NUCLEAR FALLOUT

Thousands of Ukrainians sacrificed their health during the Chernobyl disaster cleanup. Chris Scott investigates how recent budget cuts have decimated the pensions they were promised.

Photographs by Chris Scott.
LIQUIDATORS DEMANDED THEIR PROMISED GOVERNMENT BENEFITS, SETTING UP PROTEST CAMPS IN FRONT OF UKRAINE'S PARLIAMENT.
In a large green army tent propped up in a park no more than thirty metres from the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine’s gleaming, marble-esque parliament building, Nikolai Sharpatii was furious. He was angry at the new government, much like he’d been angry at the old one. “They [the government] say there’s no money,” said the then sixty-year-old, speaking for the score of fellow pensioners who crowded on the benches next to him. There has to be money, he exclaimed, arguing that the government was stealing from the people. Sharpatii said that many Ukrainians were living in poverty: they can’t pay for medicine, he said. They can’t pay for bread.

Speaking over the drone of a diesel generator, Sharpatii explained how, thirty years ago, Soviet authorities reassigned him from his job on an agricultural cooperative in northern Ukraine to aid in the cleanup of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. He was one of six hundred thousand citizens of the former Soviet republics, including 350,000 Ukrainians, who toiled in and around Pripyat, a small city located one hundred kilometres north of Kiev. These workers—called liquidators—encased the ruins of the blown reactor in a concrete sarcophagus in December 1986. A steady rotation of workers also spent four years burying nuclear fuel and partially decontaminating the land in a thirty-kilometre radius around the power plant. The area remains uninhabitable to this day.

Liquidators included conscripts from the Red Army, police officers, doctors, drivers, construction workers and engineers. Their prompt, efficient response is often credited with containing the nuclear fallout and sparing large swathes of Ukraine and Europe from contamination. But the consequences for the individual workers were dire. Liquidators operated with rudimentary protective gear and were exposed to both the plume of radioactive particles settling from the reactor and those stirred up from the soil. These particles invaded their lungs and circulatory systems, affecting vital organ functions. Of the 230,000 liquidators who remain alive in Ukraine today, more than a quarter are classified as “invalids,” having been diagnosed with late-onset, career-ending diseases linked to the radiation they were exposed to.

ON MAY DAY, 2014, Kiev was a study in contrasts. It was more than two months after Ukraine’s mass protests under the Maidan banner pushed Russian-aligned president and suspected kleptocrat Viktor Yanukovych from office. The coalition of citizens who had united under the broad goals of ending government corruption and pursuing ties with Western Europe had dissolved into a mess of competing factions. The city’s main square was still checkered by a warren of fenced-in protest camps as the militants resisted overtures from the new government to dislodge them. Nearby, militiamen conducted traffic checks and a wall of bricks blocked a main arterial road. During the daytime, at their mothers’ urging, kids of six or seven scrambled atop abandoned armoured police vehicles to have their pictures taken, while shoppers sauntered by vigilantes in cast-off army fatigues bearing clubs.
CHERNOBYL INVALID YURIY SEDIKH ATTENDS AN EVENT THANKING LIQUIDATORS ON THE UKRAINE CHERNOBYL UNION'S TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY.
Sharpattii was one of these invalids. Not long after his term of service was complete, he collapsed from the effects of radiation and was paralyzed for eighteen months. He then went about learning how to learn to walk again, “like a child,” he said. As an invalid, he was eligible for some of the expansive benefits for those affected by the Chernobyl disaster that Ukraine cemented into law in the early 1990s.

But after a series of cuts starting in the late 2000s, Sharpattii was among the thousands of former workers whose promised benefits were slashed—in recent years he saw his monthly pension go from 7,220 uah (in February 2016 dollars, that is from $363 to $114 CDN). Some liquidators, Sharpattii included, had participated in the Maidan protests hoping that a new government would restore their payments. But these hopes were soon dampened when Ukraine’s new finance minister declared that she would practise fiscal austerity. And so Sharpattii, his fellow liquidators and their families stood outside of Parliament day after day, demanding a return to the benefits they felt they were owed. “We protected Ukraine and Europe with our bare hands,” Sharpattii emphasized. “If we hadn’t done our job, they wouldn’t have a thing to govern.”

BY THE FALL OF 2015, Kiev has shed its insurgent stripes and morphed into a city of well-heeled shoppers, imported cars and billboards marketing iPhones. At first look, the Maidan protests appear to have successfully secured Ukraine in its western orientation. But a metro ride to the suburbs at the end of the line is enough to show that the capital exists as an island in a Soviet-esque sea. It is in one of these expanses of faceless high-rises that I visit Volodymyr Samolin. He still lives in the apartment he was allocated by the Soviet government after he was evacuated from Pripyat.

Standing in a small, cluttered kitchen, stirring a cauldron of borscht, sixty-three-year-old Samolin chats with me in Russian and looks back on the pre-disaster years as a time of plenty. “Pripyat was a great city,” he says.

Born in the Soviet Far East to Russian and Ukrainian parents, Samolin moved to Pripyat in 1979 and was hired by the power plant soon after. Promotions came quickly, and Samolin was a senior engineer before being assigned to the construction of a fifth and sixth reactor. A photo from the time shows Samolin looking like the model technician: a trim man with a beard and lab coat, confident behind a control panel.

By 1986, the thirty-four-year-old had achieved many of the hallmarks of success: a common-law wife, a high-paying job, a close circle of friends. Samolin took business trips to Moscow; he and his colleagues vacationed in the Crimea; and he spent weekends taking his motorboat out along the Pripyat River. “My [monthly] salary was 300 rubles,” he chuckles. “For fifteen rubles I could invite a lady to a restaurant, order salad and some other dish and have a bottle of champagne and a spot of vodka too. It was a good life. We lacked nothing.”

On the evening of April 25, 1986, Samolin had just returned to Pripyat from a fishing trip. After placing his catch in a pot of salted water on his balcony to steep in the sun the next day, he went to bed. At about 1:20 AM, his wife, Galya, woke to the sound of cascading explosions. She anxiously roused her husband. “I said it was no big deal,” Samolin recalls. “They were turning the reactor off [for a safety test] and it was probably the valve system blowing from the pressure.”

The next morning, Samolin stood on his balcony and looked at the shattered reactor five kilometres away. From his perspective, it seemed like a minor explosion, nothing too serious. In reality, a steam explosion had triggered a larger one, causing the nuclear fuel at the reactor’s core to ignite in a meltdown. At that moment, radioactive particles from the core were settling all over the city. Radiation exposure was highest during these first few hours.

Samolin had that Saturday off from work, and his life went on as usual. But, throughout the day, he started to notice hints that something was amiss. During an errand to purchase a bus ticket for a future trip to Kiev, he found the station closed. On his way back home, he noticed a shop offloading its stock of imported suits—then a coveted item. “I bought two suits right away,” he says. “Later I had to turn one in as nuclear waste.” Army trucks appeared in the streets and soldiers started hosing down the sidewalks. Long-distance phone service was cut off. Samolin later learned that the roads out of Pripyat had been blocked to prevent residents from fleeing and spreading panic. That night, at two or three in the morning, his dentist knocked on his door, handing him iodine tablets that could be used to block the buildup of radioactive molecules in the body.

It wasn’t until the next morning that Samolin, tuning into a special local news bulletin, learned that the area would be evacuated later that day. Residents were told the evacuation would last for two to three weeks. By this point, Samolin suspected that the situation was worse than the news was letting on. “I felt deep down we wouldn’t be coming back,” he says.

THE CHERNOBYL DISASTER can be said to have exposed the Soviet Union at its worst and best. Although the authorities’ initial reaction was secrecy, the state mobilized a massive evacuation strategy once the seriousness of the situation became known. In approximately three hours on the afternoon of April 27, authorities relocated the entire population of Pripyat—some forty-three thousand people—via trains and more than one thousand busses commandeered from surrounding cities (only a minority of Soviet citizens owned cars at the time). Police went door to door and patrolled the streets to prevent looting. Another thirty-nine thousand residents of towns located further from the reactor, including Chernobyl and outlying villages, were evacuated over the next two days.

“Samolin had started suffering from headaches a couple of days after his initial evacuation. In the following months he began to struggle with dizziness and memory loss.”
A LIQUIDATOR POSES WITH AN AWARD HE WAS GRANTED FOR HIS SELF-SACRIFICIAL WORK IN THE CHERNOBYL DISASTER CLEANUP.
Inside one of the trains leaving Pripyat, Samolin instructed his fellow passengers to breathe into wet cloths to avoid ingesting radioactive dust as they rolled by the gutted reactor. He and his wife drank red wine to prevent the breakdown of water particles inside their bodies, which would worsen the effects of radioactivity. As a specialist, his scientific knowledge was at a premium among a population unprepared for a meltdown.

In the months after the evacuation, Samolin worked briefly at another nuclear power plant in Ukraine, but he was assigned back to Pripyat in late September. Samolin rose at five each morning to take a bus into the deserted town where he then headed a team tasked with burying nuclear fuel. In an attempt to limit exposure, authorities ensured that liquidators worked in rotating shifts with a limited numbers of days they could be on site. Samolin was on the ground for about twenty days in 1986. He continued working as a liquidator in on-again, off-again stretches for a total of fifteen days a month through 1987 and most of 1988.

By this time, the effects of radiation exposure were catching up to him. He had started suffering from headaches a couple of days after his initial evacuation. In the following months he began to struggle with dizziness and memory loss. In late 1988, he did his first stint in a Moscow hospital, recuperating from symptoms that included weakness, leg pains and shortness of breath. He later developed an irregular heartbeat and other cardiovascular problems. Discharged as a liquidator on account of his health in 1989, Samolin was declared a Chernobyl invalid by a commission of three doctors in Kiev in 1992. He was forty years old.

Samolin isn’t alone in his health struggles. Dr. Dmitry Bazyka is the general director of the Research Centre for Radiation Medicine, a 530-bed hospital in Kiev that specializes in post-Chernobyl care. He confirms that Samolin’s case is representative of tens of thousands of other liquidators, noting that cardiological diseases among workers usually started ten years after exposure. Arterial hypertension, diabetes and thyroid dysfunction are common. “Most people have from two to six diseases,” he says.

During the 1990s, Samolin worked odd jobs, including as a taxi driver. He suffered two heart attacks within a decade. When I visit Samolin in December 2015, he is living alone. He complains of a weak pulse and is uncomfortable in an apartment that he cannot afford to heat properly. He now survives on a monthly pension that he describes as “miserly.”

The brief time spent on the ground in Pripyat drastically affected Samolin’s future health. But when asked whether he regrets his actions, he is divided. “First off, they didn’t ask us. [But] at that time there was a kind of patriotism,” he says. “How could I not go there if my friends were there? [Am I] a traitor?”

But Samolin is not happy with how his government has treated him in the years since the disaster. “[The government] tells me ‘We can’t pay your pension.’ But if I hadn’t done my job back then I wouldn’t have lost my health,” he says. “I could have started some business and have a company by now. Instead, in the 1990s, when [today’s politicians] were making money, I was lying in the hospital.”

**LASTING FOUR YEARS.** The intensive phase of the Chernobyl cleanup coincided with the final days of the USSR. As the federation’s republics lurched towards independence, Ukraine saw the emergence of a new class of politician, people who were the same age as the Chernobyl liquidators and determined to help their comrades. Volodymyr Yatsenko was one of these officials. Elected in 1990, he was one of the representatives who voted for Ukrainian independence in August 1991.

As a national representative from Korosten, a small city about one hundred kilometres south-west of Pripyat that was affected by the nuclear fallout, Yatsenko became a spokesperson for Chernobyl issues and sat on the committee that drafted Ukraine’s first Chernobyl law four years after the disaster. “There was no framework document to guide us,” he explains.

There was scant consensus within the scientific community about how to treat the long-term effects of radiation exposure in a large population; what knowledge that existed was mainly gleaned from the more than forty-year-old experiences of the Hiroshima and the Nagasaki bombings.

To complicate matters further, there were different classes of Ukrainian citizens needing protection—and tensions between them. Yatsenko says that liquidators felt they had made the most sacrifices, while residents of the irradiated areas blamed the liquidators—or at least the ones who had lived in Pripyat—for causing the disaster. To balance these interests, Yatsenko and his colleagues consulted a wide range of stakeholders. “We listened to the opinions of scientists,” he explains, “the opinions of authorities from regions that had been contaminated. Opinions of different categories of liquidators and people and civil organizations that lived on the polluted lands.” The goal, he says, was to forget no one.

The resulting law, adopted in February 1991, legislated a raft of benefits for liquidators, evacuees from the exclusion zone, citizens who still lived in a less-irradiated boundary zone and children of parents who had been irradiated. Seen broadly, the law had two priorities: to assure medical care—including preventive care—to cope with the public health effects of the radiation; and to provide financially for those whose ability to work had been lost or impacted through the accident. At its outset, about three million Ukrainians were covered.

Under the law, residents of the contaminated areas would have the right to retire up to ten years early, and eligible kids would get nutritional supplements to boost their bodies’ defences against the effects of radiation. Medicine would be free for all diseases related to Chernobyl. Liquidators would be put on a waiting list for free housing, and those who served before March 1, 1988, could receive early retirement, with pension, at age fifty. Later workers received the same at fifty-five. Liquidators like Samolin who were declared invalids by medical professionals would get a pension right away. These pensions were to be calculated as a percentage of an employee’s earnings, but the law guaranteed certain baselines determined as a multiple of a cost-of-living minimum: a Group Three invalid (the least affected) would receive a pension that was not less than six times the minimum; Group Two invalids would get at least eight times the minimum; and Group One (the most affected), were ensured ten times the minimum amount.

On paper, these benefits were substantial. Pensions were, for the most part, paid out to eligible liquidators for about sixteen years after being signed into law. But in 2007, Ukraine was feeling the beginnings of the world financial crisis. Parliament, led by then-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, decided to cut pensions as a cost-saving measure. With the stroke of a pen, predictable income for thousands of men and women vanished.

**A HALE MAN OF SIXTY-FIVE.** Yatsenko sits in his law office above Kiev’s bustling Velyka Zhytomyrska Street and recalls that heady transition period in the 1990s. Ideas of democracy and public accountability were in the air then, but few people knew what these would mean in practice.
MASHA ROZNOSHENSKAYA DISPLAYS A REPORT THAT CONFIRMS HER HUSBAND’S DEATH WAS LINKED TO HIS WORK IN THE CHERNOBYL RESPONSE.
Yatsenko was elected for two more mandates after his first term before being defeated in 2002. Once out of office, Yatsenko, who was trained as a lawyer, continued to work on behalf of citizens though the Ukraine Chernobyl Union (UCU). The non-government organization was founded in 1990 to advocate for those covered under the Chernobyl benefits law, and Yatsenko eventually rose to be its vice president. As the cuts legislated in 2007 began to bite, the UCU started battling the government on behalf of the workers.

Some liquidators (such as Nikolai Sharpatii) were able to get their pension amounts reinstated by appealing to Ukrainian courts or the European Court of Human Rights. Emotions boiled over in September 2011, after the government of President Viktor Yanukovych announced that it would only implement the courts’ rulings subject to budgetary constraints. At a raucous demonstration that month, liquidators tore down the metal barricade surrounding Parliament and bashed in the door of the building.

Yatsenko describes how this incident compelled the government to seek out the UCU to begin talks. “The government was openly scared,” he says. A series of meetings ensued that ended in compromise: in November 2011, after the government of President Viktor Yanukovych announced that it would only implement the courts’ rulings subject to budgetary constraints. At a raucous demonstration that month, liquidators tore down the metal barricade surrounding Parliament and bashed in the door of the building.

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Yatsenko complains that the government has exploited these differences between the UCU and individual liquidators as a way to stall action. “They say, ‘You guys are demanding one thing, but these other Chernobyl veterans are demanding something else. Go agree between yourselves [and then come see us],’” he explains.

Some of Chernobyl’s first responders fell through the cracks from the beginning. When I met Masha Roznoshenskaya, she is nursing a bad cold from spending too many days picketing. She tells me how her husband, Vladimir, was a crane operator working as a state employee in the Kiev port. He was mobilized in August 1986 and spent fourteen days in Pripyat, lowering construction materials onto the reactor. Illness took hold soon after. “He started having headaches right away,” says Roznoshenskaya. Vladimir had developed vasoneurosis, a disorder involving blood vessel spasms. He later started finding blood in his urine.

Roznoshenskaya explains that despite the health problems, her husband did not seek help. “[A]fter Chernobyl we had two small kids,” she says. “He had to work. He didn’t go to the doctor.” Vladimir eventually went for a medical consultation in 1999, when Ukraine’s post-independence economy was in a slump. “He [was] working for six months without a salary,” she says. “We went to the hospital. The doctor wrote a prescription for some medicine. I asked ‘Is it free?’ Medicine was supposed to be free. The doctor said no. I said, ‘We have no money and no salary. What will happen if he’s not treated?’ The doctor said have him stay at home and it will go away.”

Roznoshenskaya says that she had seen a reference to her husband’s Chernobyl service on his medical records. But he did not wish to register as an invalid—he found it embarrassing. If Vladimir had, he could have qualified for an immediate pension. (Those who did not register immediately as liquidators found it difficult to substantiate their claims later on.) Roznoshenskaya adds that pharmacies, which were in private hands at the time, would refuse to honour the free prescriptions for Chernobyl-related health problems that were promised by law.

Following the doctor’s advice, Vladimir took a week off work. But his symptoms did not improve. In 2003 he was hospitalized and died of a heart attack at age forty-eight—two years before he would have qualified for a general pension as a liquidator.

Today, Roznoshenskaya subsists on a widow’s pension of about 2,600 UAH per month ($131 CDN). Under the 1991 law, she should be entitled to three times that amount.

Ukraine’s current economic constraints are real. Following the shuttering of state-run enterprises around the time of independence, the country’s economy went into free-fall and has not recovered since. Ukraine’s debt stands at $70 billion USD.

Many liquidators who protested at Maidan accuse politicians of pocketing the money that would otherwise be spent on pensions. But such an explanation ignores systemic pressures. Pummelled by the 2008 recession, Ukraine solicited two loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to meet the balance of payment on previous debts. These loans were granted subject to the condition that...
Ukraine would apply a budget of fiscal austerity, including cuts to pensions.

Following the Maidan Revolution, Ukraine’s new government negotiated a third loan on comparable terms, and since then two bills have been introduced that aim to reduce the promised benefits for Chernobyl workers and survivors. In December 2014, Parliament voted to eliminate the provisions in the 1991 law that established benchmarks for invalids’ pensions and eliminate benefits for residents who live on some of the contaminated lands. Another bill was introduced in December 2015 that aimed to offload the responsibility for paying non-pension benefits and several other forms of social spending to the regional governments (ultimately, this provision of the bill did not pass). Alexander Kravchuk, an economist with the Kiev-based Centre for Social and Labour Research, saw this as a ploy for the national government to renege on its duties. “The local budgets don’t have any money,” he explains.

The question of state pensions has been a long-running debate in Ukrainian fiscal policy. Writing for the Kyiv Post, journalist Olena Savchuk repeated an argument that is common to advocates of pension reform, stating that the promised deals are a burden on the tax system and are unaffordable in light of the poor economy. In an article published last December, Savchuk backs this position with numbers: 25 percent of the Ukrainian population are pensioners; men are generally allowed to retire at sixty, and women at fifty-seven; pensions consume 15 percent of Ukraine’s gross domestic product.

But Ukraine survived similar economic storms in the 1990s, culminating in a default on an international loan in 2000, and it did so without gutting pensions. Kravchuk says that the recent cuts have more to do with political choices than budget issues. “Right now there’s a tremendous reallocation of resources away from the social and investment in infrastructures towards defence, first of all, and second towards paying the external debt,” he says. With the national agenda focused on European integration and the separatist war in the country’s east, Kravchuk says that the Chernobyl veterans face diminishing chances of having their concerns heeded.

According to Kravchuk, numbers provided by the National Bank of Ukraine confirm this massive shift in spending. Debt servicing during the first nine months of 2015 cost 70 billion UAH—or 14 percent of the government’s annual expenditure, compared to 7 percent during the last year of former president Yanukovych’s term in 2013. Meanwhile, defence expenditures (tied to the anti-separatist war in Ukraine’s east) rose to 37 billion UAH, equalling 8 percent of government spending in 2015—up from 3 percent in 2013. According to the UCU, the cost of fully paying all Chernobyl pensions in 2017 would be an additional 5 billion UAH.

THE FIRST SNOW OF THE SEASON IS FLYING

when we turn off the highway south of Kiev, driving past rutted fields and heading towards Belaya Tserkov, a town full of potholes and two hundred thousand people. It is the city that Grigory Levishchenko, a Group Two invalid, calls home. In 1986, Levishchenko was working as a police officer when he was ordered to Pripyat within twenty-four hours of the meltdown. He remained in the city for two weeks, patrolling its deserted streets.

Today, Levishchenko shares a pocket-sized apartment with his wife, Valentina, his two sons in their thirties, a daughter-in-law and three grandchildren. There isn’t always hot water in the taps; it is too expensive. At night, the family sleeps on a combination of fold-out cots and mattresses splayed on the bedroom and living room floors.

In between cups of coffee and vodka, Levishchenko regales me with swashbuckling army songs. But the conversation soon grows serious. He tells me that last year, his married son Igor was drafted and spent two months in eastern Ukraine’s combat zone. As the government announces a new round of mobilization, Levishchenko is afraid that his other son Andrei is fated for the same ordeal.

Though it is located about seventy kilometres from Kiev, Belaya Tserkov was in the path of the radioactive fallout due to the vagaries of the wind. While Levishchenko was serving as a liquidator, his family back home was also irradiated (these residents also belong to one of the categories whose benefits were cut under the December 2014 legislation). Levishchenko now has a heart condition that prevents him from working; Valentina developed and was treated for cancer; his five-year-old grandson, Artyom, was born with a leaky heart valve and has required two operations.

Levishchenko thought that the political changes that swept Ukraine in 2014 would improve his living standards—“We were all on Maidan,” he explains. But those hopes were quickly dashed. As part of his liquidator package, Levishchenko has been on the waiting list for a new apartment since 1997. The family lives on Levishchenko’s pension, plus an allotment for his sick wife and grandson (his two sons are unemployed), for a total of about 7,000 UAH ($352 CDN) per month. Of that amount, 1,000 UAH goes directly to his grandson’s heart medication. After Levishchenko buys his own medicine, much of what remains is spent on rising utility bills. Over our dinner that evening, most of the food we eat was grown on Levishchenko’s cottage farm in the country. It seems that the family is coping through their resourcefulness, but just barely. “I have a candy jar,” he says. “[When] my grandson comes near and I have to tell him ‘There’s no candy,’ it feels so bad.”

LIKE MANY LIQUIDATORS, Volodymyr Samolin has regularly made an annual pilgrimage back to Pripyat. His grandmother is still buried in the city. In past years, he would pile into a car with his brother and travel there at the start of May. There is a checkpoint at the entrance to the exclusion zone, and visit lengths are limited.

Contemporary accounts of Pripyat speak of five-story high trees growing out of the city’s streets and through building stairwells. Samolin’s apartment is now empty, his belongings long since removed by looters.

A recent photo of one of these excursions shows Samolin posing in front of a busted Soviet-era canteen. He looks unhealthy, but still manages a broad grin.

Samolin lived in Pripyat during the prime of his life. He was a well-paid expert, even a leader. Since the disaster, though, he has become dependent on the society he sought to protect. “Everything I spent my time doing [after Pripyat],” he says, “was not what I was about. The nuclear reactor was what I was about.”

I ask Samolin what memories rolled through his mind during his trips back home. Uncharacteristically, his voice lifts with impatience, as if the answer is self-evident, or as if his feelings have grown too big for his cluttered kitchen.

“What’s there to remember?” he says.

“You get there and you’re sorry to see a dead city.” He makes another effort at explaining: “What do you remember when you visit a graveyard? It’s about the same thing. [Pripyat is] the graveyard of my former life.”

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