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Containing Russia's Dangerous Game of 'Chernobyl Roulette'

By Charlie Hancock

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View of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant from the city of Pripyat. **Inna Dudnik (CC BY-SA 4.0)**

President Volodymyr Zelensky once had an optimistic vision for the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. Weeks after his 2019 election, he signed a decree to turn Ukraine's portion of the 2,600-square-kilometer region along the border with Belarus into an engine of economic growth, welcoming a soaring stream of tourists inspired by HBO's dramatization of the 1986 disaster.

The assured boom never came. On the morning of Feb. 24, 2022, personnel at the nuclear power plant were woken by the rumble of continuous heavy gunfire.

A professor of Ukrainian history at Harvard, Serhii Plokhy has also found a rich niche in chronicling the history of nuclear disasters – and near-misses. While the invasion of Ukraine gave a boost in support for nuclear energy as markets were thrown into turmoil when they could no longer rely on Russian fossil fuels, Plokhy urged caution.

“In order for this method of producing electricity to be safe, everything else in society has to be functioning perfectly,” he wrote in May 2022. By that time, the nightmare scenario – a nuclear power plant on the front line of a war – had already happened twice.

Plokhy’s latest book, “Chernobyl Roulette,” is a tautly written account of the 35 days the power plant and its 300 workers and guards were held hostage — and a warning of the dangers that threaten humanity when nuclear facilities fall into the crosshairs of conflict.

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Valentyn Heiko, the 59-year-old shift supervisor who was on duty when Chernobyl was cut off from the rest of the world, laid down the law for his captors: they may have arrived with guns and the belief they were keeping the plant – a potential dirty bomb – from “fascist Banderites.” But everyone was subject to the rules of the plant, where failure to comply could have devastating consequences.

Despite being forced to work 12-hour shifts, resorting to smoking cigarette butts, the plant workers found ways to test the limits of how much defiance they could get away with, from decorating mandatory identifying clothing with Ukrainian national symbols to playing on the occupiers’ fears of radiation. At the same time, the Russian forces became increasingly demoralized as they learned how badly the war was going for them.

The occupation of Chernobyl is a distillation of the Russian Armed Forces’ absurd lack of preparedness in the early days of the invasion. While some troops had a background in handling radioactive material and dangerous chemicals, many did not. Some of these tankmen came from Buryatia in the Far East and barely spoke any Russian, complicating communication with the multilingual, university-educated plant workers. Drunkenness and infighting were common.

Some Russian soldiers fell victim to their own propaganda, believing that the Chernobyl site was hosting a secret U.S.-sponsored nuclear weapons program. Senior engineer Valerii Semenov recalled how they had to be dissuaded from opening sealed mounds of radioactive waste and packed sandbags with potentially contaminated dirt before checking that radiation levels were safe first.

Outside the plant, beyond the monitoring of its expert staff, fewer precautions were taken. Without questioning the orders from their officers, who treated the lives of their subordinates with the disregard characteristic of Russia’s meat-grinder tactics, soldiers dug trenches into the contaminated ground, sleeping and eating in clothes embedded with radioactive dust. It reminded Heiko of the “bio robot” conscripts sent into the most dangerous parts of the disaster zone in 1986.

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Meanwhile, the UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) dragged its feet on calling out Russia’s dangerous behavior. It is not unusual for international organizations to adopt a

neutral stance to avoid jeopardizing negotiations. But Plokhy argues that the IAEA's failure to condemn Russia's actions was emblematic of the organization's inability to change the behavior of a country that has long played a central role in its structure.

Though he gives IAEA head Rafael Grossi some credit for leading potentially risky visits to Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant – which has been under Russian occupation since early March 2022 – Plokhy argues the problems go deeper than the organization's leadership. It lacks the mandate or resources to repel aggression against nuclear sites, and there are no legal instruments that would deter such aggression in the first place.

"Unless nuclear reactors are protected from attack in wartime, there can be no serious consideration of nuclear energy as a solution to the problem of climate change," he warns, demanding that attacking or endangering a nuclear power plant be punishable in the "severest possible" way. Currently, loopholes in 1970s-era protocols allow aggressors to attack nuclear sites they think are helping their enemy.

There are still no independently reported cases of radiation sickness among Russian troops who dug trenches in contaminated earth. But the symptoms can take years, even decades, to emerge.

As well as a chronicle of the extraordinary resilience of the workers at Chernobyl and their colleagues and families in Slavutych, "Chernobyl Roulette" should serve as a catalyst for implementing structures to ensure that attacking a nuclear power plant is as unthinkable as using a nuclear weapon.

With Zaporizhzhia still under Russian control, and the situation around Russia's Kursk NPP still "serious" amid Ukraine's ongoing incursion, such action cannot come soon enough.

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