



Plokhy, Serhii.

Chernobyl: The History of the Nuclear Catastrophe.

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The Ukrainian city Chornobyl, first mentioned in the Kyivan chronicle of 1193, became widely known for an explosion at its nuclear power plant. On the night of April 26, 1986, although less than 5% of the reactor's fuel leaked out, it released 50 million curies of radiation, equivalent to 500 Hiroshima bombs. Although the catastrophe occurred 33 years ago, humanity is still dealing with its consequences today, while Chornobyl and its Exclusion Zone function as an open air museum.¹ The book *Chernobyl: The History of the Nuclear Catastrophe* by Serhii Plokhy, is the first comprehensive history of the disaster.

The author admits he wrote the book as a historian and contemporary of the Chornobyl catastrophe. At the time of the explosion he lived fewer than 500 kilometers from the power plant. Unfortunately, distance did not protect people all over the world from the after effects of the explosion, including the author, who suffers from an enflamed thyroid, a sign of radiation exposure. Several decades after the disaster Serhii Plokhy went on a tour to the Exclusion Zone. Silent and full of abandoned things, it signaled to the author a need for collecting and sharing knowledge about the catastrophe, life after it, and its meaning in contemporary circumstances, when technological issues of the past have supposedly been solved. Currently revealed unique archival materials used in the research increase the value of the investigation with partly personal motivation.

Writing about Serhii Plokhy evokes cinematographic parallels. Chronology as an organizational principle of the book and the sufficiency of psychological detail and portraits provide this effect. The author mentions hobbies and habits, family origins and love stories, and dynamics of the preferences and work/ethic codes of different figures

1 Learn more about Chornobyl as open air museum in the article "Chornobyl as an Open Air Museum: A Polysemic Exploration of Power and Inner Self" by Olga Bertelsen, published in the *Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal* 5 (2018): 1–36.

connected with the notorious location. Even if you've watched the HBO mini series *Chernobyl* based on the works of Svetlana Alexievych, who collected the testimonies of local residents, Plokhy's book will prove to be informative and grasping. Precise attention to human nature, cultivated in the research, reminds us of the main objects of history—people and choices made by people. Therefore, all details, portraits, mood descriptions, and side stories help us learn the circumstances in which and with what intentions people allowed the catastrophe to happen.

Briefly describing the history of Chornobyl from the 12th century, the author continues by thoroughly exploring the modern chronicle of the city from its construction to the completion of its new sarcophagus in May, 2018. The complex past of this land is related in grasping, well-made narratives focused not only on historical and political contexts, but also on social and cultural outcomes.

The author starts with an overview of the political and economical contexts of the time. Plokhy describes how managerial, financial, and international struggles resulted in the strong desire of USSR party leadership to outmatch the entire world at any cost. Economic acceleration was thought to be a fast and impressive solution, however in the long-term it led to a dead failure in different fields, particularly in the energy field. When production had to be increased, the necessity to construct more nuclear plants appeared. The abrupt development of the nuclear sector matched the party's needs and ambitions and the idea of nuclear energy became entrenched among party representatives. As Plokhy writes, everyone wanted to go nuclear.

The author illustrates how discussions considering safety issues were suppressed, while the promotion of the idea of the power plants' harmlessness was popularized. Gorbachev, talking about a zero chance for an explosion, compared the RBMK reactor (high-power channel reactor) to a samovar, while Alexandrov assured that owing to its complete safety the reactor could be installed in Red Square. Needless to say, this would never happen. Instead, the third most powerful nuclear plant in the world was built in Chornobyl, 130 kilometers from the capital of Ukraine, at the intersection of the Dnipro, Desna and Prypiat, the three biggest rivers in the country.

Outlining party needs, policies, methods, and specifics of resources, the author describes the power plant's construction and its work till the day of the explosion. Discussing the plant's construction, Serhii Plokhy demonstrates the costs of economic acceleration. First of all, the terms of the plant's construction were shortened. The minimal 7 year period was shortened to 5 years. This haste led to an increase of challenges, serious neglect of safety measures, and negligence during plant construction and operation. For example, equipment, ordered at minimal cost, was made in factories unfit for the task; building supplies had serious defects; the nuclear plant's foundation lacked proper isolation. Moreover, the decision to use RBMK reactors was made despite the lack of proper security tests. As Serhii Plokhy writes, power plant designers were so confident in RBMK safety that they allowed cost reduction by not building a concrete structure which would contain radiation in the case of a reactor failure.

In discussing power plant operation, the author highlights the intense pressure placed on workers and engineers, an oppressive bureaucracy, and the catastrophic

results of censorship and government domination in the sciences. It is important to realize that information about major technical weaknesses in the design of the RBMK reactor remained under wraps as did data about incidents at other nuclear plants.

The events of the night of April 26, 1986 are thoroughly described. The author uses multiple focalization, which means that he describes crucial events from the perspective of different people: power plant engineers, firefighters, their family members, citizens, party leaders, journalists, foreigners, and international community representatives. The author then outlines the multiple consequences of the disaster in people's lives, in demography, ecology, engineering, the economy, social movements, art, journalism, nation-building, the functioning of the Soviet system, international relations, and basic freedoms. One of the most important stories is the development of the Ukrainian national movement on the basis of the disaster.

At the end of *Chernobyl: The History of the Nuclear Catastrophe*, Serhii Ploky discusses the consequences of the explosion and the lengthy and costly building of the sarcophagus. The European Union and USA took active part in improving the ecological situation, while the Russian government, despite being the guilty party, did nothing. Furthermore, despite the Budapest memorandum on guaranteeing the sovereignty of a nuclear-free Ukraine, signed by the USA, Russia, and Great Britain, Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and unleashed a war in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Serhii Ploky discusses the reaction of the international community on the mentioned aggression and also provides data about countries that even after the tragic Chornobyl experience attempt to construct insufficiently financed nuclear power plants. The author relates that 21 such reactors have been constructed in China, 9 in Russia, 6 in India, 4 in the UAE, and 2 in Pakistan. Notably, a nuclear explosion occurred on August 13, 2019 in a Russian village near Arkhangelsk. Aftermaths included canceled evacuation plans, unknown radiation levels, and rumors of new weapons development in a new arms race. Such a current development makes Ploky's research topical indeed.

One confusing aspect of the book cannot be left without comment. Despite using the Ukrainian spellings of Kyiv and Prypiat, which is logical, the author uses the Russian spellings of Chernobyl and the Dniepr (river). The book starts with the phrase "there are eight of us on the trip to Chernobyl, marked on my Ukrainian map as 'Chornobyl'" (p. 12). Chornobyl is a Ukrainian city and there is no sound reason to rethink its history under a Russian naming. Especially taking into consideration that the Soviet government enabled the catastrophe and that the Russian government later unleashed a war against Ukraine, which in Ploky's book is termed a Russo-Ukrainian armed conflict and hybrid war.

Another point concerns the variety of the discussion concerning the consequences of the disaster. Whereas the book is the first comprehensive history of the disaster and the author outlines the impact of the Chornobyl explosion on different social activities, it would be appropriate to mention its affect on women's movements. For instance, The Ukrainian National Women's League of America (UNWLA) made many efforts to break the informational iron curtain veiling the disaster and constantly raised the Chornobyl issue in the international arena. UNWLA leadership corresponded on Chornobyl issues

with President Reagan, the Prime Minister of Canada, the German government, and the World Health Organization. Not to mention that at the 24th Plenary Conference of the International Council of Women in London (April 21 to May 2, 1986) the UNWLA announced a statement of concern dedicated to the tragedy and held a meeting with Margaret Thatcher. This statement of concern was one of the first international statements regarding the tragedy and reached a broad international audience. More information about women's activities dedicated to Chernobyl may be found in the journals *Ukrainian Woman in the World* (no. 13, 1986), *Our Life* (no. 6, June 1986), and a forthcoming book, *A History of the UNWLA From 1925 to the Present*, by Martha Kebalo.

On the whole, the book *Chernobyl: The History of the Nuclear Catastrophe* represents profound well presented research enriched by supplementary visual materials. The book is worthy of the attention of a broad cross-section of readers, as it documents not only the disaster, but also relates to current world affairs and concerns.