

BEYOND VICTIMHOOD AND STIGMATIZATION

Trauma, Ruptured Memories and Agency
in the Context of Global MigrationFrom trauma to chronic crisis: Mobility and migration of the
Chernobyl children from Belarus to Italy

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Abstract (1000 characters)

The Chernobyl nuclear disaster occurred in 1986. The most affected country was Belarus (23.5% of the territory, 35% of the population). Children born before and after 1986 were rendered most vulnerable, with thyroid cancer being one of the growing diseases over time (from 600 cases in 1996 to 11,000 cases in 2016). The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and the Iron Curtain fell. This provided “a window of opportunity” for Western NGOs (primarily European, but also North American) to expand their operations to the “East” and organize recuperative stays for Chernobyl children abroad. Italy was the most active country that has hosted more than 460,000 Belarusian children in families since 1993. For some of these children frequent mobility between Belarus and Italy in childhood and adolescence resulted into their permanent migration to Italy in adulthood for studies, work, and marriage. This paper sets to investigate how trauma and chronic crisis of Chernobyl was established and resulted in the need to recuperate children affected by the nuclear disaster abroad and what consequences this recuperation has brought.

Theoretical approach (700 characters)

This study combines two theoretical concepts – trauma (Fassin & Rechman, 2009; Zhukova, 2020) and chronic crisis (Vigh, 2008; Zhukova, 2019) – in order to investigate how different temporalities, spatialities, and responsibilities intersected in constituting individuals, communities, and societies in relation to a traumatic occurrence, the material consequences of which have not been resolved. While trauma was a result of a “rupture”, “a short-term explosive situation”, “a moment of decisive change”, or a “turning point”, chronic crisis represented “fragmentation”, a “durable and persistence circumstance”, a “condition”, or “a state of affairs” (Vigh, 2008: 9-10). The study centers on survivors agency and how they have coped with the consequences of the nuclear disaster during mobility and migration to Italy.

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Bio (350 characters)

Ekatherina started with cultural sociological theories of trauma (Eyerman, 2011) and looked at how state actors constructed the national trauma of Chernobyl in Belarus and Ukraine. She then moved towards more anthropological theories (Ticktin, 2014) and looked at how child survivors of Chernobyl experienced trauma over time. She engaged with the concept of chronic crisis (Vigh, 2008) to address the prolonged consequences of radiation.

**Empirical findings / observations (700 characters)**

The trauma of Chernobyl turned chronic crisis can be exemplified via these two interview extracts: (1) “When you move here [to Italy], you are told to wait at least 1 year before getting pregnant; they tell you to wait for 1-2 years. My doctor sent me to do breast screening, he said that it is normally recommended for people above 50 years old, but I was recommended to do it now, in advance. He said that it is because I come from the [Chernobyl] zone, it is better to check in advance” (Interviewee, born 1975); (2) “I have also developed, but only recently, gynecological problems. Many link these problems to Chernobyl, but noone can tell whether it is related to Chernobyl or not” (Interviewee, born 1986).

(Research) Questions with regard to trauma & migration (400 characters)

- How has the trauma of Chernobyl developed for children?
- How has the trauma of Chernobyl turned into chronic crisis for children?
- How have recuperation programmes for the Chernobyl children in Italy been reasoned and justified in relation to trauma and chronic crisis?
- How have they formulated the problem and solutions, its “victims”, “perpetrators”, and “saviours”?
- How have these formulations been internalized and rejected by those they were applied to?
- What have the consequences of this acceptance and rejection been?
- How have the trauma and chronic crisis of Chernobyl contributed to migration of youth to Italy?
- How have the grown up Chernobyl children been coping with the trauma and chronic crisis over time?

Methods (700 characters)

The empirical material consisted of ethnographic interviews with grown-up Chernobyl children, Italian NGO reports, and Italian media reports. 16 ethnographic interviews were conducted in Belarus and Italy during autumn 2017 with several generations of the Chernobyl children who went to Italy for recuperation (born between 1975 and 2000). In addition, 10 reports from 3 Italian NGOs (*Puer*, *Legambiente*, and *Progetto Humus*) were analysed. Finally, 13 news articles from *La Repubblica* were selected for the analysis (period 2011-2018). Qualitative thematic analysis was applied to the material in an abductive fashion to distill the concepts of trauma and chronic crisis. The concept of chronic crisis was captured through temporality and spatiality of radioactive contamination on human bodies and nature.

Motivation, Input Thoughts and Questions (400 characters)

- What is trauma’s ontology and epistemology? When studying trauma, do we focus on individual, collective, social, national or transnational levels?
- What theoretical concepts can be used to study trauma in global migration?
- What are the best methodologies to capture trauma in global migration? What is the role of ethnography, interviews, diaries, and documents in understanding trauma? How can trauma be analysed?
- Would engaging in interdisciplinarity in studying trauma be fruitful? How can it be achieved?