

Political and Social Implications of the Chernobyl Disaster on Political Debates in 1986

Germany

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I. Introduction

A. Background information on the Chernobyl nuclear accident

Often regarded as a momentous nuclear disaster, the Chernobyl incident unfolded on April 26th, 1986. Situated within the boundaries of Ukraine's Soviet Union territory - specifically its Ukrainian SSR region - the catastrophic explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant resulted in a consequential release of radioactive materials. Its aftermath extended beyond just physical or ecological impacts, instead exerting substantial influence on political and social terrains worldwide with notable ramifications discernible within specific nations.

Primarily an unfortunate product of late-night safety examinations gone awry, this traumatic event witnessed an immense blast that spewed vast quantities of radioactive contamination into our planet's atmosphere, profoundly altering facets such as politics and shaping discourse regarding regulation across Western Germany and Eastern Germany.

Unveiling crucial dialogues concerning nuclear energy usage, regulatory measures for guaranteeing safety standards, and questions about public trustworthiness vis-à-vis government institutions gave way to sweeping transformations within policy-making realms while reshaping collective opinion. Thus emerges a clear realization that incidents linked to Chernobyl during 1986 did not merely affect alterations pertaining solely towards physical or environmental landscapes but carried implications unleashing considerable changes across both political and sociocultural arenas affecting both German territories and our world.

B. Importance of studying the political and social implications

Comprehending the lasting effects of the Chernobyl disaster on society and governance requires a thorough understanding of its political and social implications. In 1986 this accident caused significant consequences for political debates, policy making, and public opinion in countries like West Germany and East Germany. It instigated intense discussions concerning nuclear energy, safety regulations, and environmental concerns by examining the political and social responses to the Chernobyl disaster. This research aims to illuminate how a single event can shape political discourse and public perception ultimately impacting policy decisions.

C. Research Objectives and Methodology

The purpose of this thesis is to assess how the Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster affected political discussions in West Germany and East Germany back in 1986 by exploring its consequent political and social outcomes. This study seeks to shed light on how influential politicians responded to this catastrophic incident, investigate public perception and reactions towards it, as well as discern any modifications made within policies or legislative actions following the disaster. An extensive literature review will thoroughly examine scholarly literature and primary sources, supplemented by additional data from secondary sources and statistical surveys as deemed necessary. The primary focus of this research is to analyze the similarities and differences in political debates between West Germany and East Germany during the given time period, utilizing a qualitative methodology that employs content analysis and comparative techniques to extract valuable insights.

II. Literature Review

A. Overview of existing literature on the Chernobyl disaster

The extensive collection of literature available provides a thorough analysis of the Chernobyl disaster. Including detailed accounts of the events and the far-reaching consequences of this significant nuclear catastrophe. Marples (1986) has made significant contributions to this field through his publications, specifically "The Chernobyl Disaster" and "A Chernobyl Diary, 28 April to 14 May 1986." These works meticulously explore the factors that led to the accident and offer valuable insights into the effective crisis management strategies employed in response. Marples' research serves as an invaluable resource for comprehending the technical complexities surrounding the accident and understanding the immediate response measures that were implemented. Additionally, "A Chernobyl Diary" provides a firsthand and personal account that offers distinct perspectives on the early stages of the disaster and the subsequent challenges confronted (Marples, 1986).

B. Analysis of previous studies on political debates in West Germany and East Germany in 1986

The aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster sparked significant political debates in East and West Germany. And Joppkes' (1990) compelling study titled "Nuclear Power Struggles after Chernobyl: The case of West Germany" delves into these discussions. Focusing primarily on West Germany, Joppke offers an analysis of how responses and policy changes related to nuclear power unfolded post-Chernobyl. This research aims to analyze the influence of various political actors, including political parties, environmental organizations, and government agencies, in shaping discourses related to nuclear energy. Joppkes' study on the political landscape in West Germany after the Chernobyl disaster effectively demonstrates the impact of this event on energy policies and the subsequent emergence of heated debates within the nuclear industry. Joppke offers valuable insights into how the disaster influenced and shaped nuclear energy discussions.

C. Identification of gaps in the literature

Even though an extensive body of literature surrounds the Chernobyl disaster and its consequent political implications, notable gaps still require further exploration. Specifically, Our current understanding regarding how exactly this tragedy influenced political debates within East Germany remains limited. Despite recognizing its broader impact across German society as documented by existing literature, we lack a comprehensive analysis of detailed political responses and resultant policy changes, specifically within East Germany itself. Moreover, research exploring its social impact spanning West Germany and East Germany remains scarce. To acquire a truly encompassing comprehension regarding broader implications stemming from this catastrophic event within both regions, further investigations exploring public perception alongside societal transformations become indispensable – simultaneously examining long-term consequences pertaining to public health and environmental awareness alike. Thus, this thesis seeks to bridge these existing gaps by advancing our comprehension of intricate politico-social consequences arising from Chernobyl's nuclear reactor disaster and its ensuing effects on political debates within West Germany and East Germany during 1986.

III. The Political Context in West Germany and East Germany in 1986

A. Overview of the political landscape in West Germany and East Germany

In 1986 West Germany and East Germany were operating under different political systems and faced distinct challenges. West Germany, being a democratic country, had a multi-party system that consisted of the dominant parties - the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The political landscape in West Germany was notable for its strong emphasis on environmentalism and growing opposition towards nuclear energy. The

Green Party, established in 1980, had gained considerable traction and significantly influenced the political discussions regarding nuclear power.

On another note entirely lies East Germany - an embodiment of socialist principles primarily guided by its governing body known as the Socialist Unity Party (SED). This ruling faction effortlessly wielded control over all realms of politics within its territory while severely hampering any potential for political diversity to flourish. Forging ahead with utmost determination on industrialization and economic development fronts became paramount objectives for SED - comporting nuclear energy as a vital cog within their larger energy framework. As such, the East German government found themselves vested in garnering unwavering support for nuclear energy while subtly understating any inherent risks that might manifest.

B. Key political actors and their positions on nuclear energy

In West Germany, political actors had a range of opinions regarding nuclear energy. Under Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's guidance, the SPD had historically shown support for nuclear power. However, the devastating Chernobyl incident caused a shift in their position, and some members began advocating for a gradual elimination of nuclear energy. On the other hand. The CDU, led by Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Took a more cautious approach but still acknowledged the significance of nuclear energy in terms of the countrys' energy security. Meanwhile, the Green Party emerged as a prominent force in the political landscape and staunchly opposed nuclear energy urging its immediate abandonment.

Within East Germany, the SED maintained a viewpoint that favored nuclear power due to its representation of scientific advancement and economic growth. The government's overarching

objective revolved around curtailing any risks associated with nuclear energy while steadily advocating for its expansion. Nevertheless, there were also individuals in East Germany who voiced apprehensions regarding the safety of nuclear power and its possible effects on both the people and the environment.

C. Factors influencing political debates in both countries

The political debates on nuclear energy in both West Germany and East Germany were influenced by several factors. In West Germany, the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster was instrumental in triggering an escalation in public concern and creating widespread recognition of the potential dangers inherent in nuclear power. The influential environmental movement backed by the Green Party and various citizen groups played a noteworthy role in shaping public opinion and influencing political discussions. Moreover, it is worth acknowledging the invaluable role that the media has played in disseminating information about the catastrophe and its aftermath, thereby fostering meaningful discourse among the general public.

The government's tight control of information flow in East Germany restricted public awareness and hindered meaningful debate. The SED's dedication to industrialization and economic progress posed challenges for dissenting perspectives to gain momentum. Nevertheless, even amidst limited political pluralism, the catastrophic Chernobyl incident did spark discussions within intellectual and scientific circles regarding the safety of nuclear energy.

The overarching discourse revolving around politics in both West Germany and East Germany was heavily shaped by prevalent ideological outlooks, public sentiment trends, involvement of environmental organizations, and governmental priorities. Significantly altering this landscape was the fateful Chernobyl disaster which resulted in widespread awareness

regarding the risks emanating from nuclear energy usage. This incident undeniably acted as a catalyst for transforming political standpoints while also fueling extensive policy debates across these two countries.

IV. The Social Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster

A. Public perception and reaction to the accident in West Germany

The ramifications of the Chernobyl disaster resonated deeply within West Germany, shaping how people viewed and reacted to it profoundly. The incident instilled widespread anxiety while eliciting valid apprehensions surrounding nuclear power's potential perils. Media outlets seized upon this tragedy through extensive coverage, featuring striking visuals showcasing the compromised reactor alongside harrowing accounts detailing Europe's contamination by radioactive fallout. As a result, societal consciousness surged significantly, fostering escalating skepticism among individuals while simultaneously undermining their faith in relying on nuclear energy sources.

Following the disaster, a wave of anti-nuclear sentiment emerged within the German populace. Protests and demonstrations advocating for the gradual elimination of nuclear power gained traction. Environmental organizations like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth played a vital role in galvanizing public backing and fostering consciousness regarding the perils linked to nuclear energy. This swelling opposition from the general public towards nuclear power significantly affected the political scenario. Shaping discourse among political figures and triggering policy alterations intended to lessen dependency on nuclear energy.

B. Public perception and reaction to the accident in East Germany

The perception and reaction of the public in East Germany towards the Chernobyl disaster were distinct from those in West Germany. The government exercised strict control over information dissemination, downplaying the gravity of the accident and portraying it as a distant occurrence with minimal repercussions for East Germany through official media channels. They depicted the incident as an operator error rather than acknowledging systemic deficiencies within the nuclear industry.

The governments' attempts to shape the narrative were not entirely successful, as there remained a certain level of public awareness and apprehension regarding the potential dangers of nuclear energy. The scarcity of information, coupled with the governments' assurances of safety, resulted in a varied response from the population. At the same time, some individuals retained faith in the government's assertions and stood by nuclear energy. Others grew more doubtful and sought out alternative sources of information.

C. Comparison of social responses in both countries

The response to the Chernobyl disaster in West Germany differed significantly from that in East Germany. In the western part of the country, the incident served as a catalyst for the anti-nuclear movement and intensified existing apprehensions regarding the safety of nuclear power. Consequently, public opinion became more doubtful and evaluative regarding nuclear energy, fostering enhanced activism and calls for reform.

In East Germany the governments influence over information and its endorsement of nuclear energy as a sign of advancement had a profound impact on the response. The public reaction was relatively restrained and varied. Given the limited opportunities for people to voice their opinions and disagreements. Nonetheless there were individuals and organizations in East

Germany who voiced their apprehensions about the safety of nuclear energy despite the governments efforts to downplay the incident.

In the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster, it became evident that the response from society was deeply influenced by media coverage, governmental control over information, and grassroots activism. Significantly, the responses witnessed in West Germany and East Germany highlighted the undeniable influence of political and ideological forces in shaping public perspectives and participation in nuclear energy matters.

V. Political Debates in West Germany

A. Analysis of political debates in West Germany after the Chernobyl disaster

The Chernobyl disaster profoundly impacted political discourse in West Germany, sparking extensive debates and prompting a reassessment of the countrys' reliance on nuclear energy. This incident further intensified ongoing deliberations surrounding the safety and viability of nuclear power. The various political parties engaged in heated discussions, with the Green Party assuming a prominent role in opposing nuclear energy and advocating for its complete abandonment. Simultaneously internal divisions arose within both the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) as certain members began to question the future of nuclear power within Germany.

B. Influence of Chernobyl disaster on political parties and public opinion

Undoubtedly, one cannot downplay the significance of the Chernobyl disasters influence on public sentiment, which created substantial pressure for political parties operating within West Germany. This momentous event resulted in a paradigm shift, remarkably altering people's attitudes toward nuclear energy while amplifying existing concerns about its safety measures.

The Green Party adeptly seized upon this growing anti-nuclear movement and witnessed an upsurge in their support base as they championed environmental causes. Consequently, other political parties were compelled to adapt by acknowledging this evolving change among voters and addressing their anxieties accordingly.

C. Policy changes and legislative actions in response to the Chernobyl disaster

Following the tragic Chernobyl disaster, West Germany recognized the importance of implementing substantial policy changes and enacting legislative actions. Chancellor Helmut Kohl's government responded to the public outcry and growing anti-nuclear sentiment by taking various measures. In 1986 one of these measures was the creation of the Nuclear Energy Consensus (Atomkonsens) (Sergiusz, 2019). This consensus's objective was to gradually reduce reliance on nuclear power and instead encourage greater utilization of renewable energy sources. Consequently, nuclear power plants in West Germany were steadily decommissioned, and more attention was given to developing renewable energy alternatives.

The government took legislative actions to impose more stringent safety regulations and enhance the transparency surrounding nuclear facilities. Additionally, the authorities placed great emphasis on the significance of public involvement in decision-making processes concerning nuclear energy. These policy changes and legislative actions signify the impact of the Chernobyl disaster on political discussions and showcase the governments' attentiveness toward public anxieties (Insch & Loughran, 2022).

The Chernobyl disaster had a profound impact on political discourse in West Germany. It prompted a reassessment of the nation's energy strategy, and fueled a rise in opposition to

nuclear power. It also instigated substantial policy adjustments and legal measures to diminish dependence on nuclear energy while advancing renewable alternatives.

VI. Political Debates in East Germany

A. Analysis of political debates in East Germany following the Chernobyl disaster

The Chernobyl disaster left a lasting impact on political debates conducted within East German borders; nevertheless, these exchanges diverged significantly when juxtaposed against those held within West German territory. To maintain public confidence levels toward nuclear industry endeavors, governmental authorities implemented stringent measures controlling information propagation channels while diminishing accounts projecting high severity levels regarding this incident's consequences. As such, measures took root here domestically ultimately lending themselves to shaping the discourse; it became evident that political discussions within East German environment remained less openly contested than such exchanges occurring westward across the border. Nonetheless, within specialized intellectual and scientific circles, debates surrounding nuclear energy safety persisted alongside growing demands calling for enhanced transparency measures.

B. Influence of the accident on political parties and public opinion

The impact of the Chernobyl disaster on political parties and public opinion in East Germany was greatly influenced by the government's tight grip on information. The ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) steadfastly supported nuclear energy and stressed its significance for economic growth. Despite some apprehension among certain groups, the governments' communication downplayed the dangers with the aim of retaining public backing for nuclear

power. Consequently, in East Germany, public sentiment towards nuclear energy was relatively muted and less responsive compared to West Germany.

C. Policy changes and legislative actions in response to the disaster

In light of the Chernobyl disaster, East Germany took certain measures and passed laws although to a lesser degree than West Germany. The government stressed the importance of enhancing safety measures in nuclear power plants and enacting stricter regulations in the nuclear sector. Nevertheless, the main objective of their policy continued to revolve around sustaining and augmenting nuclear energy production to fulfill the nations' energy requirements.

The Chernobyl disaster should be acknowledged as a significant event that took place during a period of political and economic change in East Germany. At that time, the country's primary focus was on larger societal and political transformations leading up to German reunification resulting in limited immediate effects on energy policies. Nonetheless, the incident did play a role in raising awareness about the potential hazards linked to nuclear energy. This newfound understanding subsequently influenced discussions and policies surrounding the reunification process.

In essence, the political debates in East Germany after the Chernobyl disaster revolved around how powerfully influenced they were by governmental control over information dissemination and their unwavering support for nuclear energy. At the same time, there may have been meager deliberations within intellectual and scientific communities. It is fair to say that public sentiment and political party positions hinged largely on how effectively the government conveyed its messaging. However, certain policy revisions occurred alongside legislative initiatives. Their impact paled insignificantly compared to those witnessed in West

Germany, in light of East Germany prioritizing matters of political transformation and national reunion at that particular juncture.

VII. Comparison and Contrast of Political Debates in West Germany and East Germany

A. Similarities and differences in political responses

How West Germany and East Germany responded to the Chernobyl disaster had similarities and differences. One similarity was that both countries saw an increase in public awareness and worry about the dangers of nuclear energy. The accidents led to discussions about the safety of nuclear power and greater scrutiny of the nuclear industry in both places. However, the main difference was how open and participatory the political debates were. West Germany had a strong anti-nuclear movement, with protests, demonstrations, and increased pressure on the government to address public concerns. In contrast, the government in East Germany tightly controlled the narrative and downplayed the severity of the accident. As a result, public involvement and disagreement were significantly restricted (Insch & Loughran, 2020).

B. What contributed to variations in political debates

Several factors contributed to the divergence in political debates between West Germany and East Germany. Among these, the political systems and levels of political pluralism played a crucial role. In West Germany, a democratic system fostered a greater spectrum of political parties and open discussions. This conducive political environment gave rise to the Green Party, which vehemently opposed nuclear energy. Conversely, East Germany adhered to a socialist regime characterized by limited political pluralism and centralized decision-making. As a result, the government's response was more controlled and uniform (Peters, 1992).

It is worth noting that significant differences existed regarding the role of mass communication channels and accessibility of knowledge between these two nations. Specifically addressing West Germany, here lies an instance where mass communication assumed paramount importance as it provided valuable insights and broadly influenced public opinion for an informed and active participatory citizen base. In stark contradistinction lay East Germany's reality, where governmental authority controlled its mass communication channels extensively, curtailing access to knowledge and shaping public outlook to align perfectly with their personal agenda.

C. Impact of the Chernobyl disaster on German reunification

The Chernobyl disaster had an indirect impact on the process of German reunification. Although it did not directly influence the reunification itself, it had wider implications for the political situation during that period. The disaster raised public awareness and anxiety about nuclear power in both East and West Germany, thereby contributing to a greater sense of environmental consciousness and anti-nuclear sentiments in German society. These sentiments played a role in shaping the political landscape and public opinion during the reunification process. The disaster highlighted the need for environmental cooperation and emphasized the importance of sustainable and safe energy sources, ultimately influencing energy policies and discussions during the reunification negotiations (Snell, 1988).

VIII. Conclusion

A. Summary of findings

This thesis examined the political and social repercussions of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster on April 26th, 1986, specifically focusing on its influence on political debates

1986 in both West Germany and East Germany. A literature review was conducted to survey existing research on the Chernobyl disaster to establish a foundation for this study. The analysis of previous studies encompassed an exploration of political debates in both countries while also identifying areas that have yet to be thoroughly addressed in the literature.

The research findings underscored that the Chernobyl disaster profoundly affected political discussions and how the general public viewed nuclear energy in West Germany. It catalyzed a change in public opinion resulting in an upsurge of opposition towards nuclear power and an increase in anti-nuclear activism political factions, including the Green Party. They capitalized on this burgeoning anti-nuclear sentiment shaping political conversations and prompting modifications in policies and laws to decrease dependence on nuclear energy.

In East Germany, the government exerted meticulous control over the narrative and understated the gravity of the accident; public opinion appeared restrained. In comparison, political debates lacked openness as compared to West Germany. Emphasizing its significance for economic advancement, the government unwaveringly maintained its commitment to nuclear energy.

B. Evaluation of research objectives

The research aims of examining the political and social consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe on political discussions in West Germany and East Germany have been accomplished. The study thoroughly analyzed the political environment, public viewpoint, and policy adjustments made in reaction to the disaster in both nations by exploring the resemblances and disparities in political debates. The research highlighted the contrasting reactions and influences shaping these discussions.

C. Implications and significance of the study

The results of this research have important implications for our understanding of the wider effects of the Chernobyl tragedy on political and social contexts. The study reveals how a major nuclear disaster can shape political discussions, public opinions, and policy adjustments in democratic and socialist societies. Furthermore, this investigation enhances our knowledge of nuclear history by shedding light on the enduring consequences and societal reactions to nuclear incidents.

D. Suggestions for future research

Further research could delve into the long-term repercussions of the Chernobyl disaster on the public's overall well-being, promoting environmental consciousness and advancing renewable energy sources in both West Germany and East Germany. Furthermore, conducting comparative studies may shed light on the political and societal ramifications of other significant nuclear accidents or illuminate the Chernobyl catastrophe's influence on countries beyond Germany. Investigating how political choices, popular sentiment, and energy policies intersected following nuclear disasters would undoubtedly deepen our comprehension of the intricate dynamics surrounding these occurrences.

Considering everything, it becomes apparent that the Chernobyl disaster carried significant weight in terms of its effects on politics and society in West Germany and East Germany. The incident sparked intense debates within the political sphere, reshaped public opinions about similar hazards, and led to policy alterations pertaining to energy matters. Henceforth this research significantly enhances our comprehension of how history was shaped by the Chernobyl catastrophe while molding various aspects of German politics and society.

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