The Soviet Meltdown

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I met Natalia Baranovska, a Ukrainian historian who is one of the characters in Kate Brown's book, last summer. I also read her work on the Chernobyl (in Ukrainian, Chornobyl) nuclear disaster, but I did not know her personal and academic story until I read the *Manual for Survival*. Baranovska began to study the Chernobyl catastrophe before any of her fellow historians in Kyiv considered it a legitimate topic for historical research. She made dozens, if not hundreds, of visits to the Chernobyl exclusion zone and saved hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pages of documents on the disaster that she brought from the area. Natalia Baranovska is also a cancer survivor.

I learned a great deal from the *Manual for Survival*, the Baranovska story being just one of many examples. In various ways, Brown picks up the narrative of the victims and witnesses of Chernobyl where Svetlana Alexievich left it. If the Nobel Prize laureate shared tragic and very personal stories of the survivors of the world's worst nuclear disaster, Brown adds to the list and provides broad historical, cultural, scientific, and political contexts for those stories. Most of the stories in her book, like that of Baranovska, are revealed for the first time. Hers is a work of environmental history growing out of historical and anthropological research. It would probably be no exaggeration to say that she has consulted more archives than any historian of Chernobyl before her and made more trips to the Exclusion Zone than any anthropologist. As a result, we have a deeply-researched but also seamlessly-woven narrative that brings together human stories and their multiple contexts while addressing big issues in today's scientific and societal debates, ranging from the impact of nuclear accidents on human health and the environment to the politics of science and the legacy of the Cold War.

The book does not lend itself to easy "predatory" reading, and graduate students would probably find it difficult to prepare a quick essay on it a few hours before class. The book is much richer than its introduction and conclusions suggest, as the threads of Brown's argument are often to be found in the middle of chapters between stories of individuals whose life experiences made possible or greatly strengthened a particular point. This applies especially to the realm of politics, both Soviet in general and Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian in particular, on which I have been asked to comment for this forum. As noted, *Manual for Survival* is primarily a work of environmental history, but it is saturated with politically-relevant stories, observations, and arguments. By highlighting the ruptures that the Chernobyl disaster helped to expose between the central and republican authorities on one level and the party apparatus and society on the other, the book contributes to a better understanding of late Soviet history and the fall of the Soviet Union.

Several themes in the book highlight the cracks that emerged in Soviet society in the wake of the disaster and help us understand the disintegration of the nuclear superpower. The first of these is the question of responsibility

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for placing the Chernobyl power plant in the highly populated (by Soviet standards) European part of the USSR—only 100 kilometers, as the crow flies, from the city of Kyiv, one of the largest Soviet urban centers at the time. Another is the development of tensions and the eventual breakdown of subordination between the all-Union authorities on the one hand and their underlings in the Soviet republics of Ukraine and Belarus on the other in the aftermath of the accident. Also, the center's policy of keeping the disaster secret clashed with society's demand to learn the "truth" about Chernobyl, which meant access to information about levels of contamination in areas affected by nuclear fallout. That in turn led to mass anti-government mobilization around the issues of nuclear safety and environmental protection, which prepared the way for nationalist movements in Ukraine and other Soviet republics, especially Lithuania, in the years leading up to the Soviet collapse.

The question of responsibility for placing the world's largest nuclear plant so close to Kyiv, which then had a population of close to two million, was extensively debated in the Ukrainian public arena in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Was it a premediated attack on Ukraine and Ukrainians by the imperial center, or did the authorities simply neglect the safety of inhabitants of the region, whatever their ethnicity? Academics are now asking more subtle questions about the role of ethnicity and nationalism in the development of nuclear energy. Kate Brown is one of the few historians of the disaster who is acutely aware of the multiethnic composition of the region chosen for the plant and affected by its subsequent explosion. That feature of her research and writing is on display in the Ukrainian (less so Belarusian) spellings of the names of people and localities discussed in her book. She is also very effective in distinguishing between all-Union and republican institutions and actors, which is again quite unique for the field and allows her to uncover layers of the disaster's history that remained unknown to historians and journalists writing from the center's perspective or familiar only with Moscow-based personalities and archives.

Brown's detailed understanding of the complex Soviet administrative system and the ethnonational mosaic of the USSR has allowed her to document the emerging rift between all-Union political, governmental, and academic institutions and their counterparts in the Soviet republics. In particular, she discusses the reservations of the communist leader of Ukraine, Volodymyr Shcherbytsky, with regard to the nuclear industry. Information about official Kyiv's unhappiness with the construction of nuclear power plants comes mostly from the recollections of former party officials in Ukraine and certainly deserves attention. But it is equally important to bear in mind that some of those recollections are post-factum attempts to shift responsibility for the Chernobyl disaster to the center, and that Ukrainian officials' involvement in nuclear power is more complex than the discussion of Shcherbytsky's reservations might suggest. The Ukrainian party and intellectual elite welcomed the arrival of the nuclear industry in their republic in the late 1960s and continued to do so for a good part of the 1970s. They were proud that Ukraine was joining the club of nuclear nations, just as elites in every country adopting nuclear power today are proud of that achievement.

True, Shcherbytsky was concerned about the radioactive contamination accidentally caused by the use of nuclear bombs intended to extinguish

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underground gas fires: Brown describes one such accident in the Kharkiv region. By the early 1980s, the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, with Shcherbytsky's apparent approval, was protesting the expansion of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant because of its harmful pressure on the region's ecology. Back in the 1960s and mid-1970s, however, Shcherbytsky and the most influential members of the same Academy of Sciences had lobbied Moscow for funds to build not one but three nuclear power plants in Ukraine in order to promote its economic development. It was only later, especially after the Chernobyl disaster, that attitudes toward the center and nuclear power changed in Ukraine, and Ukrainian officials started to blame the center for pushing more nuclear reactors on them.

The turning point in relations between official Moscow and Kyiv was the Chernobyl disaster. In commenting on the July 1986 meeting of the Politburo in Moscow, Brown makes a very important observation: the members of the supreme Soviet governing body discussed everything from lax discipline at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant before the explosion to problems with the reactor—highly classified information concealed from the world—but paid no attention to the fate of the people affected by the explosion. Indeed, the function of dealing with the inhabitants was relegated to republican and local officials, who were not allowed to tell the people about the scope of the disaster beyond the limits imposed by Moscow. This meant in practice that they had to organize the evacuation of more than 100,000 people from the Exclusion Zone while local newspapers were not allowed to publish even a line about the accident. Local party and government bosses kept the press silent, but only because they were ordered to do so. After all, they were exposed to radiation in the same or even greater measure as ordinary citizens.

In the multiethnic Soviet Union many policies devised in Moscow, while not targeting any particular ethnic group, often ended up privileging one republic or nationality over another. That certainly applies to the case of Chernobyl. The power plant was constructed on the Belarusian border, seemingly without so much as consulting the Belarusians. Brown is probably the first western scholar to discuss the impact of the top-secret Soviet Operation Cyclone. According to Brown, it was meant to keep radioactive rain from falling on large Soviet cities. Pilots absorbed enormous amounts of radiation as they flew into radioactive clouds, releasing chemicals that were supposed either to seed clouds to produce rain or to prevent them from doing so. Moscow, Kyiv, and a number of big cities in Russia were allegedly protected in that way. But nuclear fallout from the rain thus produced, goes the argument, damaged rural areas in southeastern Belarus and in parts of western Russia. That became one of the reasons why the smallest Slavic republic, Belarus, which had no direct relation to the Chernobyl nuclear plant, suffered most from the accident.

Operation Cyclone was kept secret from the world at large and, more importantly, from people who continued to live in affected areas for decades without being able to explain sudden spikes in diseases and death rates around them. As Brown points out, the KGB was responsible not only for reporting to the top echelon of the Soviet authorities on problems with the reactor and difficulties in preventing harmful consequences of the explosion but also for concealing

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that information from the rest of the population. Indicative of the latter role is the story, discussed by Brown, of the KGB General P. Buldakovsky, the deputy director of the Belarusian Institute of Nuclear Energy, who denounced the institute's director, Vasilii Nesterenko, for trying to alert senior party and state officials in Moscow to high levels of radiation in parts of western Belarus. Nesterenko was accused of covering for a "Zionist clan" at his institute that was allegedly involved in falsifying research results.

The book also includes the story of another KGB general, the director of the KGB medical center in Kyiv, Dr. Mykhailo Zakharash, who estimated that 4.5 million people were affected by the explosion. He was summoned to Moscow in 1990 and accused of being a traitor and a falsifier. The stories of these two KGB officers point to an important aspect of post-Chernobyl political reality. The disaster caused elites to split not so much along institutional lines (between the Party, KGB, trade unions, and so on) as along republican lines. General Buldakovsky was in fact doing the bidding of the Belarusian party authorities, who did not want bad news about their republic to reach Moscow, while Dr. Zakharash would never have managed to conduct his research and make his claims without the support of his KGB and party bosses in Kyiv. The party and state elites in Kyiv and Minsk took different stands toward Moscow partly because of the different levels of anti-nuclear mobilization in the two republics. If in Russia no anti-nuclear movement emerged at all, and in Belarus it came late and was largely limited to rural areas directly affected by the disaster, in Ukraine, as Brown discusses in several chapters, the movement took off after the first semi-free elections to the Soviet super-parliament in 1988, two years after the disaster.

The issue was not so much the proximity to Chernobyl of Kyiv, the intellectual and cultural center of Ukraine, as the growing strength of Ukrainian ethnonational mobilization. Brown is among the first western authors to focus attention on the role of the "ex-cons," or former prisoners of the Gulag released by Mikhail Gorbachev, in fostering the environmental movement and then turning it into an ethnonational one, leading eventually to the independence of Ukraine and the fall of the USSR. Ironically, the anti-nuclear movement, which was kept from spreading and taking a pro-independence direction by Shcherbytsky and his fellow hardliners in Kyiv, was originally supported by Gorbachev and his liberal center. Brown demonstrates this in her discussion of the release of Mi-kro-phone, a documentary by a Ukrainian filmmaker about the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. Before long, the anti-nuclear movement turned eco-nationalist and then pro-independence, sweeping not only Shcherbytsky but also Gorbachev from the political scene.

The Soviet Union outlived the Chernobyl disaster by only five and a half years. It did not fall because of the Chernobyl explosion, but that disaster contributed to its speedy collapse. The accelerator was not so much the catastrophe itself as the reaction to it by sections of Soviet society when Gorbachev permitted some forms of free expression in an attempt to reform the Soviet political system. Brown's research leaves little doubt that public reaction to the disaster and mobilization around the threat presented by nuclear power was not preconditioned by the level of contamination of a particular area. It depended instead on the general unhappiness of the political elites and the

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population at large with the rule of the center and the Soviet regime in general. *Manual for Survival* also helps explain the power of the nuclear industry to boost national pride and morale at earlier stages of its development and then to create social ruptures at times of economic and political crisis.

Few discoveries and inventions have such power over human life and health, and thus over the human imagination, as the creation of nuclear weapons and subsequently the rise of the nuclear industry. Consequently, as long as we continue to depend on nuclear power, we will need "manuals for survival" addressing problems of nuclear physics, issues of health and environment, and questions of politics and society. Kate Brown's book is designed as a warning for the future, but is also an excellent guide to the past, the Soviet and post-Soviet past in particular.

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