PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Episode 161:
Title: “Chernobyl”
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- Circle, highlight and note anything that you want. We have even provided space for you to do so!

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- Don’t worry about understanding every single word. Just focus on training your ears to the sound of English.

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00 :00	Welcome to the Déclic Anglais Podcast, THE podcast for intermediate, French-speaking learners of English. This podcast is like a steppingstone *(un tremplin)* to help you understand more advanced materials in English. There is a transcript *(une transcription)* available for this and every episode of this podcast. You can download the transcript for free from the link in the description of this episode. Or go to **www.declicanglais.com/podcast.** *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*
01:04 02:05	Hello there, dear listeners! This is Tom, your English teacher and host on the Déclic Anglais Podcast. I hope you are all well. This episode is being released in April 2026. And this month marks exactly forty years since one of the most catastrophic events of the twentieth century: the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Soviet Ukraine. Four decades on, Chernobyl remains a powerful reminder of the dangers of nuclear technology — and the importance of transparency in government. This episode is not a criticism of nuclear technology. In today's episode, we'll explore what happened on that night in April 1986, what the consequences were for the Soviet Union, for Ukraine, and for Europe as a whole — and also what the site looks like today. And of course, dear listeners, we will also explore some very useful vocabulary. I always try to speak clearly, but don't hesitate to use the transcript *(la transcription)* that is available for this episode. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*

03:00	Alright then, dear listeners. Let's now go on a journey, back in time to 1986 (a little before my lifetime!) Our journey takes us to the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant *(la centrale nucléaire de Tchernobyl)*, located near the town of Pripyat in northern Ukraine. At that time, Ukraine was not an independent country, it was still a part of the USSR – the Soviet Union *(l'Union soviétique).* *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*
04:00 04:39	It's very early in the morning, about 1 o'clock, on Saturday, the twenty-sixth April 1986. Ukraine and most of Europe is fast asleep. But at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, teams of engineers are not relaxing – far from it! They are carrying out a safety test on the plant's Number Four reactor. Now, dear listeners, here's where it gets a little complicated, so bear with me *(c'est là que ça se complique un peu, alors soyez indulgents avec moi).* A nuclear reactor works by controlling a process called nuclear fission *(la fission nucléaire).*What basically happens in nuclear fission is that atoms are split apart – broken, if you like. And when this happens, it releases enormous amounts of energy as heat *(la chaleur).*This heat is used to boil water into steam *(cette chaleur sert à faire bouillir de l'eau pour produire de la vapeur)* –and in turn, this steam *(this water vapour)* is used to drive turbines which generate electricity. It's an amazing process! *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*

06:23	The problem with this nuclear reaction is that you can't just turn it off. Imagine, dear listeners, that you have an electric kettle in your kitchen *(imaginez, que vous ayez une bouilloire électrique dans votre cuisine).* On a normal kettle, the electricity automatically stops when the water is boiled, doesn't it? But now let's imagine that your kettle is like a nuclear reactor. Your water gets hotter and hotter, it starts boiling – but the electricity won't stop automatically. If you don't want your nuclear kettle to burn down your house, there is only one solution – you must keep adding cold water to the kettle *(Si vous ne voulez pas que votre bouilloire nucléaire mette le feu à votre maison, la seule solution est de continuer à y verser de l'eau froide).* *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*
07:58	The cold water converts the heat into steam, and so your house is safe – but probably like a sauna! This isn't a great system for making tea and coffee, but it's a great system for generating electricity. This method is only safe if you can cool the system by continually adding cold water. If for some reason you can't add cold water, well… You have a big problem! *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*
08:39	In 1986, the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant was one of the newest and most advanced power plants in the Soviet Union. The Number Four Reactor was also the newest reactor in the power plant. On the morning of the twenty-sixth April, the engineers wanted to test the cooling system on the reactor *(les ingénieurs voulaient tester le système de refroidissement du réacteur).* *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*

09:23 10:11	But the test went badly wrong. It's quite complicated to explain how it happened exactly – but a combination of design flaws *(des défauts de conception)* in the reactor itself and critical errors made by the operators caused the reactor to become very unstable. The reactor overheated *(le réacteur a surchauffé)* catastrophically. There followed two explosions in quick succession - the second one being so violent that it was equivalent to about 225 tons of TNT and killed two engineers. But that wasn't all. The explosion blew the entire roof off the reactor building, exposing the burning nuclear core directly to the open air. About 190 tons of highly radioactive nuclear fuel was exposed to the atmosphere, which began spilling out and contaminating the surrounding environment. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*
11:12	The first people to respond were firefighters from the local station *(les pompiers de la caserne locale)*... And dear listeners, they had absolutely no idea what they were dealing with. They arrived thinking it was just an ordinary industrial fire. Many of them received lethal doses of radiation within hours. Many of the first responders (the emergency workers) were later diagnosed with acute radiation syndrome. Dear listeners, radiation sickness is an absolutely horrific way to die. You wouldn't wish it on your worst enemy! *(On ne souhaiterait ça à personne, même pas à son pire ennemi).*Twenty-eight *(28)* first responders died within the first few months of the disaster. Their bravery — and their tragedy — has never been forgotten. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*
12:55	The initial response of the Soviet government was, shall we say — and this is putting it diplomatically, dear listeners — deeply inadequate. As many of you might know already, the government of the Soviet Union was authoritarian and highly secretive. They were very slow to acknowledge the true scale of the disaster. At the time of the catastrophe, Pripyat was a city of about forty-nine thousand people *(49,000)* living just a few kilometers from the Chernobyl site – indeed, a great number of the inhabitants worked at the power plant. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*

14:00	Dear listeners, despite the fact that the air was contaminated with highly radioactive, highly toxic materials, it took thirty-six *(36)* hours for the authorities to decide to evacuate the city. Can you imagine that? An entire city was living next to a burning nuclear reactor for a day and half, and the government did nothing. When the order to evacuate Pripyat finally came, residents were told: “it’s only a minor incident, so take only what you need for three days.” The authorities assured the residents that they would be able to return shortly. Well, dear listeners, most of the evacuees never ever went back to Pripyat. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*
15:23	Now, dear listeners, in the days following the explosion, no one outside of the Soviet Union knew anything about what had happened at Chernobyl. *(Dans les jours qui ont suivi l'explosion, personne en dehors de l'Union soviétique n'était au courant de ce qui s'était passé à Tchernobyl).* *Comment ça, Tom ? Le gouvernement soviétique n'a pas prévenu les pays voisins de la présence de radiations ?* *NYET, comrades!* The Soviet government said NOTHING to other countries. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*
16:17	The first alarms went off at a nuclear power plant in Sweden *(en Suède)*, about 1,100 kilometres away from Chernobyl. On the 28th April, two days after the explosion in Chernobyl, workers at the Forsmark Nuclear Power Plant were shocked when their radiation monitors started ringing. Their first thought was: “Oh no! We have a radiation leak in one of our reactors!” *(Les ingénieurs suédois ont pensé : « Nous avons une fuite radioactive dans l'un de nos réacteurs. »).* *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*

17:18	They checked and double-checked the reactors, everything was fine. But the radiation level was still so high! The same happened across Europe – scientists kept discovering abnormally high levels of radiation, but no one knew where it was coming from. Scientists quickly traced the contamination back to the Soviet Union. Only then did Moscow begin to acknowledge what had happened.
18:02	The Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev later admitted that the accident was one of the key factors that forced him to pursue his policy of *glasnost*— a Russian word meaning openness or transparency. The disaster had demonstrated, in the most brutal possible way, that a culture of secrecy and denial was not just politically problematic — it was also deadly in the face of catastrophe like Chernobyl. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*
18:45	Alright then, dear listeners… So, what were the actual consequences? Let's look at this in three parts: the human cost, the environmental impact, and the political fallout (*les retombées politiques)*.
19:10	**The Human Cost** The immediate death toll *(Le nombre immédiat de victimes)* was relatively small in number but of a horrendous nature. In addition to the twenty-eight (28) emergency workers who died of acute radiation syndrome in the weeks and months following the explosion, a further fifteen (15) people died of thyroid cancer that is directly attributable to the disaster. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*

19:49	However, the long-term health consequences are far more complex and still debated by scientists. Hundreds of thousands of so-called liquidators *(les liquidateurs)* — workers brought in to clean up the site and build a containment structure over the reactor — were exposed to significant levels of radiation. Many suffered long-term health problems as a result. The World Health Organisation has estimated that the disaster ultimately caused several thousand additional cancer deaths across Europe. The problem is, dear listeners, it's difficult to be sure. And so, the estimates vary significantly. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*
20:55	**The Environmental Impact** The environmental impact on Ukraine was enormous. The Soviet authorities declared a 30-kilometre exclusion zone around the site, an area of roughly 2,600 square kilometres. Officially it's called the "Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant Zone of Alienation", but sometimes it's called the "30-Kilometre Zone", and sometimes simply "The Zone". If you lived in *The Zone,* you had to leave – you were in great danger! The area straddles the border *(la région est située à cheval sur la frontière)* between Ukraine and Belarus, and it remains largely uninhabited to this day. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*

22:24	The radioactive cloud that rose from the burning reactor drifted across much of Europe. Significant contamination was measured in Belarus, Russia, across Scandinavia, and parts of central and western Europe — including France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. The fallout — and that's both the literal radioactive fallout and the metaphorical political consequences — was felt across the continent. In fact, in my native Wales, three hundred and thirty-four *(334)* farms were affected. It was a difficult time for the farmers, because they couldn't sell their sheep, and they were subject to a number of restrictions. These restrictions were only lifted twenty-six *(26)* years later, in 2012. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*
23:37	**The Political Fallout** Politically, Chernobyl is widely regarded as one of the factors that contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union. Now, the Soviet Union already had its problems before 1986, dear listeners. People were already unhappy with the government and the Soviet system. But the disaster exposed the fundamental weaknesses of the Soviet system *(cette catastrophe a mis en évidence les faiblesses fondamentales du système soviétique)*: the secrecy, the bureaucracy, the inability to respond effectively to a crisis. It deeply shook the Soviet people *(la crise a profondément ébranlé le peuple soviétique).*We could say that, combined with other economic and political pressures, Chernobyl helped to accelerate the collapse of the USSR, which came in 1991 — just five years after the disaster. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*

25:11	So,dear listeners, what does the site of Chernobyl look like forty years on? Well today, Reactor Number Four is now enclosed beneath a massive structure called the New Safe Confinement *(en français, l'arche de Tchernobyl).*The New Safe Confinement is a remarkable feat of engineering. *(L'arche de Tchernobyl est une prouesse technique remarquable).* It is an enormous metal case (a kind of sarcophagus) *(un sarcophage)* that confines what is left of the Number Four Reactor. It was built to prevent the release of further radioactive materials. It is 108 metres tall, and weighs thirty-one thousand *(31,000)* tons. That's four times heavier than the Eiffel tower!
26:45	Not only is it heavy, but it's currently the largest movable structure in the world *(l'arche de Tchernobyl est actuellement la plus grande structure mobile au monde).*Oh yes, dear listeners, it moves! The New Safe Confinement is on rails *(sur des rails).* The New Safe Confinement cost approximately 1.5 billion euros – but it's built to last 100 years *(l'arche est conçue pour durer 100 ans).* *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*
27:45	Now, dear listeners, what would you say if I said that the Chernobyl exclusion zone has become a haven for wildlife? *(Que diriez-vous si je vous disais que la zone d'exclusion de Tchernobyl est devenue un refuge pour les animaux sauvages ?)* *Eh bien, Tom, je dirais que tu es fou !* Ah-ha! Well, believe it or not, it's true! The exclusion zone itself has become, unexpectedly, a haven for wildlife. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*

28:27	Think about it: four decades without humans… No new buildings, no farms and agriculture, no traffic. Over the last forty years, forests have reclaimed much of the land. The animals are loving it! Today you can find bears, wolves, and even some rare animals like lynxes living in the 30-kilometre zone. Nature, it seems, has proven more resilient than many scientists initially expected. But of course, more research is needed to understand the long-term genetic effects of radiation on the animals. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*
29:26	And so, what of Pripyat, the city that we mentioned earlier? Well, today it's a ghost town *(une ville fantôme).*The city was evacuated in 1986 in the week following the explosion and subsequently abandoned. Pripyat today is filled with abandoned buildings that are slowly falling into ruin. Apartments and houses are still filled with furniture. Pripyat was a real, living city. Then suddenly in 1986, everyone was evacuated and they never came back. The city looks like something from a dystopian movie. Today, it's actually safe to visit the entire Chernobyl exclusion zone and you can visit Pripyat, but only under the supervision of local guides. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*
30:44	Alright then, dear listeners, we are coming to the end of this episode. Even though it has been forty years since the disaster, the name Chernobyl still evokes strong emotions for many people. We live in a time where we need to make important decisions about the future of our energy supplies. Chernobyl remains deeply relevant even today — not just as a historical event, but as a lesson about nuclear safety, government transparency, and the relationship between human activity and the natural world. *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*

31:36	Thank you very much for listening to today's episode of *the Déclic Anglais Podcast*. I hope you found it interesting — and that your English has improved a little along the way. As always, don't forget to like this podcast and share it with your friends. Take care of yourselves, dear listeners, and see you next time. Bye for now! *(Ecrivez vos notes ici).*