

Review of Serhii Plokhy. Chernobyl: The History of a Nuclear Catastrophe

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Serhii Plokyh. *Chernobyl: The History of a Nuclear Catastrophe*. Basic Books, 2018. xvi, 406 pp. Illustrations. Maps. Notes. Index. \$32.00, cloth.

Serhii Plokyh, the director of the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University, is clearly a distinguished scholar, and he could write confidently on any topic about Ukraine's history. Why, then, has he chosen to devote an entire book to the Chornobyl disaster? One might think that such an important event—which took place over thirty years ago—must surely be well understood by now. But this just is not the case, as Plokyh convincingly shows. At the beginning of his work *Chernobyl: The History of a Nuclear Catastrophe*, he gives two reasons for embarking on a major new study of Chornobyl. First, additional information has become available; this includes, for example, government documents that are now accessible in Ukraine following the 2014 revolution. Also, the simple passage of time has allowed for the aftermath of the crisis to be studied in greater breadth. Second, a new generation has grown up with no first-hand knowledge of this dramatic nuclear disaster of 1986. This point was brought home to Plokyh—as he notes in the book's preface (xi-xiii)—during a recent visit to Chornobyl. Among his fellow tourists was a group of young people from Britain who knew of the site only because it is the setting for two popular video games. And their tour guide, a young Ukrainian woman, had no idea as to the identity of the Soviet leader whose portrait was prominently displayed in one of Chornobyl's abandoned buildings (the reference here is to Viktor Chebrikov, the head of the KGB in the 1980s). These young people, not having experienced life in the 1980s, seemed to be regarding the Chornobyl event as ancient history. But such a position is not valid, as Plokyh clearly shows. The Chornobyl disaster helped to catalyze the end of the Soviet Union, and its political and economic effects still echo dramatically today—much like the lingering radioactive effects of the accident, which will continue even far into the future.

Plokyh, in demonstrating the ongoing importance of the Chornobyl disaster, wisely does not start his narrative with the events of the accident itself. In part 1 of the book (6-57), he draws back, discussing the history of the plant and its roots in the Soviet system. In fact, chapter 1 (7-22) opens with the Twenty-Seventh Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU)—held just two months prior to the nuclear disaster—which ushered in the rule of a new leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. Plokyh shows that the CPSU was eager for the success of its nuclear plans, an important component in the march of “scientific and technical progress” (10), which provided much of the justification for the Party's rule. Gorbachev himself, during his early months in office, had similar hopes, as demonstrated by his main watchword at the time—“uskorenienie” (“acceleration”). The prevailing

thought was that if the sclerotic Soviet economy could succeed in adapting a new technology, it might rescue itself from the decline that was already setting in. This political context helps explain the pressure felt by the operators of the Chornobyl complex, who were constantly pushed to generate more power, even at the cost of cutting corners in safety.

Plokyh presents a detailed and gripping account of the events of the disaster itself in parts 2 (58-119) and 3 (120-71) of the book. However, his study really shines in the latter parts of the volume—parts 4 through 6 (172-344). Just as Plokyh had shown earlier that the causes of the nuclear disaster were rooted in Soviet politics, here he shows that its effects were highly political as well. First, the disaster had an impact on the Cold War. As Plokyh explains (180), the accident damaged Moscow's credibility in Europe and globally, thus strengthening the hand of United States president Ronald Reagan in the global competition between the West and the Soviets. Within the USSR, Chornobyl helped to reveal that the principle of "uskorenienie" was not working. The secrecy that Moscow initially imposed after the accident clearly backfired, putting the health—and even the lives—of millions of people at risk. The Soviet people (and their rulers) understood that a freer exchange of information was needed. And this helped propel Gorbachev's shift to the new policies of glasnost and perestroika, which soon began to change the USSR irrevocably.

Finally, Plokyh shows that perhaps the most dramatic impact of the crisis was on Ukraine itself. Initially, the Ukrainian Communist leadership reacted with great caution. Plokyh states, "[s]ubservience to Moscow was part and parcel of the historical DNA of the Ukrainian political elite" (196). Most notably, Ukrainian Party boss Volodymyr Shcherbyts'kyi decided to go ahead with the 1986 May Day parade in Kyiv only days after the accident. And he did not inform the many thousands of citizens marching through the city that they were being exposed to dangerously high levels of radiation. Soon, after the scale of the disaster had become apparent, the event played a large role in mobilizing the Ukrainian people to criticize their rulers. Plokyh shows that Chornobyl was instrumental in the growth of "eco-nationalism," both in Ukraine and in nearby regions, such as Belarus and Lithuania. The first authorized non-governmental organization in Ukraine was the ecological group Zelenyi Svit (Green World). In addition, the formation of Narodnyi rukh Ukrainy (Popular Movement of Ukraine), or Rukh, the popular front group that played such a central role in the country's eventual independence, was also closely linked to Chornobyl. Its chairman, Ivan Drach, said that the need for Rukh was "'dictated above all by the idea of Chernobyl'" (298).

In short, Plokyh makes a strong case for the fact that Chornobyl is much more than just a setting for a video game. It is the setting for today's Ukraine.

Indeed, in many ways, it is the setting for the present-day post-Soviet space and the world as a whole.

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