



The Ukraine List #498

The Ukraine List (UKL) #498
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www.danyliwseminar.com
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#1

15th Annual Danyliw Research Seminar on Contemporary Ukraine

Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Ottawa, 7-9 November 2019

<http://www.danyliwseminar.com>

CALL FOR PAPER PROPOSALS

The Chair of Ukrainian Studies, with the support of the Wolodymyr George Danyliw Foundation, will be holding its 15th Annual Danyliw Research Seminar on Contemporary Ukraine at the University of Ottawa on 7-9 November 2019. Since 2005, the Danyliw Seminar has provided an annual platform for the presentation of some of the most influential academic research on Ukraine.

The Seminar invites proposals from scholars and doctoral students—in political science, anthropology, sociology, history, law, economics and related disciplines in the social sciences and humanities—on a broad variety of topics falling under thematic clusters, such as those suggested below:

Conflict

- war/violence (combatants, civilians in wartime, DNR/LNR, Maidan)
- security (conflict resolution, Minsk Accords, OSCE, NATO, Crimea)
- nationalism (Ukrainian, Russian, Soviet, historical, far right)

Reform

- economic change (energy, corruption, oligarchies, EU free trade, foreign aid)
- governance (rule of law, elections, regionalism, decentralization)
- media (TV/digital, social media, information warfare, fake news)

Identity

- history/memory (World War II, Holodomor, Soviet period, interwar, imperial)
- language, ethnicity, religion, nation (policies and practices)
- culture and politics (cinema, literature, music, performing arts, popular culture)

Society

- migration (IDPs, refugees, migrant workers, diasporas)
- social problems (reintegration of combatants, protests, welfare, gender, education)
- state/society (citizenship, civil society, collective action/protests, human rights)

The Seminar will also be featuring panels devoted to recent/new books touching on Ukraine, as well as the screening of new documentaries followed by a discussion with filmmakers. Information on past book panels and films can easily be accessed from the top menu of the web site. The 2019 Seminar is welcoming book panel proposals, as well as documentary proposals.

Presentations at the Seminar will be based on research papers (6,000-8,000 words) and will be made available in written and video format on the Seminar website and on social media. The Seminar favors intensive discussion, with relatively short presentations (12 minutes), comments by the moderator and an extensive Q&A with Seminar participants and the larger public.

People interested in presenting at the 2019 Danyliw Seminar are invited to submit a 500 word paper proposal and a 150 word biographical statement, by email attachment, to Dominique Arel, Chair of Ukrainian Studies, at darel@uottawa.ca AND chairukr@gmail.com. Please also include your full coordinates (institutional affiliation, preferred postal address, email, phone, and Twitter account [if you have one]). If applicable, indicate your latest publication or, in the case of doctoral or post-doctoral applicants, the year when you entered a doctoral program, the title of your dissertation and year of (expected) completion. Note that a biographical statement is not a CV, but a written paragraph.

Books published between 2018 and 2020 (as long as near-final proofs are available prior to the Seminar) are eligible for consideration as a book panel proposal. The proposal must include a 500 word abstract of the book, as well as the 150 word bio and full coordinates.

Films produced between 2017 and 2019 are eligible for consideration as a documentary proposal. The proposal must include a 500 word abstract of the film, as well as the 150 word bio, full coordinates, and a secure web link to the film.

In addition to scholars and doctoral students, policy analysts, practitioners from non-governmental and international organizations, journalists, and artists are also welcome to send a proposal.

The proposal deadline is 27 June 2019. The Chair will cover the travel and accommodation expenses of applicants whose proposal is accepted by the Seminar. The proposals will be reviewed by an international selection committee and applicants will be notified in the course of the summer.

The Danyliw Seminar website (<http://danyliwseminar.com>) contains the programs, papers, videos of presentations and photographs of the last five years (2014-2018). To access the abstracts, papers and videos of the 2018 presenters, click on “Participants” in the menu and then click on the individual names of participants. The 2018 Program can be accessed at <https://www.danyliwseminar.com/program-2018>. Presentations from previous years can be accessed under menu “Archives.”

Check the “Danyliw Seminar” Facebook page at <http://bit.ly/2rssSHk>. For information on the Chair of Ukrainian Studies, go to <https://www.chairukr.com>. (The site is being re-developed).

The Seminar is made possible by the generous commitment of the Wolodymyr George Danyliw Foundation to the pursuit of excellence in the study of contemporary Ukraine.

#2

Kule Doctoral Scholarships on Ukraine Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Ottawa

Application Deadline: 1 February 2020 (International & Canadian Students)
<https://www.chairukr.com/kule-doctoral-scholarships>

The Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Ottawa, the only research unit outside of Ukraine predominantly devoted to the study of contemporary Ukraine, is announcing a new competition of the Drs. Peter and Doris Kule Doctoral Scholarships on Contemporary Ukraine. The Scholarships will consist of an annual award of \$25,000, with all tuition waived, for four years (with the possibility of adding a fifth year).

The Scholarships were made possible by a generous donation of \$500,000 by the Kule family, matched by the University of Ottawa. Drs. Peter and Doris Kule, from Edmonton, have endowed several chairs and research centres in Canada, and their exceptional contributions to education, predominantly in Ukrainian Studies, has recently been celebrated in the book *Champions of Philanthropy: Peter and Doris Kule and their Endowments*.

Students with a primary interest in contemporary Ukraine applying to, or enrolled in, a doctoral program at the University of Ottawa in political science, sociology and anthropology, or in fields related with the research interests of the Chair of Ukrainian Studies, can apply for a Scholarship. The competition is open to international and Canadian students.

The application for the Kule Scholarship must include a 1000 word research proposal, two letters of recommendation (sent separately by the referees), and a CV and be mailed to Dominique Arel, School of Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences Building, Room, 7067, University of Ottawa, 120 University St., Ottawa ON K1N 6N5, Canada.

Applications will be considered only after the applicant has completed an application to the relevant doctoral program at the University of Ottawa. Consideration of applications will begin on **1 February 2020** and will continue until the award is announced.

The University of Ottawa is a bilingual university and applicants must have a certain oral and reading command of French. Specific requirements vary across departments.

Students interested in applying for the Scholarships beginning in the academic year 2020-2021 are invited to contact Dominique Arel (darel@uottawa.ca), Chairholder, Chair of Ukrainian Studies, and visit our web site www.chairukr.com.

#3

ASN 2019 Convention Awards

<https://bit.ly/2I6j0dF>

The ASN 2019 World Convention Awards Ceremony was held on Saturday May 4.

The Harriman ASN Book Prize was awarded to Sarah Cameron for *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan* (Cornell 2018). Special mentions were given to Jennie Schulze for *Strategic Frames: Europe, Russia, and Minority Inclusion in Estonia and Latvia* (Pittsburgh, 2018) and Andreas Wimmer for *Nation Building: Why Some Countries Come Together While Others Fall Apart* (Princeton, 2018).

The Doctoral Papers Awards were given to

- Jelena Golubovic (Simon Fraser U, Canada, Balkans Section), “To Me You Are Not a Serb”: Ethnicity, Ambiguity, and Anxiety in Post-War Sarajevo”
- Daniel Solomon (Georgetown U, US, Central Europe Section), “*Explaining Subnational Variations in Pogrom Violence: The Case of Kristallnacht*”
- Colleen Wood (Columbia U, US, Eurasia/Caucasus Combined Sections), *Who Belongs in “Our Common Home”: Public Education and National v. Ethnic Identification in Kyrgyzstan*”
- Alexander Kustov (Princeton U, US, Migration/Nationalism Combined Sections), *‘Bloom Where You Are Planted’: What Can We Learn About Immigration Politics from Public Opposition to Emigration?*
- Ekaterina Klimenko (Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Poland, Russia Section), *Church, State and Memory: Remembering the Revolution and Building the Nation in Contemporary Russia*
- Ronay Bakan (Yale U, US, Turkey Section), *Socio-Spatial Dynamics of Contentious Politics: A Case of Urban Warfare in the Kurdish Region of Turkey*
- Irina Soboleva (Columbia U, US, Ukraine Section), *Exaggerating the Gap: Heterogeneous Effects of Civil Engagement Campaigns in Polarized Societies*

The Huttenbach Prize for Best Articles Published in *Nationalities Papers* went to Kimitaka Matsuzato for “Donbas War and Politics in Cities on the Front: Mariupol and Kramatorsk” (vol. 46, no. 6, 2018). Special mention was given to Ota Konrád for “Two Post-War Paths: Popular Violence in the Bohemian Lands Austria in the Aftermath of World War I.”

The Award for Best Documentary went to *The Trial of Ratko Mladic* (UK, 2018). Special mentions were given to *Novaya* (Russia, 2019) and *The Waldheim Waltz* (Austria, 2018).

The winners of the First Annual Nationalities Papers Photo Contest were Damon Lynch (U of Minnesota, US), H el ene Thibault (Nazarbayev U, Kazakhstan), Koen Sloodmaeckers (U of London, UK), Florian Bieber (U of Graz, Austria), Mariya Rohava (U of Oslo, Norway), Kriistina Silvan (U of Helsinki, Finland) and Annelie Sheline (Rice U, US). The pictures were taken during field work and will grace the covers of the printed version of Nationalities Papers throughout 2019.

The next ASN World Convention will take place on 7-9 May 2020 at the Harriman Institute, Columbia University. The Call for Papers will be announced in early September 2019.

Congratulations to all!

#4

New Book:

Kate Brown
Manual for Survival
A Chernobyl Guide to the Future
W. W. Norton & Company, 2019
<https://bit.ly/2IvBTW7>

A chilling expos e of the international effort to minimize the health and environmental consequences of nuclear radiation in the wake of Chernobyl.

Dear Comrades! Since the accident at the Chernobyl power plant, there has been a detailed analysis of the radioactivity of the food and territory of your population point. The results show that living and working in your village will cause no harm to adults or children.

So began a pamphlet issued by the Ukrainian Ministry of Health—which, despite its optimistic beginnings, went on to warn its readers against consuming local milk, berries, or mushrooms, or going into the surrounding forest. This was only one of many misleading bureaucratic manuals that, with apparent good intentions, seriously underestimated the far-reaching consequences of the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe.

After 1991, international organizations from the Red Cross to Greenpeace sought to help the victims, yet found themselves stymied by post-Soviet political circumstances they did not understand. International diplomats and scientists allied to the nuclear industry evaded or denied the fact of a wide-scale public health disaster caused by radiation exposure. Efforts to spin the story about Chernobyl were largely successful; the official death toll ranges between thirty-one and fifty-four people. In reality, radiation exposure from the disaster caused between 35,000 and 150,000 deaths in Ukraine alone.

No major international study tallied the damage, leaving Japanese leaders to repeat many of the same mistakes after the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011. Drawing on a decade of archival research and on-the-ground interviews in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus, Kate Brown unveils the full breadth of the devastation and the whitewash that followed. Her findings make clear the irreversible impact of man-made radioactivity on every living thing; and hauntingly, they force us to confront the untold legacy of decades of weapons-testing and other nuclear incidents, and the fact that we are emerging into a future for which the survival manual has yet to be written.

#5

New Book:

Erica Resende, Dovilė Budryté and Didem Buhari-Gulmez
Crisis and Change in Post-Cold War Global Politics
Ukraine in a Comparative Perspective
Palgrave Macmillan, 2018
<https://bit.ly/2QZO1Bk>

This volume analyzes crises in International Relations (IR) in an innovative way. Rather than conceptualizing a crisis as something unexpected that has to be managed, the contributors argue that a crisis needs to be analyzed within a wider context of change: when new discourses are formed, communities are (re)built, and new identities emerge. Focusing on Ukraine, the book explore various questions related to crisis and change, including: How are crises culturally and socially constructed? How do issues of agency and structure come into play in Ukraine? Which subjectivities were brought into existence by Ukraine crisis discourses? Chapters explore the participation of women in Euromaidan, identity shifts in the Crimean Tatar community and diaspora politics, discourses related to corruption, anti-Soviet partisan warfare, and the annexation of Crimea, as well as long distance impacts of the crisis.

#6

Cheap Gas is Too Costly

by Oleh Havrylyshyn
Atlantic Council, 4 June 2019
<https://bit.ly/2XAP9PK>

Oleh Havrylyshyn is an adjunct research professor in the Institute of European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies at Carleton University in Canada.

On May 20, Volodymyr Zelenskiy was inaugurated Ukraine's seventh president. In his inaugural address, he demonstrated a resoluteness that should put an end to the annoying

journalistic cliché of a “comedian-president.” Taking such firm actions as dissolving parliament and requesting the resignations of key officials within minutes of taking office in front of the very same people, he demonstrated a full understanding of Theodore Roosevelt’s favorite weapon, the bully pulpit.

Transferring his communication skills to governance is surely a good thing in general, but may be particularly important on the issue of gas prices. Many voters probably hope that Zelenskiy is such a good guy that he will reward them by going back to the old days of cheap gas. Here is an opportunity to move early and explain to people why seemingly cheap gas is in fact much too costly for the country and its citizens.

The new president should start with a simple story of the enormous damage cheap gas—purchased from Russia, of course—did in the past. The alleged benefits of cheap gas for twenty-five years since independence were entirely illusory, as they had many negative consequences. Direct impacts included long periods of unpredictable cut-offs by Russia; cold apartments resulting in casualties and health problems for residents, especially the elderly; and an uncertainty of energy supplies for factories and other industry that caused production losses.

Even greater were the many indirect costs. When private intermediary companies were allowed by the government to make deals to buy gas from Gazprom in the future and then sell it to Ukrainian energy distributors for a profit, Russia insisted on loan guarantees by the Ukrainian government. When somehow these intermediaries went bankrupt and could not pay, the budget did, which automatically meant less funds for schools, hospitals, road repairs, and many other necessary services—that is, for many government programs that might have benefitted the same people getting “cheap” gas.

And that’s not the end of it. Russia often insisted that the sale of gas to Ukraine—incidentally at prices far below those that Poland and other Central European countries were paying from the start of their freedom from Moscow—involve not only government guarantees but also lower payments by Gazprom for transit through Ukraine’s Druzhba pipeline to Europe, as well as frequent “kind” offers to accept debt payment in the form of ownership of refineries and other energy facilities.

The biggest cost was not easy to measure but is well understood: the most important method for embryonic oligarchs of the nineties to accumulate huge sums of money was to play the game of energy intermediation: profits went to them, while debts were paid by the budget—that is, by the people. Experts have estimated the total amount of these gas-related debts to be in the tens of billions.

That was then; have things changed? Aren’t we free of Russia’s blackmail? Yes, but only because Ukraine pays Gazprom more or less the same price as all of Europe—an accomplishment for which the previous government deserves credit. Technically, the government could legislate a lower price for households by providing a subsidy from the budget, but this only brings back the problem of reducing available funds from other social uses. It is far less costly to continue with high prices and direct income

supplements to low-income households, with the added advantage that those with higher incomes are not given the free ride of cheap gas. Theoretically one might even negotiate a lower supply price with Gazprom, but this stretches credulity—and merely brings back the earlier costs of what Russia would demand for this.

No doubt many citizens, and certainly populist demagogue politicians, will say, “First, do something to increase our incomes to Central European levels, and then raise gas prices.” After all, most Ukrainians are still feeling the reality of the country’s poor economic performance since independence compared to Poland and others.

But in Central Europe, high-priced gas came immediately after 1989, many years before incomes to afford this were achieved. Economic growth and improved standards came about thanks to all sorts of early reforms, including accepting the immediate reality that gas costs what it has to cost. While Ukraine’s early governments delayed needed reforms—allegedly to avoid imposing on people the great shocks of high prices, but perhaps in reality to buy themselves time to become new capitalists—Poland among others moved fast; people endured a shock for a few years, but soon came therapy and today prosperity. In contrast, Ukrainians endured shock and more shock for years and years, with little or no therapy, and today citizens have a standard of living ranked as one of the lowest in all of Europe.

As Taras Shevchenko wrote long ago: “Learn from the foreign, whilst shunning not thine own.” Like Poland and other countries, Ukraine must finally learn that the pain of high prices is often best not avoided.

#7

How Kolomoisky Does Business in the United States

by Anders Aslund
Atlantic Council, 4 June 2019
<https://bit.ly/2MAh0hL>

Anders Aslund is a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and author of the new book “Russia’s Crony Capitalism: The Path from Market Economy to Kleptocracy.” Follow him on Twitter @anders_aslund

On May 21, the nationalized Ukrainian PrivatBank filed a remarkable civil case against its prior owners Ihor Kolomoisky and Gennady Bogolyubov in the state court of Delaware. The three co-defendants are US citizens in Miami and nineteen anonymous companies.

The defendants are accused “for hundreds of millions of dollars of damages arising in connection with claims for...unjust enrichment, for fraudulent transfer under state laws (including Delaware and Ohio), for violations of Ohio’s [Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations] statute, and for civil conspiracy” (p. 2).

The most striking statement is “From 2006 through December 2016, the total movement of funds (credits) into the [ultimate beneficiary owners’] laundering at PrivatBank Cyprus was \$470 billion, which amounts to approximately double the Gross Domestic Product of Cyprus during the same period” (p. 77). If this is true, this is the biggest case of money laundering in history, and it has been perpetrated by one single group.

This is a civil suit, so PrivatBank’s investigators have provided all the materials. All the accusations, however, are of a criminal nature. PrivatBank investigators have done extraordinary detective work, and this is probably the most detailed study of large-scale money laundering into the United States that runs 104 pages, though it has not been proven in court yet. This case shows how money laundering from Ukraine to the United States allegedly takes place.

Ihor Kolomoisky and Gennady Bogolyubov, both from Dnipro in eastern Ukraine, have been business partners since 1992. They established PrivatBank that accounted for one-fifth of Ukraine’s banking assets, but in December 2016 it was nationalized by the Ukrainian government, which alleged that the two co-owners had given 97 percent of its loans to themselves through various offshore companies, usually in Cyprus. The Ukrainian government took over the bank and recapitalized it with \$5.5 billion. Kolomoisky and Bogolyubov run a vast conglomerate, commonly called Privat Group, though legally no such group exists. It is a multitude of anonymous offshore companies, mainly based in Cyprus. Kolomoisky and Bogolyubov do all kinds of business. They are big in airlines, oil, gas, metallurgy, and real estate. Kolomoisky is an abrasive public figure, while Bogolyubov rarely appears in public. In recent years, Kolomoisky has lived in Geneva, but for the last half year in Israel and Bogolyubov in London. Reportedly, both are Ukrainian, Cypriot, and Israeli citizens.

The suit lays out how they operate. The ultimate beneficiary owners “used PrivatBank as their own personal piggy bank—ultimately stealing billions of dollars from PrivatBank and using United States entities to launder hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth or PrivatBank’s misappropriated loan proceeds into the United States to enrich themselves and their co-conspirators.” (p. 3).

The money trail is surprisingly simple. To begin with, the ultimate beneficiary owners collect retail deposits in Ukraine by offering good conditions and service. The money then flows to their subsidiary, PrivatBank Cyprus. In Cyprus, they benefit from the services of two local law firms.

Untypically, the ultimate beneficiary owners did not take the precaution to establish multiple layers of shell companies in Cyprus, the British Virgin Islands, and Cayman Islands, as is common among Russians with seriously dirty money. Instead, they operated with three US individuals in Miami, who helped them to set up a large number of anonymous LLCs in the United States, mainly in Delaware, but also in Florida, New Jersey, and Oregon.

The typical objects of post-Soviet money launderers are real estate in New York and southern Florida, but the investment profile of this group is different. They invested in real estate in Cleveland, Ohio; Harvard, Illinois; and Dallas, Texas, and in ferroalloy companies. According to the suit, the defendants purchased commercial real estate for millions of dollars in Cleveland and became the biggest owner of real estate there. It has been reported that the FBI investigated Kolomoisky's business in Ohio for money laundering.

More remarkable is that Kolomoisky and Bogolyubov, according to the suit, purchased several ferroalloy companies in the United States, Felman Production Inc., in West Virginia; Felman Trading Inc. and Georgian Manganese, LLC; Warren Steel Holdings in Warren, Ohio; Steel Rolling Holdings Inc., Gibraltar, Michigan; CC Metals and Alloys, LLC, in Kentucky; Michigan Seamless Tubes, Michigan. These appear to be medium-sized companies in small places. Real people worked in these enterprises. Why didn't anybody raise questions about the dubious owners?

This suit offers a lot of interesting suggestions. It appears amazingly easy to launder vast amounts of money into the United States even for amateurs. The PrivatBank scheme was as simple as it gets. Alas, US law enforcement cannot penetrate the hundreds of thousands of anonymous companies in the United States, so one has a good chance to get away with it, unless one encounters a serious opponent with deep pockets.

The ultimate problem is that the United States allows the formation of hundreds of thousands of anonymous companies that have permeated this country with laundered money. The PrivatBank case shows that dirty money is not necessarily concentrated in the big cities and in real estate but can penetrate the real economy. The PrivatBank case provides a graphic illustration of the need to prohibit anonymous companies in the United States once and for all.

#8

Pro-Russian Political Forces Unite for Parliamentary Elections

by Illia Ponomarenko
Kyiv Post, 7 June 2019
<https://bit.ly/2WUaLcR>

Several Russian-friendly political parties have signed an incorporation memorandum to run as a joint political force in the July 21 parliamentary elections.

The new bloc was formally created on June 7 during a signing ceremony on the pedestrian bridge over the Dnipro River in Kyiv. It includes five parties.

The the two largest members of the new political force are the Opposition Bloc, an offshoot of ousted former President Viktor Yanukovich's Party of Regions that has 38 seats in the Verkhovna Rada, and the Vidrozhennia (Revival) party, which has 25 seats in the Rada.

They are joined by the Nashi (Ours) party, led by politician and media owner Yevgeniy Murayev, and the recently-formed Dovernai Delam (Trust In Deeds) party, run by two controversial city mayors, Gennady Kernes of Kharkiv and Gennady Trukhanov of Odesa.

The new bloc also includes the Party of Peace and Development, an offshoot of the Opposition Bloc that is chaired by pro-Russian politicians Borys Kolesnikov and Vadym Novynsky.

"We're running in the elections to restore peace, the economy, and to bring prosperity back to the people," Opposition Bloc leader and former presidential candidate Oleksandr Vilkul wrote on his Facebook page on June 7. "We will accomplish a true decentralization and abolish 'reforms' that are against the people. Only we can do this."

The political parties decided to join forces due to the "closeness of their views," a spokesperson said during the ceremony.

They also announced the fundamental planks of their political platform: enshrining Ukraine's non-bloc status in the Constitution, peace negotiations with "fair concessions" over the Russian-occupied Donbas, increasing living standards in the country, ending the "language dictatorship" imposed by the government, halting the state's involvement in religious affairs, and the "normalization of relations with all of Ukraine's neighbors."

The new Russian-friendly political alliance has not yet selected a name. According to Vadym Novynsky, the bloc will declare its name and the principles guiding how it will form its list of candidates on June 9, at its first convention.

However, there is one person from the five constituent parties who won't be on the list: Vidrozhennia leader Viktor Bondar.

As a result of the merger, he has resigned from his position and left the party.

"Today we saw the desire of certain lawmakers and members of the (Vidrozhennia) party to unite with the Opposition Bloc. The absolute majority of the lawmakers supports my opinion and did not join this union. In essence, a unification of the capital of the south and east of the country has occurred," Bondar said in a statement.

"This is not my path," he continued. "I want to unify and build the country with new and young faces."

Bondar also compared the new bloc to the Party of Regions.

Other pro-Russian forces

The new political union is not the only alliance of pro-Russian forces preparing to run for parliament on July 21.

In late 2018, part of the Opposition Bloc led by former Energy Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Yuriy Boyko formed the Russia-friendly Opposition Platform – For Life political party. Besides Boyko, the party is led by Ukrainian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, a close associate of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and businessman and politician Vadym Rabinovych. It currently has 20 seats in the Verkhovna Rada.

A number of recent polls have shown Opposition Platform – For Life to be the second most popular party in the run-up to the parliamentary elections, with 10.7-percent support among decided voters, according to the Rating Group Ukraine pollster.

According to polls, the most popular party is Servant of the People, which is associated with President Volodymyr Zelenskiy.

#9

Zelenskiy Team Proposes Referendum on Peace Deal with Russia

Here's Why That's a Problem

by Alya Shandra

Euromaidan Press, 29 May 2019

<https://bit.ly/31fTxWu>

On 21 May, newly-appointed Ukrainian Presidential Administration head Andriy Bohdan stirred up controversy with Ukrainian political commentators when he announced the intentions of Ukraine's new authorities to conduct a referendum on a peace deal with Russia regarding Donbas, the region in eastern Ukraine broken off from government control with the help of Russian financial and military support.

“So it wouldn't be some politician making a decision breaking apart society, but so the people, society itself would make this decision, whether our deal suits them,” Bohdan said, adding that the team of newly-elected President Volodymyr Zelenskiy is forced to search for a compromise with Russia.

“The only thing is, Volodymyr Zelenskiy said that we don't trade our territories and our people,” Bohdan noted, referring to Zelenskiy's statement in one of his rare appearances at a political talk show.

Following Bohdan's statement, a protest erupted near the President's Administration. Portraits of Ukrainian soldiers who were killed in Donbas were set up at the stairs. Widows of soldiers stood in solitary pickets. One of them, Yulya Kirillova (pictured below) held a sign saying “On 11 August 2014, my husband was killed during an artillery strike on

Stepanivka village by the 17th and 18th separate motorized rifle brigades from Russian territory. Do you plan to negotiate with killers?”

Responding to the protest, Zelenskyi clarified that it won't be a legal referendum but an information one, to find out what people think, “a normal conversation with people” and stressed that he aims for openness in discussing issues important for the country.

It's unclear how this “information referendum” is different from a regular opinion poll, but it is extremely likely that Zelenskyi's team will indeed hold some kind of plebiscite on matters of national security during his term in power. “Direct democracy through a referendum” was a central position of Zelenskyi's campaign and adopting a law on referendums – “a major direction for our activities,” according to Bohdan.

Although it's definitely a good idea for politicians to take into account the opinions of their citizens, the idea of a referendum for deciding how to solve the conflict in Donbas is fatally flawed.

The importance of Donbas

Russia's undeclared war against Ukraine has entered its sixth year. The Minsk agreements on a peaceful resolution of the de-facto war between Ukrainian government forces and Russian-led separatists are in a dead end. They have succeeded in extinguishing the most active warfare of 2014, but the quasi-states of the “Donetsk People's Republic” and “Luhansk People's Republic” have, with Russia's guidance and support, turned into a frozen conflict zone.

From Russia's behavior in the Minsk agreement stalemate, it is reasonable to assume that its ultimate goal is to return the “quasi-states” to Ukraine on its own conditions, creating enclaves semi-controlled by Kyiv while informally directing the processes within them by ensuring that people loyal to Russia have real power.

These enclaves would help Russia meet many goals: to ensure that the Ukrainian Constitution is changed to federalize Ukraine, which would give Russia leverage to permanently disrupt Ukraine's course towards the EU and NATO; to lessen the West's sanctions against Russia and decrease its expenditures for the war, for maintaining the enclaves, and restoring war-torn Donbas.

Russia's military power is daunting, which makes the scenario of Ukraine regaining the Donbas by force unattainable.

Western support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russian aggression gets bleaker with every passing day, as the urge to “get back to business as usual” makes each prolongation of EU sanctions against Russia a formidable ordeal.

Meanwhile, the de-facto war drags on, taking nearly one life of a Ukrainian soldier each day. The more time passes, the harder it is to recall that Russia occupied Crimea and started the war in Donbas because of Ukraine's desire to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, thereby exiting Russia's sphere of influence and dealing a blow for the nuclear power's plans to resurrect the Soviet Union. And the harder it becomes for Ukraine to fight for this dream of independence. An independence which, as it seems, is inconvenient for the West, which would rather see its problems disappear while Ukraine is sucked back in by its violent resurgent imperialist neighbor.

The only thing preventing that scenario is Ukraine's will to fight while waiting out Russia's ability to continue the war in Donbas.

Under these circumstances, one must understand that in any negotiations of a peace deal, Russia will pursue all possible avenues to gain control over Ukraine under the mask of peace and protection of "Russian speakers" in the country – or newly-minted Russian citizens of Donbas.

Zelenskyi had previously made statements suggesting he was ready to make significant concessions to Russia over the frozen conflict zone in eastern Ukraine.

In a rare interview about his political views with Dmytro Hordon, he said that he was ready "to deal even with the devil so that nobody dies. We need to make the first step – to stop the shooting and to develop our country." He said that it was necessary to negotiate on peace with Russia, so that "a group of people from Ukraine met with a group of people from the Kremlin." Both sides would state their demands, "and we would meet somewhere in the middle." Zelenskyi proposed to determine what exactly Ukraine could give away to Russia on a referendum, an online-poll, or TV.

However, it's unlikely that Russia will accept any concessions that don't involve Ukraine's territorial losses or massive economic dependence. Which makes the idea of negotiations a likely failure from the start – as the previous five years of attempts at negotiations have shown.

Legal problems with a referendum

According to the Ukrainian Constitution, a referendum can be appointed by the Parliament (on matters on changing the territory of Ukraine), or president of Ukraine (on matters of changing the Constitution, its general matters, or matters of elections). The president can also announce the conduct of a referendum if it initiated by Ukrainian citizens. For this to happen, there must be no less than three million signatures of Ukrainian citizens gathered in at least than 2/3 of the oblasts, with no less than 100,000 signatures in each Oblast.

Questions about changing the territory of Ukraine are decided exclusively through a referendum. Questions about taxes, the budget, or amnesty cannot be solved through a referendum.

Ukraine did have a law on an all-Ukrainian referendum which was adopted in the time of former President Viktor Yanukovich, who was deposed from power in the Euromaidan revolution. The law foresaw that a new version of the Constitution could be adopted at a referendum without the Parliament, and the decision did not require additional confirmation. But in 2018, the Constitutional Court recognized it as unconstitutional both in its content and form of adoption. As well, the law was criticized by the Venice Commission. The law was never used.

Developing such a law is one of the priorities of Zelenskyi's team. But until it is adopted, any announcements of a referendum are made in a legal vacuum. They are even more unclear given that, according to the Constitution, a referendum can be held to decide on changes to the territory of Ukraine. But, if Zelenskyi promised that Ukraine will not trade its territories, then why hold the referendum at all?

Shifting the burden of responsibility and dangers of populism

Many critics of the referendum idea stressed that decisions of national security could not be left for ordinary citizens to decide, as the choices are fraught with geopolitical consequences which the citizens are not able to foresee.

“Our world is complicated. In order to choose the scenario, one needs to clearly understand all possible consequences. Currently, UK citizens who voted to secede from the EU are proving this for themselves. It turns out that nobody explained the real consequences to the Brexit supporters. Like, the scale of economic losses for the British economy. Or the amount of the ‘buyout.’ Or the wave of violence in North Ireland. That very same violence which came to naught, including through both parties to the conflict ending up within the EU, with the border between them basically disappearing. Maybe these things were explained to them, but that doesn't mean that they heard them. Or were ready to understand. After all, any idea can be placed in an attractive package and sold to the voter,” writes RFE/RL journalist Pavlo Kazarin, stressing that people can make mistakes (the fact that people believe in a flat Earth does not mean this theory should be taught in schools) and that the aspiration to dissolve individual responsibility in the collective one does not have anything in similar with democracy.

Meanwhile, Mariya Haidar, former consultant of the President of Ukraine, said that a referendum makes sense if it's possible to implement the solution; however, asking them if they want something [like, to establish peace in the Donbas – Ed] when it's not up to Ukraine to implement it is senseless. Haidar believes that the idea of this referendum will be used by Russia to attack Ukraine.

Constitutional law expert Bohdan Bondarenko stressed that such referendums can be dangerous for democracy.

“Consultative referendums are a dangerous thing. Under conditions when a leader has great support, he can use consultative referendums as a decision of the people of sorts and make them mandatory by his decrees. The post-Soviet space remembers such cases. Reduce the number of MPs from 300 to 120. First, there was a vote, and then the deputies to be slashed were selected manually. We can remember 1933, 1936, 1938 in Germany. There are no national referendums in Germany now!

In order for a referendum not to become a way of usurping power, not to become a manipulative means for legitimizing any decision of any political groups, it must meet two very important criteria – there must be clear, understandable, and specific rules and procedures, and the country should have the practice of holding referenda. We have no criteria. A referendum can be both a threat and a panacea for a country in a transformational period.”

Some, like rock musician Sviatoslav Vakarchuk, who just registered his political party “Holos,” say that holding a referendum under the conditions of a kinetic and information war against Ukraine is irresponsible.

Vakarchuk calls to remember how the “referendums” in occupied Crimea and Donbas were conducted. In 2014, so-called “plebiscites” were held in territories uncontrolled by Ukraine, which appeared to show popular support for seceding from Ukraine. However, the referendums were held in breach of all standards, with no independent international observers present. In both Crimea and occupied Donbas, it is widely believed that the results were falsified in order to give plausible deniability to Russia’s landgrabs.

Meanwhile, Heorhiy Tuka, Deputy Minister in issues of temporarily occupied territories, did not mince words when talking about Zelenskyi’s idea of a referendum.

“My personal opinion about this idea: for instance, some kind of scarecrow breaks into my apartment, he’s huge, unshaven, and smells like a bar. He beats up my kids, kills my son, climbs on my bed, and rapes my wife. And I, as a man, as the leader of the family, start to say: ‘Dear family, let’s consult on what we’ll do with this rapist – maybe we’ll offer him coffee and cake, or give him a pillow to sit on.’ God forbid that Mr. Zelenskyi will have the desire to carry out this idea,” the Deputy Minister said.

Peace referendums in history

History provides ambiguous examples of peace referendums reaching their goal, writes Serhiy Solodkyi from the New Europe center.

“Referendums as an instrument or stage of regulating a conflict are a rare phenomenon. One must realize that without the will of the leaders of the opposing sides, without a clear-

cut peace plan, the referendum itself is of little value,” Solodkyi says. “The approval of a plan by Ukrainians at a referendum doesn’t mean it will be implemented. In particular, because of the counteraction of the other party.”

He provides examples of several peace referendums in international conflict situations. The one in North Ireland was a success – not least because there were two referendums, in North Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement was agreed on by a majority of voters in both locations.

But the referendum on a peace plan in North Cyprus failed: the Greek Cypriots voted against the plan.

In both cases, however, there was a referendum from both parties of the conflict – an opportunity that Ukraine is unlikely to enjoy.

Moreover, the referendum in East Timor conducted under the auspices of the UN in 1999 led to bloodshed. It is believed that it was conducted too early without the necessary safety precautions – and in result, thousands of East Timor citizens were killed, and 400,000 became refugees.

What could be the solution to the war in Donbas then? Unfortunately, there is no easy one. But it would be prudent to continue viewing Russia as a permanent threat and an aggressor, to stop feeding the Russian economy, and build up Ukraine’s military potential and economy. And in the meantime, to continue searching for ways to make Russia’s expenses for occupying Crimea and Donbas outweigh the benefits it gets from its aggression.

#10

Council of Europe Looks Set to Cave In to Russian Blackmail

Halya Coynash

Human Rights in Ukraine, 4 June 2019

<https://bit.ly/2Znq2Ax>

On the same day that Russia challenged the jurisdiction of a second UN tribunal whose orders it is flouting, the Council of Europe’s Rules Committee adopted a draft resolution which could open the door to removing the sanctions imposed after Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea. The resolution has yet to be voted on by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), and it is a ‘compromise’ which may still not satisfy Russia, however the message sent by any such compromise is disastrous. If you are a big country, and can blackmail with lost revenue to PACE, and potential withdrawal from the European Court of Human Rights, measures will be found to waive or at least weaken entirely warranted sanctions.

PACE reacted to Russia's invasion and occupation of Ukrainian territory in 2014 by suspending Russia's voting and other rights. The Russian delegation remained free to attend sessions and engage in dialogue, however it chose not to do so, and then in 2017, Moscow stopped paying its annual payment to PACE. The Russian Foreign Ministry referred to the sanctions as being "an attempt to 'punish' the Russian delegation" for what it claimed to have been, not the invasion and annexation of Ukrainian Crimea, but the "free expression of the will of the Crimean people to join the Russian Federation".

The key elements of blackmail were two: the loss to the Council of Europe of Russia's €33 million annual fee, and the threat that Russia would withdraw from participation in the European Court of Human Rights. The latter would, undoubtedly, be a blow for Russians who can find no justice in domestic courts. Russia has, however, already violated Article 46 of the European Convention on Human Rights by adopting a law which allows the Constitutional Court to decide that ECHR judgements are 'unconstitutional' and can therefore be flouted.

Attempts to remove the sanctions began in 2017, with these heavily supported by Secretary General Thorbjorn Jagland. Since not one of the conditions for the reinstatement of Russia's rights had been fulfilled, and with the human rights situation steadily deteriorating, attempts were made to present the removal of sanctions in a more palatable light. New rules were proposed, which would make it much more difficult to reimpose sanctions. Since these need to be renewed each year, the chances of this happening would be reduced.

The last attempt to pass a resolution with the deceptively innocent title: 'On strengthening the decision-making process of the Parliamentary Assembly concerning credentials and voting' failed at the PACE session in October 2018.

On 3 June 2019, however, the Rules Committee adopted a draft resolution based on a decision by the Committee of Ministers from 17 May. This will enable the Russian Federation to present their credentials during the June 2019 part-session. "The Committee also proposes to supplement its Rules of Procedure to clarify that in the context of a challenge to or reconsideration of credentials, members' rights to vote, to speak and to be represented in the Assembly and its bodies shall not be suspended or withdrawn."

Russia was seeking full removal of any possibility to impose sanctions, and this only makes them harder to impose, but it is, nonetheless, an attempt to give in to Moscow's blackmail.

An Open Letter, endorsed by many prominent European politicians, political analysts, academics, rights activists and journalists, has warned against any such measures aimed at weakening the Council of Europe's power to sanction countries that violate human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

The authors point to the grave consequences for human rights of Russia's annexation of Crimea, and to its ongoing major role, including military, in Donbas and Georgia.

One can, and should, recall the over 100 Ukrainian political prisoners whom Russia is illegally holding in occupied Crimea and Russia, and the clear moves over recent months to use fabricated 'terrorism' charges to crush the Crimean Solidarity civic initiative, and its work in supporting political prisoners and their families, and in reporting on human rights violations.

There are also well over 100 civilian hostages and prisoners of war in occupied Donbas, with their release also dependent on directives from Moscow.

Moves to reinstate Russia's position in the Council of Europe comes at a time when the country is directly blocking or obstructing the work of international judiciary and investigative bodies.

Russia used its power of veto in the UN Security Council to block an international investigation into the downing by a Russian Buk missile on 17 July 2014 of Malaysian airliner MH17. It used propaganda and other methods to obstruct the work of the Joint Investigative Team, which concluded in May 2018 that "the Buk missile which downed Malaysian airliner MH17 on 17 July 2014 came from the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile brigade which is a unit of the Russian army from Kursk in the Russian Federation".

Russia's response to the International Criminal Court Chief Prosecutor's conclusion that its occupation of Crimea constitutes an international armed conflict (falling within the ICC's jurisdiction) was to declare that it wanted nothing to do with this Court.

It has repeatedly flouted orders from the European Court of Human Rights under Rule 39, with respect to Ukrainian political prisoners. Over a year and a half after the Russian FSB abducted Ukrainian teenager Pavlo Hryb from Belarus and imprisoned him, it has still not complied with the ECHR order to allow the gravely ill young man to be examined by Ukrainian doctors.

On 25 May 2019, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea ordered Russia to immediately release the 24 Ukrainian seamen whom it took prisoner on 25 November 2018, and to also return the three Ukrainian naval vessels it seized in its attack. Russia is thus far continuing to claim that this UN Tribunal does not have jurisdiction over its act of aggression against Ukraine and to say that it will not comply.

Russia's general position in all international disputes appears to be to deny the particular court's jurisdiction. It tried this with respect to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, and, earlier, over Ukraine's suit against Russia before the UN's International Court of Justice. On 19 April 2017, ICJ not only accepted prima facie jurisdiction, but also imposed the provisional measures which Ukraine had requested with respect to discrimination against Crimean Tatars and ethnic Ukrainians in occupied Crimea. Russia

has flouted the Court's direct order to withdraw its ban on the Mejlis, or representative assembly, of the Crimean Tatar people and to ensure the availability of the Ukrainian language in Crimean schools.

Instead it is still arguing that the Court does not have jurisdiction. At the hearings which began on 3 June 2019, the Russian delegation arrived with one of the few Crimean Tatars who has collaborated with the occupation regime, presumably in the hope that he could convince the Court that the ongoing persecution of Crimean Tatars that has been noted by the UN General Assembly, PACE, OSCE, all democratic countries and rights NGOs, is merely 'Ukrainian disinformation'.

Do the honourable members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe really wish to ignore such overt violation of fundamental principles of international law and denial of the authority of international judicial bodies? The signal this will send is devastating and would appear to undermine the Council of Europe's commitment to the values it purportedly upholds.

#11

Zelenskiy's Confrontational First Meeting with Parliament Leaders Detailed in 76-page Transcript

by Oleksiy Sorokin
Kyiv Post, 31 May 2019
<https://bit.ly/2WyhVnz>

A 76-page transcript of President Volodymyr Zelenskiy's first meeting with the leaders of parliament was published on May 30, revealing a confrontational conversation with no consensus.

The transcript, which Zelenskiy's office published more than a week after the meeting took place on May 21, offered a look into the newcomer president's first encounter with the seasoned politicians, some of whom vehemently opposed his presidential bid.

The conversation took place a day after Zelenskiy was sworn in and announced he was dissolving the parliament – while standing in front of the lawmakers.

On the next day, the new president called the leaders of the parliament's eight factions to discuss the snap parliamentary elections, hoping to reach an agreement on changes in the electoral law and a date for the new election.

They met for about three hours and said they reached a consensus: to vote for the new electoral legislation that would secure a less corrupt election. The next day, however, the

lawmakers didn't vote for the bill. In response, Zelenskiy tossed aside the electoral reform project and set a snap election for July 21.

It appeared that the lawmakers duped the new president and gave him a cold welcome into politics, at the same time sending the country into another flawed election.

Election of discord

The meeting showed no consensus among faction leaders on the elections themselves and the system by which the elections must be held.

During the presidential campaign, Zelenskiy promised an electoral reform that would include two components: getting rid of the single-member districts that elect half of the parliament and allow for vote buying, and introducing the open-list system. The open lists give voters control over which candidates from the parties' lists get to the parliament, meaning rich donors can't buy a high spot on the list and secure a seat in parliament.

After the meeting with the lawmakers, participants said there was a consensus to support a partial electoral reform: to drop the single-member districts and lower the entrance threshold from 5 to 3 percent of the vote, but not introduce the open-list system.

It was a significant step back from Zelenskiy's initial demands.

Yet the transcript shows that not only there was no consensus, but the coveted open-list electoral system was barely discussed at the three-hour-long meeting. Zelenskiy never mentioned it in his remarks.

The only two representatives even speaking of the open-list system were Yulia Tymoshenko, the leader of the 20-member *Batkivshchyna* faction, who spoke insistently against it, and Vitaliy Khomutynnik, the leader of the 24-member *Vidrodzhennya* faction, who defended it.

Tymoshenko called open party lists a hoax that is overhyped.

"A proportional system with open lists is essentially the same (as single-member districts)," Tymoshenko said, suggesting that open lists also open ways for corruption.

Yaroslav Moskalenko, another former representative of Party of Regions and leader of the 18-member *Volya Narody* faction, said the existing closed party lists were bad, but didn't want to change the election law now. People's Front's Maksym Burbak and Radical Party leader Oleh Lyashko said they wanted to keep the existing system.

On Zelenskiy's side, the main speaker was his then-advisor Andriy Bohdan. On the day after the meeting, Zelenskiy made Bohdan his chief of staff.

Bohdan presented to the lawmakers the president's project of changing the electoral system: getting rid of the single-mandate districts and lowering the threshold for parties to enter parliament from 5 percent to 3 percent of the vote. It was the bill the parliament failed to support the next day.

Tetiana Slipachuk, head of the Central Election Commission, responsible for holding elections, opposed any changes to the electoral legislation at the moment. She said that the OSCE's recommendations to not change electoral procedures up to a year before elections must be taken into account.

Slipachuk was interrupted by Bohdan, who said that these recommendations have no legal force in Ukraine.

A missing coalition

A larger part of the chaotic meeting was dedicated to the lawmakers' questioning the legality of Zelenskiy's order to dissolve parliament. Zelenskiy dissolved the parliament citing the absence of coalition since 2016.

Speaker of the Parliament Andriy Parubiy, People's Front's Burbak, Radical Party's Lyashko, and Petro Poroshenko Bloc's Artur Herasymov insisted that the decision was illegal because the coalition existed until May.

Although the parliament has been led by a two-party coalition of the Petro Poroshenko Bloc and People's Front, there have been doubts about this coalition's legal existence. The parliament has refused to publish a list of the coalition's members, leading to speculation that it didn't have the necessary 226 lawmakers.

Tymoshenko and Khomutynnik, who disagreed on the electoral reform, both supported the decision to dissolve parliament, confirming there was no real coalition.

"If I'm not mistaken, People's Front has 80 members and Poroshenko Bloc has 135. Even a schoolboy can add these two figures," said Khomutynnik, pointing at Lyashko and implying that the number is less than the 226 lawmakers needed for a majority.

"Unfortunately, I'm no longer a schoolboy," replied Lyashko, whose quarreling and comebacks dominated the meeting.

Disruptions

There were plenty of comical disruptions and comebacks during the meeting, the transcript reveals.

The first 10 pages of the transcript are dedicated to Lyashko, who tried to broadcast the meeting live on Facebook until presidential security took away his phone.

Lyashko wasn't having it, and repeatedly demanded to get his phone back, while Zelenskiy tried to brush him off.

"When I tried to go, they pushed me off, they beat me, they took my phone from me," Lyashko complained to Zelenskiy. "Give me back my phone!"

"I didn't take your phone," said Zelenskiy.

"You won't object to the country seeing this historic meeting, will you?" Lyashko insisted.

"Oleg Valeriyovych, you try to make a historic moment out of anything," Zelenskiy replied, sardonically.

"So do you!"

"Thank you," said Zelenskiy.

#12

Official Records Reveal that 170 Russian Soldiers Were Deployed at the Ukrainian Border on the Day MH17 Was Shot Down

by Alexander Baklanov
Meduza, 6 June 2019
<https://bit.ly/2KHdmQz>

More than 170 soldiers from Russia's 53rd Air Defense Missile Brigade, which was based near Kursk, were located near the Ukrainian border on July 17, 2014, the day Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down outside Donetsk, according to unclassified Russian Defense Ministry documents obtained by the newspaper Novaya Gazeta.

International investigators say the Buk surface-to-air missile that destroyed the passenger plane and killed all 298 people on board was assigned to this same brigade. Based on the official findings, the Buk missile system that fired the missile arrived in Ukraine from Russia and then crossed back over the border.

One of the Defense Ministry documents uncovered by Novaya Gazeta states that Russian soldiers received orders on June 23, 2014 (three weeks before MH17 was shot down), to ensure the safety of public roads as the 53rd Brigade moved equipment from Kursk to the Ukrainian border. The 63rd Logistic Support Brigade also participated in this transport

operation. This brigade's records also mention the "Kamaz" heavy truck that was sighted in amateur footage near the Ukrainian border beside a Buk missile system.

Another document from the 53rd brigade states that its soldiers arrived on July 15 (two days before MH17 was shot down) near the Ukrainian border at a military base in Millerovo, where they were issued field rations for five days, and sent to another location. Afterwards, according to Novaya Gazeta, one of the brigade's vehicles was spotted inside Ukrainian territory.

Novaya Gazeta also tried to contact several current and former soldiers in the 53rd brigade. The newspaper managed to reach Irina Kolesnik, a medical officer in the brigade who traveled to Millerovo in 2014 and currently works at the Interior Ministry's medical center in Kursk, but she refused to discuss MH17. "I can't tell you anything. I have no right to talk about [the country's] actions," she said.

Spokespeople for the Russian Defense Ministry and 53rd brigade have not commented on Novaya Gazeta's report. In the past, state officials have repeatedly denied any Russian involvement in the attack on MH17. The Defense Ministry's position is that Russian Buk missile systems never once crossed the Ukrainian border, and the missile fired at the passenger aircraft was not in the Russian military's arsenal.

#13

TV Review: HBO's 'Chernobyl'

by Caroline Framke
Variety, 27 April 2019
<https://bit.ly/2QYjPYQ>

It makes perfect sense that "Chernobyl" feels more like a horror movie at times than a traditional drama. Tracing the catastrophe events before, during, and after the nuclear explosion that continues to send radioactive ripples throughout Europe to this day, the HBO's new limited series is, in fact, recounting one of the modern era's most devastating, human horrors, and the series doesn't shy away from showing it as just that. To its credit, this iteration of the story — or more accurately, the many interlocking stories of the meltdown and its aftershocks — leans into the horror of it all rather than blinking away, as so many tried to do when it happened in real life. Rather than bursting into shocking twists, writer Craig Mazin and director Johan Renck build a steadily creeping unease, allowing the scale of the atrocity to sink in with terrible, fitting gravity.

Mazin undertook an extraordinary task when breaking down the Chernobyl disaster into (somewhat) digestible parts. Each of the series' five episodes — all of which Mazin wrote — follows a core cast of characters, but crucially, also serve distinctly different purposes.

The first two focus on the immediate nightmare of the reactor exploding, the second two on the clean-up efforts and the sacrifices so many made in order to stabilize the region, and the finale on the flimsy trial of three Chernobyl laymen. (HBO has also announced that the series will have an accompanying podcast to dive deeper into the disaster itself, as well as explain the adjustments made when adapting the true story to the screen.)

Guiding our journey through it all are skeptical scientist Valery Legasov (Jared Harris), Soviet Deputy Prime Minister Boris Shcherbina (Stellan Skarsgard), and whistleblower nuclear physicist Ulana Khomyuk (Emily Watson). Legasov and Scherbina really did investigate the disaster closely to how the series depicts it, dying within a few years of setting foot in Chernobyl; Ulana, Mazin acknowledges at the tail end of the series, is a composite of the many scientists who dug into the inconsistencies of the official reports to figure out what, exactly, had happened. Sometimes, their explanatory scenes can get a bit more technical than the show can quite sustain, but for the most part, their collective curiosity and growing astonishment carries them through. Together, the formidable trio of Harris, Skarsgard, and Watson give the series its bleeding heart, untangling their characters' respective inner conflicts and ultimate determination to tell the truth in the face of extraordinary opposition from their own country with expert ease.

Meanwhile, distraught Chernobyl resident Lyudmilla Ignatenko (Jessie Buckley) brings in the tragically banal experience of just being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and fielding the wild grief of losing her firefighter husband (Adam Nagatis) to the incomprehensible pain of agony of extreme radiation exposure. Crucially, however, Lyudmilla isn't the only "ordinary" citizen the series spotlights along the way. We also get time with the coal miners enlisted to clean up the radioactive site, the divers who plunged into the reactor's depths, the men recruited from far and wide to purge the town of any radioactive life still kicking around. All of them, "Chernobyl" makes plain, were doomed to dramatically shortened lifespans for doing this remarkable service. Some of them knew it; many of them did not; all of them performed their duty regardless.

The stark contrast between this kind of courage versus the cravenness of every stubborn bureaucrat who stood in clarity's way is what makes "Chernobyl" as chilling as it is essential. The sheer incompetence and hubris that the series reveals as the catastrophe's ultimate culprits rather than any one particular person are more frustrating than I can possibly describe. (This is, to say the least, not an easy watch; my jaw hurt after every episode from clenching it so hard.) But even if it's viscerally painful to feel the true depths of just how badly the people in power failed, and how relentlessly they tried to deny it, that surge of furious empathy is also exactly the series' point.

#14

“Chernobyl” Creator Breaks Down the HBO Drama’s Haunting Finale and Cautionary Message

by Emma Dibdin

Hollywood Reporter, 5 June 2019

<https://bit.ly/2X2adl3>

“This is in us, a certain sense of denial, a certain sense of groupthink,” Craig Mazin tells The Hollywood Reporter while discussing the culture of lies that contributed to the 1986 nuclear disaster.

Every lie we tell incurs a debt to the truth. Sooner or later, the debt is paid.” This line from Sunday’s final episode of HBO’s searing Chernobyl — spoken by the doggedly candid scientist Valery Legasov (Jared Harris) — speaks to the heart of the miniseries, which is both a riveting chronicle of one of the worst nuclear disasters in history and a morality play about the cost of a cover-up.

As depicted by creator Craig Mazin throughout the five-part project, the devastating 1986 explosion at the Chernobyl power plant was the result of a series of lies told by self-serving bureaucrats in service of a corrupt and incompetent government that prioritized its public image above the safety of its own citizens.

While this story is deeply specific to the Soviet regime, it also resonates in powerful and uncomfortable ways in modern America. Legasov and his colleagues — politician Boris Shcherbina (Stellan Skarsgård) and nuclear physicist Ulana Khomyuk (Emily Watson), the show’s only fictional character — are forced to constantly defend the truth against powerful people who willfully deny scientific fact, even as it stares them directly in the face. For Mazin, the relevance of this infuriating dynamic was a major reason why the story was worth telling.

“This is in us, a certain sense of denial, a certain sense of groupthink,” he tells The Hollywood Reporter. “This is not something that sits on one party line or the other. We’ve seen it in all permutations throughout history, and at the core of it is a certain insistence that what we want to be true is now true, and what we don’t like is now false. That’s not serving us well, and it has never served us well.”

Below, Mazin talks with THR about Chernobyl’s slow-burn success and unexpected memes, the storyline he left out because it felt “too Hollywood” and his plans for a follow-up.

You end the show on Legasov acknowledging, in voiceover, that the scientific search for truth is often undermined by the fact that people simply don’t want to hear it. That feels pretty timely. Why did you wrap up on that note?

My personal belief is that there's not much value in showing things from the past that have no relevance to today, or failing to connect some kind of dotted line to where we are today, because otherwise it just becomes homework. What compelled me about the story of Chernobyl more than anything else was something very universal. Yes, Chernobyl happened because in many ways the Soviet system was deeply corrupt and evil, but the Soviet system did not arrive to us from some other planet. It was devised by humans. This is in us. A certain sense of denial, a certain sense of groupthink — this is not something that sits on one party line or the other. We've seen it in all permutations throughout history, and at the core of it is a certain insistence that what we want to be true is now true, and what we don't like is now false. That's not serving us well, it has never served us well. We need to ask ourselves why we feel entitled to say to scientists, "We actually think the climate isn't changing." Or "I think vaccines might cause autism." We can say that all we want, but it's not true, and it costs us. I want everyone who watches this show to consider how they themselves are complicit in a kind of conspiracy against truths that are uncomfortable.

The show has really gathered steam through its run — it was critically well received from the start but gradually built a devoted audience. Why do you think it has resonated so much?

I'm a big believer in the old-school way of releasing television. It's not to say that other platforms aren't making great shows, but there's something about just dumping it all down at once that I think, honestly, cheapens it a touch. It also steals any chance for a kind of spreading, and a person-to-person encouragement, where watching it becomes a communal thing. *Chernobyl* started well, but each week it grew, which is kind of not the way it normally goes, and we hit a critical mass as we headed into our fourth and fifth episode.

Have there been any reactions to the show that have surprised you?

Yes. I was very nervous about how the show would be received in Eastern Europe, in Ukraine and Belarus, in Russia, or any of the former Soviet Republics, and it's been fascinating. By and large, the overwhelming response from people has been just incredibly gratifying. They recognize that we made this with love and respect for them, and that we tried our hardest to get the details right, which I think from their perspective Western productions often either fail to do, or don't try to do at all. I did expect — and my expectation was rewarded — a certain level of propaganda from the Russian government, and after all, the man who runs that government is ex-KGB. They're putting out their own Chernobyl narrative, which is I think is based around a KGB officer trying to stop a CIA officer from doing something, and okay, sure, I figured that was coming, I get it.

I've also just been surprised by the strength of reactions from people on all sides of the political spectrum. There are people that missed the point, because they want to see this as a condemnation of people on the right who can't deal with science, and then there are people on the right who think it's entirely a condemnation of Soviet communism and

socialism. What we're getting at is something that's a bit more universal and human than "Your side bad, my side good."

What was your biggest writing challenge?

Oh, for sure it was the trial sequence in the fifth episode. I had a lot of plates to spin at once, but the biggest challenge was I needed to explain something that's complicated; it's nuclear physics and power plant engineering. And I had to figure out a way to explain this to people because I'm not gonna not explain it — that's not me! I need people to know. So I worked really hard, and Jared, too, the two of us really went through that stuff line by line to make sure it was clear and there weren't any extra unnecessary things, but that we weren't leaving anything important out. either.

The red and blue cards were a nice visual way out of that conundrum.

Yeah, because if you're really into it and you have a predilection for science, you can follow it on one level, and if it's not your jam, you can at least look at colors and you get the point! More red is this, and more blue is that, and you can see what's going on in the reactor. I come out of comedy, where the thought of boring people is just horrifying, and losing an audience is your flop-sweat nightmare, so I just wanted to make it fascinating for everybody, as best I could.

The show is unflinching in its depiction of the physical effects of radiation poisoning. Was there anything you left out or were asked to leave out because it was too much?

Yeah, we had to be really careful in episode three when we showed the final stage of Vasily Ignatenko's body. It was the most extreme thing that we showed, and our makeup and prosthetic designer Daniel Parker did a brilliant job — so brilliant, in fact, that there was a concern that we lingered on it a bit. HBO was so supportive and so great, and Kary Antholis, who was the head of HBO miniseries when we were making the show, said, "You know, can you just shorten that shot? Because it feels like you're forcing us to look at this, like you're almost proud of it." I did not intend that, and that's not what we want at all. Sometimes you lose sight of those things, because you watched the prosthetics being built, and then you don't quite get how impactful it is. So we shortened that shot by quite a bit, because the last thing we wanted was to feel like we were trading on this man's sad fate for sensationalist points on a TV show. What we wanted was for people to see the truth of what happens, but we didn't want to feel like we were exploiting it. Those were the things we were dealing with all the time, because that man was a real person, and his wife is still alive, and the last thing we want to do is show anything other than total respect.

Was there anything else major that you filmed and omitted?

We shot a sub-story about Dyatlov, Paul Ritter's character, which touched on his history. Chernobyl was not Dyatlov's first nuclear disaster — he had actually been involved in another one years earlier, when he was a nuclear engineer at a submarine base. He

received a pretty steep dose of radiation, a dose that theoretically could have killed him. It didn't, the guy was tough, but his son died about a year later of leukemia, and there was an implication that whatever contamination Dyatlov experienced he may have brought home with him and it may have impacted his son's health. From a writing point of view, if you have some backstory that helps explain a character's motive, or creates sympathy for an unsympathetic character, it's generally seen as a useful thing. But I just ultimately didn't feel like it was justified. It felt like I was stretching. I could make the case [for keeping it], but it felt a little Hollywood. Ultimately, when we looked at the cut, we didn't need it.

The show's popularity online is really striking — there are a lot more Chernobyl memes out there than I expected! What do you make of that?

(Laughs.) I think it's just how people show their love for something. When I was younger, I remember I was just obsessed with *The Godfather*, and there were like 1,000 *Godfather* parodies and lines like "We'll make him an offer he can't refuse" became this thing people would say, but nobody called them memes back then. When I was a kid, *Welcome Back, Kotter* was really popular, so we'd say all these stupid things that they say in the show, or *Happy Days*: "Sit on it!" Those were memes! I think it's how we show that we have fallen in love with something, and I take it all with joy. I don't think people are making light of anything that's serious; I think they're just saying, "We connected with this, and we love it."

Dyatlov's line, "Not great, not terrible," which is this moment of completely absurd denial, seems to be heavily memed.

Yeah, I have to give credit to Carolyn Strauss, who executive produced *Chernobyl* along with me and Jane Featherstone. Somewhere fairly early on in postproduction, she said, "You know what I love the most? When Dyatlov says, 'Not great, not terrible.'» She just zeroed in on that, it was like she knew, she was the original memer on that one. I don't know why she saw something in that line that for me was never a big thing, but she was right!

On the Chernobyl podcast, you briefly touch on the question of how a similar scenario would play out in the West, especially the moments where workers are effectively sacrificed for the greater good. Is that something you've thought a lot about?

The good news is we don't really have to worry about that, because it wouldn't have happened in the West. Our nuclear reactors don't explode, because they're built smartly, and carefully, and they are surrounded by containment buildings that are engineered so a plane can fly into them and they won't break. The RBMK reactor used at Chernobyl was just a terrible design, just flat-out. Too big, too unstable, uncovered, so we wouldn't have to deal with that problem. We can look at Japan — the way they dealt with Fukushima is impressive, and from that we can see that no matter what, there are going to be people that perform heroically and somewhat sacrificially, but they are also protected. When you see these guys going on the roof in Chernobyl, they're wearing these hand-hammered lead

scraps that they've scrounged themselves and tied together with basically shoelaces, and that's something we don't do. We have resources and we would not do that, and they did it there. That alone, I just find breathtaking. The Soviet system was so bad, and the Soviet citizenry were so brave. They are remarkable people, and the things they have suffered and the things they have done through over the course of the 20th century, and today, is just amazing and inspiring to me.

Have you thought about a follow-up to the show? Is there another historical event you're interested in approaching in the same way?

I want to do a million things. If every day could be 70 hours and I didn't have to sleep, because I'm really just a student and I get fascinated with things. The one thing I can say is I'm going to continue in this vein of making a show about something that matters, that is real. I probably won't try and duplicate what I did with *Chernobyl* — I think down that road is failure. We've actually had a tremendous response from India, and a lot of people have tweeted at me from India saying, "Tell the story of Bhopal," which is an incredible story. That's something that I would encourage somebody else to tell, because I just don't want people to think, like, "Oh, he's just trying to play his hits." You have to write a new song! I know the next thing I'm going to do is something that is about now, and is about here, in the United States, and for better or for worse, I'll approach it with the same insistence on truth over narrative.

#15

What HBO's "Chernobyl" Got Right, and What It Got Terribly Wrong

by Masha Gessen

Newyorker, 4 June 2019

<https://bit.ly/2WtBrBA>

Svetlana Alexievich, the Russian-language Belarusian writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 2015, for her work with oral history, has said that the book she found easiest to report was her book about Chernobyl. (Its English title, depending on the translation, is "Voices from Chernobyl" or "Chernobyl Prayer.") The reason, she said, was that none of her interlocutors—people who lived in the area affected by the disaster—knew how they were supposed to talk about it. For her other books, Alexievich interviewed people about their experience of the Second World War, the Soviet war in Afghanistan, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. For all of these other events and periods in Russian history, there were widely adopted narratives, habits of speaking that, Alexievich found, had a way of overshadowing actual personal experience and private memory. But when she asked survivors about Chernobyl they accessed their own stories more easily, because the story hadn't been told. The Soviet media disseminated very little information about the disaster. There were no books or movies or songs. There was a vacuum.

Alexievich's book about Chernobyl was published in Russian in 1997, more than ten years after one of the reactors at the Chernobyl power plant exploded, in what was probably the worst nuclear accident in history. One of the most remarkable facts about Chernobyl is that the narrative vacuum had persisted for that long, and, in fact, it has persisted since: Alexievich's book came to prominence, both in Russia and in the West, only following her Nobel Prize win. There have been stories in the media in Russia and abroad, many of them on the odd tourist industry that has sprung up in the disaster zone; there has been a BBC documentary and a bizarre American-Ukrainian documentary. But in the past year two books, one by a historian and the other by a journalist, have attempted to tell the definitive documentary story of the disaster. Finally, the HBO series "Chernobyl," the fifth and final episode of which aired Monday, tells a fictionalized version. It being television, and very well-received television at that, it is the series, rather than the books, that will probably finally fill the vacuum where the story of Chernobyl should be. This is not a good thing.

Before I get to what the series got so terribly wrong, I should acknowledge what it got right. In "Chernobyl," which was created and written by Craig Mazin and directed by Johan Renck, the material culture of the Soviet Union is reproduced with an accuracy that has never before been seen in Western television or film—or, for that matter, in Russian television or film. Clothes, objects, and light itself seem to come straight out of nineteen-eighties Ukraine, Belarus, and Moscow. (There are tiny errors, like a holiday uniform worn by schoolchildren on a non-holiday, or teen-agers carrying little kids' school bags, but this is truly splitting hairs.) Soviet-born Americans—and, indeed, Soviet-born Russians—have been tweeting and blogging in awe at the uncanny precision with which the physical surroundings of Soviet people have been reproduced. The one noticeable mistake in this respect concerns the series makers' apparent ignorance of the vast divisions between different socioeconomic classes in the Soviet Union: in the series, Valery Legasov (Jared Harris), a member of the Academy of Sciences, lives in nearly the same kind of squalor as a fireman in the Ukrainian town of Pripyat. In fact, Legasov would have lived in an entirely different kind of squalor than the fireman did.

Herein lies one of the series' biggest flaws: its failure to accurately portray Soviet relationships of power. There are exceptions, flashes of brilliance that shed light on the bizarre workings of Soviet hierarchies. In the first episode, for example, during an emergency meeting of the Pripyat ispolkom, the town's governing council, an elder statesman, Zharkov (Donald Sumpter), delivers a chilling, and chillingly accurate, speech, urging his compatriots to "have faith." "We seal off the city," Zharkov says. "No one leaves. And cut the phone lines. Contain the spread of misinformation. That is how we keep the people from undermining the fruits of their own labor." This statement has everything: the bureaucratic indirectness of Soviet speech, the privileging of "fruits of labor" over the people who created them, and, of course, the utter disregard for human life.

The final episode of "Chernobyl" also contains a scene that encapsulates the Soviet system perfectly. During the trial of three men who have been deemed responsible for the disaster, a member of the Central Committee overrules the judge, who then looks to

the prosecutor for direction—and the prosecutor gives that direction with a nod. This is exactly how Soviet courts worked: they did the bidding of the Central Committee, and the prosecutor wielded more power than the judge.

Unfortunately, apart from these striking moments, the series often veers between caricature and folly. In Episode 2, for example, the Central Committee member Boris Shcherbina (Stellan Skarsgård) threatens to have Legasov shot if he doesn't tell him how a nuclear reactor works. There are a lot of people throughout the series who appear to act out of fear of being shot. This is inaccurate: summary executions, or even delayed executions on orders of a single apparatchik, were not a feature of Soviet life after the nineteen-thirties. By and large, Soviet people did what they were told without being threatened with guns or any punishment.

Similarly repetitive and ridiculous are the many scenes of heroic scientists confronting intransigent bureaucrats by explicitly criticizing the Soviet system of decision-making. In Episode 3, for example, Legasov asks, rhetorically, “Forgive me—maybe I've just spent too much time in my lab, or maybe I'm just stupid. Is this really the way it all works? An uninformed, arbitrary decision that will cost who knows how many lives that is made by some apparatchik, some career Party man?” Yes, of course this is the way it works, and, no, he hasn't been in his lab so long that he didn't realize that this is how it works. The fact of the matter is, if he didn't know how it worked, he would never have had a lab.

#16

The Chernobyl Syndrome

by Sophie Pinkham

New York Review of Books, 4 April 2019

Manual for Survival: A Chernobyl Guide to the Future

by Kate Brown

Norton, 420 pp., \$27.95

Midnight in Chernobyl: The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster

by Adam Higginbotham

Simon and Schuster, 538 pp., \$29.95

Chernobyl: The History of a Nuclear Catastrophe

by Serhii Plokhyy

Basic Books, 404 pp., \$32.00

On the night of April 25, 1986, during a planned maintenance shutdown at the Chernobyl power plant in northern Ukraine, one of the four reactors overheated and began to burn. As plant engineers scrambled to regain control of it, they thought for a moment that

there had been an earthquake. In fact, a buildup of steam had propelled the two-hundred-ton concrete top of the reactor's casing into the air, with masses of radioactive material following close behind when the core exploded. The plant workers had been assured again and again of the safety of the "peaceful atom," and they couldn't imagine that the reactor had exploded.

Firefighters rushed to the scene without special equipment or a clear understanding of the potential risks; they had not been trained to deal with a nuclear explosion, because such training would have involved acknowledging that an explosion was possible. They kicked at chunks of radioactive graphite that had fallen around the reactor, and their boots stuck to the melting, flammable bitumen that had been used, against all safety regulations, to coat the roofs of the plant's buildings. Efforts to douse mysteriously fizzy, incandescent fires only made the conflagrations seethe with radioactive steam. (These fires probably contained uranium dioxide, one of the fuels used in the reactor.)

Feeling hot, the firefighters unbuttoned their jackets and took off their helmets. After less than thirty minutes they began to vomit, develop excruciating headaches, and feel faint and unbearably thirsty. One drank highly radioactive water from the plant's cooling pond, burning his digestive tract. Over the next few hours, the exposed firefighters and plant workers swelled up, their skin turning the eerie purple of radiation burn. Later it would turn black and peel away. After evacuation and treatment in Moscow, many of these first responders died and were buried in nesting pairs of zinc caskets. Their graves were covered with cement tiles to block the radiation emanating from their corpses.

General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev was informed that there had been an explosion and fire at the plant but that the reactor itself had not been seriously damaged. No one wanted to be the bearer of catastrophic news. When the occasional official raised the question of whether to warn civilians and evacuate the city of Pripyat, which had been built to house workers from the Chernobyl plant, he was admonished to wait for higher-ups to make a decision and for a committee to be formed. Panic and embarrassment were of greater concern than public safety. The KGB cut Pripyat's intercity telephone lines and prevented residents from leaving, as part of the effort to keep news of the disaster from spreading. Some locals were savvy enough to try to leave on their own. But with no public warning, many didn't take even the minimal precaution of staying indoors with the windows shut. One man was happily sunbathing the next morning, pleased by the speed with which he was tanning. He was soon in the hospital.

Moscow officials eventually realized that the reactor had exploded, and that there was an imminent risk of another, much larger explosion. More than thirty-six hours after the initial meltdown, Pripyat was evacuated. Columns of Kiev city buses had been sent to wait for evacuees on the outskirts of the city, absorbing radiation while plans were debated. These radioactive buses deposited their radioactive passengers in villages chosen to house the refugees, then returned to their regular routes in Kiev. Over the next two weeks, another 75,000 people were resettled from the thirty-kilometer area around

Pripyat, which was to become known as the “Exclusion Zone,” and which remains almost uninhabited to this day.

The Soviet system began to marshal its vast human resources to “liquidate” the disaster. Many efforts to stop the fire in the reactor only made matters worse by triggering new reactions or creating toxic smoke, but doing nothing was not an option. Pilots, soldiers, firefighters, and scientists volunteered, exposing themselves to huge doses of radiation. (Many others fled from the scene.) They were rewarded with cash bonuses, cars, and apartments, and some were made “Hero of the Soviet Union” or “Hero of Ukraine,” but many became invalids or didn’t live to see their new homes. The radiation levels were so high that they made the electronics in robots fail, so “biorobots”—people in makeshift lead protective gear—did the work of clearing the area.

On April 28, a radioactive cloud reached Scandinavia. After attempts at denial, the Soviet government conceded that there had been an accident. Western journalists soon began reporting alarming estimates of Chernobyl casualties. To maintain the illusion that the accident was already under control, Moscow ordered Ukrainians to continue with the planned May Day parade in Kiev, about eighty miles away, thus exposing huge numbers of people—including many children—to radioactive fallout. Thanks to word of mouth and to their well-honed skill at reading between the lines of official declarations, however, Kiev residents were already fleeing. By early May, the exodus had grown so large that it became almost impossible to buy a plane, train, or bus ticket out of the city. Tens of thousands of residents left even before the official order to evacuate children was issued, far too late, on May 15. Thousands of people were treated for radiation exposure in Soviet hospitals by the end of the summer of 1986, but the Soviet press was allowed to report only on the hospitalizations of the Chernobyl firemen and plant operators.

A few decades later, it seemed to many that the world’s worst nuclear disaster had caused surprisingly little long-term damage. The official toll is now between thirty-one and fifty-four deaths from acute radiation poisoning (among plant workers and firefighters), doubled leukemia rates among those exposed to exceptionally high radiation levels during the disaster response, and several thousand cases of thyroid cancer—highly treatable, very rarely fatal—among children. Pripyat became a spooky tourist site. In the Exclusion Zone, one could soon see wolves, elk, lynx, brown bears, and birds of prey that had almost disappeared from the area before Chernobyl; some visitors described it as a kind of radioactive Eden, proof of nature’s resiliency. But striking differences in new books about Chernobyl by Kate Brown, Adam Higginbotham, and Serhii Ploky show that there are still many ways to tell this story, and that the lessons of Chernobyl remain unresolved.

Both Ploky and Higginbotham devote their first sections to dramatic reconstructions of the disaster at the plant. Sketches of loving family life or youthful ambition introduce the central figures, making us queasy with dread. The two authors’ minute-by-minute descriptions of the reactor meltdown and its aftermath are as gripping as any thriller and employ similar techniques: the moments of horrified realization, the heroic races against time. The prescient 1979 film *The China Syndrome*, about a barely averted disaster at a

nuclear plant and its cover-up, is mentioned in both books. The movie's title comes from a former Manhattan Project scientist's hypothetical discussion of a reactor meltdown in North America causing fuel to burn its way through the globe to China. Though that specific scenario was clearly impossible, "China syndrome" became shorthand for anxieties about nuclear material burning through the foundations of the Chernobyl plant and entering the water table, the Dnieper River Basin, and then the Black Sea.

Plokhy, a historian of Ukraine, provides a masterful account of how the USSR's bureaucratic dysfunction, censorship, and impossible economic targets produced the disaster and hindered the response to it. Though the Soviets held a show trial to pin responsibility on three plant employees, Plokhy makes plain the absurdity of holding individuals accountable for what was clearly a systemic failure. But Chernobyl could have been worse. The Dnieper River Basin was not contaminated, there was no second explosion, and long-term damage was mercifully limited; eventually the fire burned itself out, and the reactor was covered with a 400,000-ton concrete "sarcophagus."

The radioactive cloud may even have had a silver lining. Plokhy emphasizes Chernobyl's role in the USSR's final collapse and in the push for Ukrainian independence, as furious citizens worked to bring down the government responsible for the disaster, its cover-up, and the lethally inadequate response to it. For Plokhy, the greatest lesson of Chernobyl is the danger of authoritarianism. The secretive Soviet Union's need to look invincible led it to conceal the many nuclear accidents that preceded Chernobyl, instead of using studies of them to improve safety. The memory of Stalin's purges and the continuing threat of unjust punishment prevented plant workers and officials from reporting problems, while impossible Soviet quotas led plant employees to cut corners and ignore safety protocols. Once the reactor exploded, Soviet censorship kept citizens in the dark about the disaster, preventing them from taking measures to protect themselves.

But cover-ups and bureaucratic buck-passing don't happen only in authoritarian governments. As her book's title, *Manual for Survival*, suggests, Kate Brown is interested in the aftermath of Chernobyl, not the disaster itself. Her heroes are not first responders but brave citizen-scientists, independent-minded doctors and health officials, journalists, and activists who fought doggedly to uncover the truth about the long-term damage caused by Chernobyl. Her villains include not only the lying, negligent Soviet authorities, but also the Western governments and international agencies that, in her account, have worked for decades to downplay or actually conceal the human and ecological cost of nuclear war, nuclear tests, and nuclear accidents. Rather than attributing Chernobyl to authoritarianism, she points to similarities in the willingness of Soviets and capitalists to sacrifice the health of workers, the public, and the environment to production goals and geopolitical rivalries.

When the United States dropped atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the immediate effect was a huge single release of radiation. Radioactive fallout then drifted down from the sky, moving with the wind to distribute a smaller amount of radiation across a larger area. People who arrived in Hiroshima after the attack fell ill, including US soldiers

helping to rebuild the city, and the Japanese press wrote about the longer-lasting effects of the “atomic poison.” This infuriated General Leslie Groves, head of the Manhattan Project, who could not countenance the possibility that the hugely expensive new weapon might be vilified and banned, as German mustard gas had been during and after World War I. Groves directed an effort to use censorship and propaganda to suppress information about the dangers of the radiation emitted by the atom bomb. The US did sponsor a “Life Span Study” of Japanese bomb survivors, which yielded valuable information. But it only started in 1950, too late for comprehensive results, and it only factored the initial blast, not fallout, into its estimates of radiation exposure. This meant that it excluded from consideration potentially radiation-induced health problems connected to lower doses of radiation, such as leukemia, thyroid cancer, diseases of the circulatory system, autoimmune disorders, eye diseases, and increased vulnerability to infection.

In 1953 President Eisenhower announced “Atoms for Peace,” a program intended to use nuclear power for medicine and cheap electricity. Soon the cold war arms race was matched by the competitive construction of civilian nuclear reactors. The Soviet Union’s race to nuclear power, like its other industrialization drives, required the over-fulfillment of unrealistic quotas, often using substandard materials and undertrained personnel.

In the 1950s the Soviets developed the High Power Channel Reactor (RBMK). They also developed a much safer alternative model, the Water-Water Energy Reactor (VVER), similar to the Pressurized Water Reactors used in the US. But the RBMK won out because it generated twice as much energy as the VVER, was cheaper to build and run, and produced plutonium that could potentially be used in weapons—though it emitted far more radiation and had not been fully tested before operation began. The four reactors at the Chernobyl plant, opened between 1977 and 1983, were all RBMKs. They generated vast quantities of electricity not only for civilian use but also for the nearby Duga Radar system, which had been built to detect nuclear missiles. In 1985 the shoddily constructed Chernobyl plant managed to overfill its production quotas, in part by reducing the amount of time allotted to repairs.

The Soviet Union had access only to the published results of the “Life Span Study.” But the rapid development of Soviet nuclear power, and the many accidents that accompanied it, provided extensive opportunities to examine the effects of radiation on the human body. By the time Dr. Angelina Guskova cared for Chernobyl responders, she had already treated more cases of radiation illness than anyone in the world. During years of work at a secret Siberian nuclear weapons installation where she was forbidden to ask her patients about the nature of their work, and thus about their radiation exposure, she learned to estimate radiation doses from victims’ symptoms, and she made substantial inroads in the treatment of radiation-related illness. She helped contribute to the Soviet definition of “chronic radiation syndrome,” which included malaise, sleep disorders, bleeding gums, and respiratory and digestive disorders. Guskova’s findings, like the many nuclear accidents that occurred in the Soviet Union in those years, were kept secret.

Chernobyl provided an opportunity to gather a vast body of knowledge about the effects of radiation exposure, but politics trumped science. In the 1990s, when studies of Chernobyl should have been in full swing, Americans and Europeans were suing their governments for exposing them to radioactivity through nuclear tests and accidents—hardly a situation in which Western governments would wish to publicize the many harms of long-term exposure. International agencies and diplomats worked to minimize reports of Chernobyl’s damage. Despite calls from scientists from many countries, there has never been a large-scale, long-term study of its aftermath. In 2011, when an earthquake caused an accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Japan, there was still no firmly established understanding of the effects of chronic exposure to lower levels of radiation, or of the ways in which radioactive fallout continues to circulate years after a disaster.

With bountiful, devastating detail, Brown describes how scientists, doctors, and journalists—mainly in Ukraine and Belarus—went to great lengths and took substantial risks to collect information on the long-term effects of the Chernobyl explosion, which they believed to be extensive. When Soviet authorities were unwilling to accept their results or act on their warnings, these activists put their faith in foreign experts. They were sorely disappointed. In 1989, under public pressure, the Soviet Minister of Health requested that the World Health Organization send a delegation to the area around Chernobyl to determine what levels of radiation were safe for humans. The WHO selected a group of physicists who had already issued reassuring statements about the effects of the radiation spread by the accident. (Brown implies that this selection was connected to pressure from the world’s nuclear powers.) This group soon concluded that there was no association between Chernobyl fallout and the reported rise in noncancerous diseases such as circulatory or autoimmune disorders, and recommended a dramatic increase in the guideline for “safe” lifetime doses of radiation.

A 1990 assessment by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), meanwhile, was sabotaged by the KGB, which was so desperate to conceal sensitive information from foreigners that it stole a large registry of patient data kept on a single computer in Belarus. (It was never recovered.) According to Brown, the IAEA ended up producing inaccurate estimates of radiation exposure, in part because it grossly underestimated the use of contaminated local products by people living around the Zone—especially berries, mushrooms, and milk. The WHO and IAEA results hamstrung fundraising efforts for further Chernobyl studies, and for medical care and resettlement. Ukrainians and Belarusians were told that their health problems were caused by stress and “radiophobia” rather than by radiation itself.

One of the most alarming—though also eerily beautiful—aspects of Brown’s book is her description of the way radioactive material moves through organisms, ecosystems, and human society. Of the infamous May Day parade held in Kiev just after the explosion, Brown writes:

“The newsreels of the May holiday did not record the actions of two and a half million lungs, inhaling and exhaling, working like a giant organic filter. Half of the radioactive substances Kyivans inhaled their bodies retained. Plants and trees in the lovely, tree-lined city scrubbed the air of ionizing radiation. When the leaves fell later that autumn, they needed to be treated as radioactive waste.”

Radioactive fallout was distributed far beyond the Exclusion Zone, which was, after all, just a circle on a map. Clouds absorbed radiation and then moved with the wind. Red Army pilots were dispatched to seed clouds with silver iodide so that radioactive rain would fall over provincial Belarus rather than urban Russia. Belarusian villagers fell ill, as did the pilots. Livestock absorbed radiation in the immediate aftermath of the disaster by inhaling air and dust, and later by consuming contaminated grass. Cleaned villages were soon recontaminated by radioactive dust from surrounding areas, and buried material leaked radioactivity into the water table.

A reluctance to waste food and other basic goods helped keep the radioactive isotopes in circulation. (Radioactive isotopes are unstable atoms that release dangerous particles until they decay into stable atoms of different elements. Although scientists can estimate the half-life of radioactive isotopes, the process of decay at the level of individual atoms is random.) Contaminated wood and peat were burned for fuel in homes and factories, releasing more radioactivity into the air. The State Committee of Industrial Agriculture had 50,000 animals rounded up and slaughtered during the evacuation from the Zone, and their radioactive wool, hides, and meat sent to different cities for processing. Brown's findings in a Kiev archive led her to Chernihiv, in northern Ukraine, where workers at a wool factory requested the same benefits received by those who had been at the site of the reactor explosion. The workers had held the Chernobyl wool in their hands and inhaled its fibers. Soon their noses started to bleed, and they became dizzy, nauseous, and fatigued. Their managers pushed them to fulfill their quotas anyway. The authorities eventually made some efforts to clean the factory, but they weren't willing to bury the highly radioactive wool. Instead, it was piled near the factory's loading dock, waiting for its isotopes to decay. Wool accumulated for over a year, continuing to emit radiation. Meanwhile, the cleaning efforts caused radiation to be released into the surrounding environment along with the rest of the factory's waste.

Moscow agronomists explained how to make sausage with an “acceptable” amount of radioactive meat, and Chernobyl sausages were distributed across the USSR without special labeling. There were instructions on how to salvage contaminated milk, berries, eggs, beets, grain, spinach, potatoes, mushrooms, and tea—often by converting them into products with long shelf lives and simply storing them until the isotopes decayed. This misguided thriftiness was not a uniquely Soviet or authoritarian practice. Chernobyl fallout had contaminated much of Europe. When Italy rejected 300,000 tons of radioactive Greek wheat, Greece refused to take it back; the European Economic Community eventually agreed to buy the wheat, which was blended with clean grain and sent to Africa and East Germany in aid shipments.

The difficulty of the cleanup was increased by the fact that the Chernobyl plant had been built in a marshy area, the worst possible type of land for a nuclear disaster. Mineral-poor soil soaked up radioactive minerals, which were then absorbed by mineral-hungry plants. Meanwhile, seasonal floods spread contaminants into pastureland. Tim Mousseau and Anders Møller, biologists who have been studying Zone ecology since 2000, have found that microbes, worms, spiders, bees, and fruit flies still cannot function normally in the Zone, or that they exist in far lower numbers than they did before the meltdown. This means that leaves do not decay at the normal rate, pollination does not occur often enough to produce the fruit that feeds some birds, birds don't spread the seeds for new plants, and so on.

Other researchers have issued a much sunnier picture of post-Chernobyl ecology, but Brown argues persuasively that they are grossly underestimating the scale of the damage, in part because they rely too heavily on simplistic measurements of radioactivity levels. Because radioactivity can move across so many environments and exposure to it can come in so many varieties, individual doses are hard to measure or even estimate, and a full understanding of radioactivity's effects requires fine-grained observation at many levels over a long period. We don't even fully understand the process of isotope decay. Biologists originally expected that the ecological half-life of cesium-137 would be only fifteen years; now researchers predict that it will take between 180 and 320 years for cesium-137 to disappear from the forests around Chernobyl, though they don't yet know why.

Wild berry and mushroom picking is one of the few economic options for people in rural northern Ukraine. In her haunting conclusion, Brown describes a trip to the marshy forest a hundred kilometers from the Chernobyl plant. Pickers bring berries to a wholesaler who checks their radioactivity. The excessively radioactive berries are set aside for use in natural dyes, while the others are mixed with "cooler" berries until the assortment meets EU regulations. According to Brown, these regulations, like the American ones, are disturbingly lax. A nuclear security specialist told her that at the US-Canada border, a truck was stopped after officers detected a "radiating mass," which they thought might be a dirty bomb. But it was only berries from Ukraine. The truck was allowed to pass.

Brown writes about anticipating outraged letters from nuclear scientists and plant workers, oncology clinic staff, and others whose jobs require exposure to radiation. She details her scrupulous efforts to check and double-check her data, consult with scientists from many fields, and account for factors that might skew results. I suspect that she may be accused of alarmism nonetheless.

But we should be alarmed about the ongoing consequences of nuclear leaks and the risk of new nuclear disasters. Higginbotham points out that the United States now operates a hundred nuclear power reactors, including the one at Three Mile Island that suffered a serious accident in 1979, just twelve days after the release of The China Syndrome. France generates 75 percent of its electricity from nuclear power plants, and China operates thirty-nine nuclear power plants and is building twenty more. Some people see nuclear

power plants, which do not emit any carbon dioxide, as the most feasible way of limiting climate change, and new reactor models promise to be safer, more efficient, and less poisonous. But what if something goes wrong?

And what about nuclear waste? There are hundreds of nuclear waste sites in the US alone. In February the Environmental Protection Agency ordered the excavation of a landfill near St. Louis containing nuclear waste, dumped illegally, that dated back to the Manhattan Project. For years, an underground fire has been burning a few thousand feet from the dump. It took the federal government twenty-seven years to reach a decision about how to deal with this nuclear waste dump near a major metropolitan area, yet we fault the Soviet government for its inadequate response to a nuclear meltdown that unfolded in a matter of minutes. US failure to adequately address longstanding hazards—not to mention the slow-motion catastrophe of climate change—is yet another indication that poor disaster response is hardly unique to authoritarian regimes.

Then there is the renewed threat of nuclear war. One of Gorbachev's biggest achievements was the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which eliminated US and Soviet land-based intermediate nuclear weapon systems. This February the US withdrew from the treaty, with President Trump citing Russian noncompliance. His administration recently called for the expansion of the US "low-yield" nuclear force, which includes weapons the size of those dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Analysts have pointed out that a greater diversity of nuclear weapons makes it harder for a target to know whether it is facing a limited or existential threat—and therefore raises the risk that the target will overreact.

Radiation has a special hold on our imagination: an invisible force out of science fiction, it can alter the very essence of our bodies, dissolve us from the inside out. But *Manual for Survival* asks a larger question about how humans will coexist with the ever-increasing quantities of toxins and pollutants that we introduce into our air, water, and soil. Brown's careful mapping of the path isotopes take is highly relevant to other industrial toxins, and to plastic waste. When we put a substance into our environment, we have to understand that it will likely remain with us for a very long time, and that it may behave in ways we never anticipated. Chernobyl should not be seen as an isolated accident or as a unique disaster, Brown argues, but as an "exclamation point" that draws our attention to the new world we are creating.

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