

EXCLUSIVE: RUSSIA FINALLY REVEALS HOW AN ATOMIC SUBMARINE CATASTROPHE LEFT 10 SAILORS DEAD AND A TOWN RADIOACTIVE

THE world was shocked and frightened by the Chernobyl disaster. But The Mail on Sunday can reveal today that it was not the first Soviet nuclear catastrophe.

On August 10, 1985 — 13 months before Chernobyl — the reactor of a Victor-class submarine exploded during a routine refit, killing ten sailors and spreading radioactive fall-out over a wide area.

A secret board of investigation was later to describe it as the worst accident in the entire history of the Soviet Navy.

At the time, the Kremlin ordered a cover-up. But Russian journalist Yelena Vazrshavskaya has visited the base, Shkotovo-22, near Vladivostock, and interviewed eye witnesses.

Her report has shocked the entire country. It is printed here for the first time in the West.

THE accident happened when the shield of the reactor warped as it was being lifted by a crane. The impact triggered a nuclear reaction and superheated steam burst from the heart of the core which then detonated.

At first no one realised it had been a nuclear explosion. There was no mushroom cloud in the air and the first men on the scene thought the submarine's boiler had blown up.

But there was a thundery freshness in the air, and a smell of ozone — one of the most reliable indicators that a nuclear reaction was taking place.

V. Mezin, senior lieutenant of a Special Accident Brigade flown in three hours later told me: 'The submarine looked as if it had been trampled by a giant beast.'

The reactor head had been thrown into the air and had landed at the other side of the bay. Radioactive fuel had spilled into the water.

The workers still fighting the blaze did not realise they were in mortal danger from radioactivity. They did not even have protective suits.

Astonished

'A woman technician was taking samples with her bare hands. She asked us to measure them, and our instruments went off the scale.'

The workforce was told to strip off and start washing. Radiation levels were so high they could not even be measured. Everyone was told to shave off their hair.

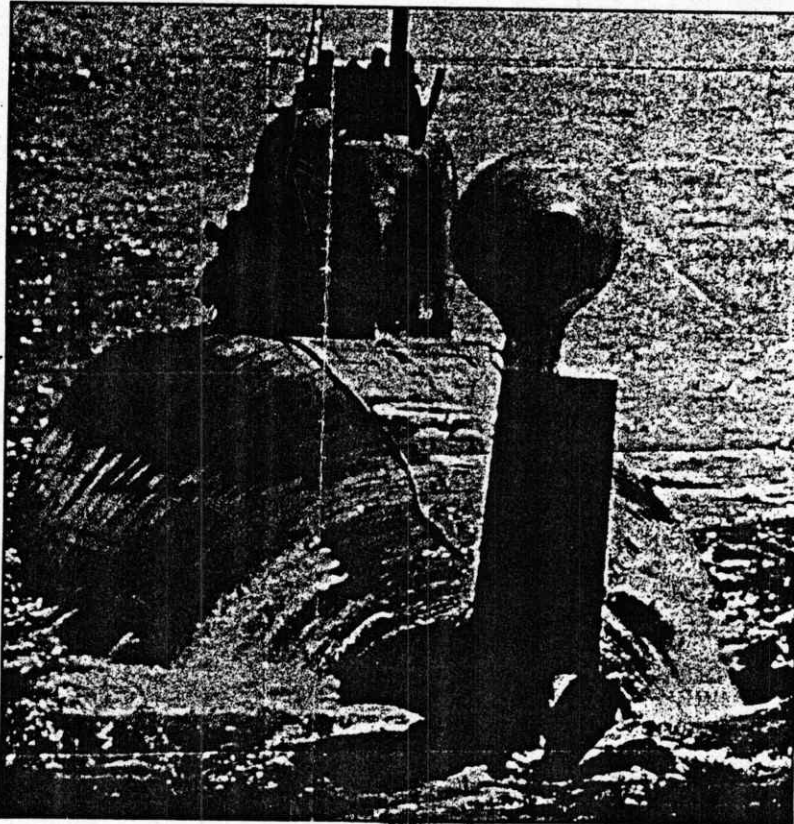
N. Rubtsov, an engineer and deputy in the Regional Soviet said: 'We found a gold ring on the body of one of the victims. Only then was it possible to establish the high levels that radiation had reached.'

The next morning, L. Grigorieva, director of the local pioneers club, was travelling into a nearby town from the airport.

'Suddenly the bus stopped, and we were ordered out,' he said. 'I was astonished to see the road entirely covered in polythene, and soldiers with polythene bags on their feet.'

'No one would tell us what was happening, and that night the evening television news did not report an accident.'

'The next day I went to see a shipyard worker. I shuddered when I saw him. His face was



COVER UP: A Victor-class sub. of the type which brought nuclear horror months before Chernobyl

The nuclear disaster that stayed a secret

By YELENA VAZRSHAVSKAYA

unrecognisable. He was completely bald and his cheeks had sunk.

'Sasha what's happened to you?'

'There's been a nuclear explosion,' he said. I ran home to telephone relatives in another part of the country to say we were coming. Then the lines were cut.'

The military command had by now arrived to organise the cover-up. Local people say they have never seen so many black Zil limousines in one place at one time.

Workers were told the accident had not been nuclear. It had been a 'thermal explosion'.

But they were made to sign documents promising never to disclose what had happened.

A thousand men were ordered to

deal with contamination. As a first step they established paths on the site and marked them off with wire and red rags. Workers were informed that these paths were 'safe'.

The base log for October 11 reports that more than 600 tons of contaminated material were removed. Three pits were dug in the hills not far from the town and the lethal material crudely dumped in them.

Graves

The remains of the ten sailors were buried in specially prepared graves. The submarine itself was towed away (minus the reactor) to a sandbank outside the bay and scuttled.

The inhabitants of Shkotovo-22 told me they should be paid compensation and a health polyclinic should be built.

I. Grishan, chairman of the

Town Soviet says: 'I consider that the radiation conditions here remain unsuitable. Every spring when the ground thaws a high level of radiation is released.'

Recently high radioactivity was discovered in a children's sandpit.

But so far there has been no aid for Shkotovo-22. Instead, more secret military installations are being built in the area.

A year ago an ammunition dump (non-nuclear) blew up. Shells flew over the heads of the townspeople for a day, exploding in or near the town.

Since the accident more than 7,000 people have left. But others have chosen to stay.

It is dangerous, but at least there is work available, because Shkotovo-22 is now a civilian port as well.

A huge merchant ship is now in the dry dock. 'We are earning hard currency,' explained the management.

Remains of nuclear products