

From Soldier to Worker: Life and Sorrows of the Soviet Atom

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Abstract

The Soviet Union was certainly not the only state placing its hopes in nuclear energy. Around the world, governments believed that splitting atomic nuclei (and potentially fusing others) would provide humanity with inexhaustible energy resources.

The specifics of the Soviet context have been described with reference to the significance Soviet leaders attributed to electrification of the entire country (Lenin's famous slogan "communism = Soviet power + electrification"), but also with reference to the crucial role attributed to nuclear power for the construction of a new society (Josephson's "atomic powered communism").

In my project, I investigate the popular-scientific media discourse on nuclear power in the Soviet Union. I am interested in the changes and continuities affecting the uses of such concepts as "risk," "expertise," and "the public." The Chernobyl disaster of 1986 and the collapse of the Soviet Union 1991 provide turning points for my analysis.

Although I do not engage in a comparative analysis, some comparative strands are inherent in my material: authors often contrast the peaceful Soviet program to the military endeavors of the United States. The Cold War notwithstanding, there were international scientific conferences, and—at least to a certain extent—international scientific and technological cooperation.

The Soviet press was regulated by a censorship system; therefore, any published article was authorized. I will try to show how this "official discourse"—even in scholarly and fairly technical periodicals—not only mirrored Soviet politics, but crafted an image of "the Soviet reader," thus envisioning an ideal member of the Soviet society-to-be.

At the workshop, I will talk about one of the periodicals I study: the scholarly journal "Atomic Energy" (*Atomnaja energija*). I will trace the development of themes, lines of argument, and rhetorical strategies in articles published from the mid-1950s until today.