it heard of the incident on TV. The Institute of hygiene started measuring radioactivity right away. Results are expected today. According to the Hamburg Weather station the wind was so weak yesterday that northern Germany should not be hit by the cloud.

According to the BILD-Newspaper (for article see below, I covered that one, too) the Federal Minister to the Interior advised the countries (Länder) to constantly check radioactivity in the air. An official in Bonn said: The fact that in Finland and Sweden radioactivity six times higher than usual was measured leads to the assumption of a reactor catastrophe in the Soviet Union.

The official Soviet news agency TASS confirmed last night that one of the reactors in Chernobyl was damaged. No further information was released. The note also said that a governmental commission was founded, something that only happens in the Soviet Union when a catastrophe with wide ranging consequences happened. Furthermore it said that measures were taken to remove the damage. The people affected by the accident were being helped. The TASS note did not say, when the accident happened and why it happened.

Welt (29th April 1986):

Accident in Soviet reactor, Alarm in Sweden

First time Moscow admits tragedy, silence about victims

Last night the Soviet Union admitted for the first time there has been a nuclear accident which in our opinion must involve a number of victims and heavy damage. TASS only spread

a note that it happened in Chernobyl, north of Kiev, and that “affected people” are taken care of. Also, a commission has been founded to investigate what happened and measures are taken to remove the damage. TASS also stated that the accident resulted in the damage of a reactor, further information, also when the tragedy happened, was not released.

Soviet media rarely cover natural catastrophes or accidents – except if there were many victims and much damage or if foreigners were involved. Political observers note that the act of admitting the accident was highly unusual for the Soviet Union. They see it as a result of Michail Gorbatschows policy to be more open about mistakes and catastrophes.

The town of Chernobyl is located about 130 km north of the Ukrainian capital of Kiev and has about 1,5 Mio inhabitants. Whether the city was affected by the accident remains unknown. According to the US news agency UPI, a western diplomat reported that the nuclear power station consists of four reactors with 1000 Mw each. According to TASS this was the first accident of this kind in the Soviet Union, but other countries had faced a disaster like this one more than once. It meant two accidents in the US in 1979 in Pennsylvania and Virginia.

However, western observers and Soviet scientists living in exile reported a heavy nuclear accident in the area of Cheljabinsk in the Ural in 1958 which supposedly killed some hundreds of people and left a huge area contaminated. Until today it is forbidden to enter this area.

Swedish officials indirectly accused the Soviet union of letting a radioactive cloud, most likely originating from an accident in a nuclear power station, spread over large parts of Scandinavia. It was registered near the Swedish nuclear power station of Forsmark on the eastern coast yesterday and after checking the reactor, the government was alarmed.

The Swedish ministry to the exterior said it wanted the Soviet Union to give a detailed report about the accident. The minister of energy said it were not acceptable that the Swedish authorities were not informed earlier.

Bild (29th April 1986):

BILD Zeitung April 29th 1986

The Chernobyl Accident made the Title on the front page. It says: ***Moscow Radioactive Catastrophe; Reactor destroyed, TASS admits: victims, deathly cloud above Denmark – will it reach us soon?***

In a nuclear power station close to the Ukrainian town of Chernobyl a radioactive catastrophe has happened. A reactor of the power station has been destroyed. According to TASS there were “victims due to the accident”. The wind has blown the “Atomtodeswolke”- “radioactive-death-cloud” to Denmark already. Is it going to reach us, too? In Bonn a crisis commission was established. How it happened and who noticed it first – read page 15

On page 15 the article says: yesterday in the evening TASS, the Soviet press agency tried to calm people down: Measures were taken to clean up the outcome of the tragedy. The victims are being helped. A governmental commission was established, something that only happens if something really big happened. The number of victims was not released by

Moscow. Victims are probably the power station staff and inhabitants of the surrounding villages and towns. Moscow said that in other countries accidents like this one happened more than once.

Already on the weekend Swedish experts had noticed that radio activity was six times higher than normal in their country. In an interview one of them said that one could guess that the accident happened on Sunday. First analyses had found radioactive Cobalt. Yesterday the concentration of radiation has been as high as in the mid 70s when the Chinese had tested nuclear weapons.

Also in Finland radioactivity was higher than usually but due to a strike it could not be measured. The possible cause of the tragedy is a leak in the cooling circuit of the power station that is cooled with water let the temperature at the fuel raise until the reactor exploded. Already in 1957/58 a radioactive catastrophe happened in the Soviet Union and killed some hundreds of people. Ten thousands suffered from radioactive damage to their bodies. After a plutonium factory exploded near Kyshtym in the Ural an area of the size of the Saarland was contaminated with radioactivity and will stay a no-go-area for centuries.

The Minister of the interior of Germany asked the countries (Länder) to constantly measure radioactivity in the air. An official said: The fact that in Sweden they measured six times higher radioactivity than normal suggests a heavy reactor-catastrophe in the Soviet Union.

The Minister to science said: Because of the wind conditions I do not think that the radioactive cloud is coming to Germany. Here in Germany a catastrophe like this one could never happen, our reactors are absolutely safe. Our safety standards are not comparable to the ones in the Soviet Union. I think after this catastrophe the International Atomic Energy Agency must check the safety standards in all Soviet Union power stations.