
CRITICAL DISCUSSION FORUM: KATE BROWN, *A MANUAL FOR SURVIVAL: CHERNOBYL GUIDE TO THE FUTURE*

Introduction

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The publication of *A Manual of Survival: A Chernobyl Guide to the Future* (New York, 2019) marks an important milestone for Slavic Studies, a field well-known for producing innovative, cross-disciplinary and transnational scholarship. At a time when the winds of nationalism are tearing apart the post-Cold War world order, Kate Brown exhibits a passionate concern for the human condition that is inextricably linked with the global ecology. And as such, despite the contemporary nature of the topic, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986, this is an old-fashioned book. Brown asks big and uncomfortable questions about the nature of modernity, our human capacity for self-annihilation, and against all odds, our capacity for survival.

Based on deep scholarly research in twenty-seven archives in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, western Europe and the United States, *A Manual for Survival* will be classified primarily as an environmental history. At the same time, it not only contains detailed information about the technical/scientific aspects of the events that happened at Chernobyl in April of 1986, but Brown also situates the accident in the evolution of the nuclear industry in the twentieth century. She offers a gripping account of Soviet politics at the highest level in the aftermath of the disaster, and describes Moscow's complicated power relationships with subordinate elites in Ukraine. The ecological story of the Pripet Marshes, as seen through the eyes of researchers, foresters, and residents, forms the third layer of this architecturally-storied book. Brown documents how, as the largest remaining wetlands in Europe that have huge capacity for acting as a carbon sink to offset climate change, the marshes have been turned into a land of ordnance and radioactive contamination in the twentieth century. And finally, *A Manual for Survival* is also a superb ethnography of human lives in the irradiated landscapes created by Chernobyl. Brown has taken the time to cultivate genuine relationships with members of the affected communities that have been knowingly exposed to extraordinary levels of radiation poisoning by their own elites and with the tacit support of the global nuclear energy industry. Brown's empathetic and respectful engagement with the numerous victims and survivors of the accident offers a masterclass in how to conduct oral interviews in a disaster-stricken area. Furthermore, she demonstrates that local doctors, medical personnel, and scientists studying the effects of radiation on those who have been forced to live with dangerous levels of airborne radiation and contaminated food, water, and soil for decades have accrued valuable knowledge not only about how to treat many

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kinds of radiation sicknesses, but also how to survive a slow-moving nuclear holocaust. Brown's justifiable anger at governments and regulatory agencies ill-prepared to deal with the aftermath of a nuclear disaster, and with scientists who profess ignorance about the long-term effects of radiation on both human beings and the environment, runs like a red thread invigorating further the beautifully-written text.

To do full justice to the extraordinary scope of *A Manual for Survival* we have assembled a team of experts to assess the various aspects of this sprawling and complex book. Chris Burton offers commentary on Brown's analysis of the medical profession, both Soviet and western, as they attempted to diagnose, classify, and treat radiation sickness. Paul Josephson analyzes both Brown's use of scientific materials and the ways in which her work contributes to the history of disaster management. Olga Kuchinskaya provides meta-commentary on the conditions in which both ignorance and knowledge about radiation was produced after Chernobyl from the point of view of Science and Technology Studies. Serhii Plokyh, the author of an excellent book on the subject, completes the set with a nuanced account of the role that the Chernobyl disaster played in the evolution of Ukraine's independence movement.¹

The forum begins with a candid account by Kate Brown about the critical commentary and personal attacks that have been leveled at her in print and on social media since the publication of the book. The polarization that has ensued between the pro and anti-nuclear organizations is making it increasingly difficult to see the woods for the trees. Therefore, the thoughtful, nuanced, and scholarly reviews contained in this forum uses the much maligned but useful voice of reason to shed light rather than generate more partisan heat. It is important to remember that the nuclear energy sector has been lobbying globally to be recognized as a green and emission-free alternative to the burning of fossil fuels, itself a problematic source of energy in an era of accelerated climate change. As the United States has the largest number of nuclear power plants compared to any other country in the world, we must consider our energy options of the future very, very, carefully. Since the Fukushima Dai-ichi disaster of 2011, another level-7 nuclear accident like Chernobyl (the highest possible level on an international scale used to classify nuclear accidents), not only have radioactive particles been detected on the beaches of Los Angeles where I live, but they have also been found in the wines produced in northern California. Experts have reassured us repeatedly, however, that the levels of radiation on our beaches are very low and that the wine is safe to drink.

1. Serhii Plokyh, *Chernobyl: The History of a Nuclear Catastrophe* (New York, 2018).