

Chernobyl, Coronavirus, and the Art of the Authoritarian Cover-Up: Who is to Blame, and What is to be Done?¹



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The HBO miniseries *Chernobyl* and the investigative history *Midnight in Chernobyl* by Adam Higginbotham both raise two important questions that have carried through the last two hundred years of Russian and Soviet history: Кто виноват? ‘Who is to blame?’ and Что делать? ‘What is to be done?’ In the case

¹ I would like to thank Alicia Zalusky, (BA, Rice University), for initially suggesting a “paper examining Russia’s cultural anxieties of ‘who is to blame’ and ‘what is to be done’ in the context of the final episode of *Chernobyl* and how the episode proposes they be answered.” This paper is a continuation of that initial conversation, expanded in light of current events in another authoritarian regime.

of the former, the Soviet Union decided to blame the Plant Director of the Chernobyl project, Viktor Brukhanov, and several others in the plant's hierarchy, although not all were deemed fit to stand trial. In the case of the latter, they did their best to cover up the entire disaster until it became too obvious for even them to deny. The Soviets also initially refused any outside inspectors or assistance. Western doctors were not able to come with their advanced equipment and knowledge of dealing with radiation sickness, leading to more deaths than might have otherwise occurred. For the Soviets, it was more important to be seen as strong in the eyes of the world – “We don't make mistakes,” Khrushchev once bellowed – and to demonstrate clear, unfettered technological progress than it was to step back, look at what caused the accident, and then decide how to move forward. A critical examination, of course, would have unraveled the Soviet state to its core.

By putting the manager of the Chernobyl plant and others on trial, the USSR was trying the wrong people. It needed to put the entire Soviet system on trial, as *Midnight in Chernobyl* clearly lays out. It was this system itself that led to the situation where the plant was so poorly constructed that a disaster was always going to be the end result of its existence. It is possible that various countries in the world, especially those directly affected by the radiation release, could have sought redress in the International Court of Justice, but no one chose to take that route, likely because the appropriate defendant ceased to exist in 1991. With the hopes the world placed on a new Russia, no one wanted to hold it responsible for the crimes of its defunct predecessor.

China, which is obsessed with history, both its own and that of others, has learned exactly the wrong lessons from Chernobyl in its own paranoia to remain intact and in power. The flaw, then as now, is the belief they must never admit a problem and cover up as long as possible. For China, however, this is on a national, rather than on an individual level. It's the entire country, or rather its leadership that tries to cover up for the entire nation, passing the blame for everything untoward on to other nations. China assumes it was the failure of the cover-up of the accident that led to the downfall of the Soviet Union. Rather, it was just one of many symptoms of a failing state: as exposed lie piled upon exposed lie, when there were too many open lies to back away toward the truth, the USSR unravelled. China now faces a similar challenge: there are too many obvious lies for them to be able to tell the truth now, for China fears the cost of exposed

lies will be the downfall of the state. Just as Chernobyl adversely affected the USSR's self-proclaimed positive international reputation by exposing it to world-wide criticism, China's cover-up of the Coronavirus promises to be destructive to China's already faltering reputation. Just as the world condemned the Soviet Union for Chernobyl, it will be right to do so with China and its handling of the Coronavirus outbreak, which originated in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. Because of the failure of the Chinese leadership to admit the problem existed and the lies that followed, the virus spread around the world more rapidly than it otherwise might have, leading to far more deaths than otherwise might have occurred, in addition to yet unmeasured economic harm. What the world must do now, therefore, is to declare "who is to blame" and to decide "what is to be done."

First, it can work to hold China accountable through the legal system. A multi-trillion-dollar law suit has already been filed in Texas,² and one report estimates that the United States alone can sue for \$1.2 billion in reparations.³ Others should follow, and anyone who has lost a job, income, rental payments, retirement money, etc. must be able join in class-action lawsuits. Other countries must provide the same opportunity for its citizens. Whether or not they will be successful and, even if so, whether the Chinese government will pay is in doubt, but it will send a powerful symbolic message. Enough Chinese officials have money hidden throughout the west, including in property and other investments, that it will send ripples of fear that these assets will be seized or, at a minimum, temporarily frozen, meaning that these officials would be unable to access or move them for some time. Actions, such as Australia has recently taken, to make it more difficult for Chinese investors to make purchases abroad would also go a long way to protect property and keep a close eye on the influence of Chinese money.

Second, indictments against Xi Jinping and the Director of the World Health Organization (WHO), Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, both of whom can be accused of conspiracy to engage in a coverup, can be handed down in a number of national courts and in the International Criminal Court. They are the most visible perpetrators of refusing to release information that could have saved lives. Matteo Salvini, the Italian

² <https://lawandcrime.com/lawsuit/larry-klayman-files-20-trillion-dollar-lawsuit-against-china-for-creation-and-release-of-covid-19/>

³ <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/coronaviruscompensation/>

Minister of Interior, has gone so far as to accuse Xi of “crimes against humanity,” although most of the European Union (EU) has thus far refused to take on China to that extent, preferring to keep their economic options open. India, however, has filed a complaint against China in the UN Human Rights Council.⁴ Again, it is unlikely they will see justice; however, any accompanying INTERPOL Red Notices issued against them will keep them grounded and unable to travel anywhere in the future, even when air travel recommences. The Global Magnitsky Act can be also used against them, as this will trigger a full investigation into their foreign financial accounts, including what, if anything, the Chinese might have over the WHO Director and other WHO officials.

Third, the WHO, as well as other organizations, such as the UN Human Rights Council, that have been overrun by Chinese influence, need immediate reform, if not complete disintegration, followed by a reconstitution into more responsible entities. A new version of the WHO can be headquartered in Taipei as way of giving recognition to Taiwan for being the first country to warn the world of the community spread potential of the Coronavirus, a warning that was promptly covered up by the Chinese-dominated WHO. Back in December, the Taiwanese Health Ministry announced the virus can be spread by human-to-human contact, something the WHO ignored in order not to offend China and break with their narrative. The WHO followed up on 14 January with an affirmation that the virus cannot be spread through human contact. This caused delays in preparation in the rest of the world, as many governments were reluctant to question China.

Fourth, the entire world must recognize Taiwan, under that name, as a fully independent nation with all commensurate rights and responsibilities. This includes the right to join the United Nations, with some lip service given to them taking back their seat on the Security Council. Although the latter is unlikely to happen, it will cause conniptions in the power corridors of China and will serve to recognize that Taiwan has been a stable and responsible stakeholder in Asian affairs, although they have not received the appropriate recognition for their actions, while China has and continues to cause widespread discord and instability. Even while this crisis grows, Chinese ships have been

⁴ <https://www.scribd.com/document/454999758/India-Drags-China-to-International-Court-for-COVID19-Biological-War?fbclid=IwAR2iYV8RcB0AqwoGS9er8zIo5NQ1Xxiew9Sauua4e6e3KN5MtHFCIPAvoeM>

involved in incidents with Japan and Vietnam. Fears that China is taking advantage of this crisis to extend their influence in the Indo-Pacific region are very real and must not go unchallenged.

Finally, the world must move to decouple economically from China as much and as rapidly as possible. To have global supply chains tied to any individual non-democratic nation is, as is now clear, a recipe for disaster, as that country can, in effect, hold the world hostage. Several corporations have already indicated they are moving parts of their inventory and supply chains out of China. This will not be as difficult as is being argued by some, for Chinese goods, once thought of as being cheap, yet of high quality, are increasingly seen as cheap and of shoddy quality. So far in this crisis, Spain and Turkey, among others, have been given thousands of test kits that have failed, while the Dutch have been provided 600,000 N-95 masks that did not meet even minimal standards. Ireland and Pakistan have complained about the low quality of goods provided by China, including face masks made out of underwear, and Australia has confiscated over 800,000 substandard masks. Although goods produced at home or in other parts of the world might be more expensive, this is the time for people to begin to realize that, with quality following price, paying more for supplies that are easier to obtain and are of better quality is a price worth paying. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, himself now suffering from the virus, has also stated that in light of Chinese behavior the UK needs to reevaluate its arrangements with China, which predicts, among other things, the removal of Huawei as a contender for their 5G network. This could be the beginning of the death knell for the technology giant, which is anything but an enterprise independent of the Chinese government. The fact that China is trying to tie aid to France with France's acceptance of Huawei as its 5G provider is proof enough of this.

One key challenge to accomplishing all this is the attitude of the press towards China and the argument that any criticism of China is inherently racist.⁵ The press was ecstatic over China's rapid construction of a new hospital in Wuhan, but it has largely ignored

⁵ One notable exception to the press's lovefest with China is this article:
<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/blogs/tim-blair/via-local-commie-underlings-beijing-officially-disapproves/news-story/491b415795fbbdc526d33d5b569134a4?fbclid=IwAR2fblx472V4aT5aKHlYKnh3ywsYspZ0IP3OwK7g601MDms-xUp6LMYv-Y>

the UK building the Nightingale Hospital in 9 days and will likely similarly ignore other planned fast-tracked hospitals throughout the UK. This gives the false impression that China has everything under control, while the West flounders. For several days NBC promoted the theory China had defeated the Coronavirus at the very point when the US surpassed them in numbers of confirmed positive tests until enough pressure caused them to begin to admit there was no way to verify or trust the Chinese numbers; since then, however, NBC has returned to promoting Chinese information unquestioned. Pressure on news outlets to criticize and question Chinese claims as much as they question those of their own democratic governments, many of whose leaders they clearly want to drive from office, must continue, just as there must be continued pressure against a number of Acela Corridor think tanks, some of which are funded substantially with Chinese money, to stop shilling for and defending the Chinese Communist Party. After all, groups that openly promoted the Soviet way of life and parroted the Soviet line were rightly vilified and called to account. The same must be done here to keep them from helping China promote their lies. For those who have rightly questioned the responses of certain western democracies, including the US and the UK, that is why they have regularly-scheduled elections as well as a court system that can hold accountable any US Senators or other government officials who made a profit selling stocks off of national security information.

If enough international pressure builds, then court cases against Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party may be moot for, just as the USSR crumbled, China might well follow suit. The CCP has had a tacit agreement with its people: as long as the economy continues to improve, they will remain quiet about democratic movements and political reform. Even China's best statistical forgers will be hard-pressed to argue they will have their traditional 6% growth in any quarter this year, although even their initial somewhat lower numbers strain the limits of credulity. If significant economic decoupling and international public shaming provide enough pressure, it's unclear how long Xi and the CCP can remain in power, especially without resorting to massive amounts of violence as was witnessed at Tiananmen in 1989 and in East Turkestan in recent years. Further mass casualties at the hands of the state will weaken the nation. If toppled, and with nowhere else to go, a prison cell in The Hague might look like a nice place for Xi and his minions to spend their remaining years, considering what might be

the alternative at home, but it would be a fitting punishment, for they are to blame, and this is what must be done.

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