BALTIC WORLDS

Theme: The Chornobyl disaster 40 years along. Lived memories

Guest editors
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Introduction.

Chornobyl in the fog of war 40 years after the disaster

On December 15, 2020, Ukraine commemorated a landmark in its nuclear history: 20 years had passed since the last operating reactor at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant was shut down. In connection with this event, and with the Day of Honoring the Participants of the Liquidation of the Consequences of the Chernobyl Disaster, held annually on December 14th, the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine announced its intention to apply for inclusion of the Chornobyl site in the UNESCO World Heritage list. In 2019 more than 124,000 people had visited the site, many of them in the wake of the hugely popular HBO series *Chernobyl*. Tourist interest was steadily growing.

The idea to transform a heavily radioactively-contaminated area into tourist and heritage site surprised many people.[1] Yet in the 2010s and early 2020s tourism had invigorated the economic and cultural development in the zone, and proposals how to expand this potential were plentiful. But the Russian invasion of Ukraine – including the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) – in February 2022 put an abrupt and violent end to these plans.

On a visit to the Chornobyl zone, in winter 2025, that is a few months before the 40th anniversary, these pre-war visions of the future of the CEZ appeared almost surreal. Far from a place of commemoration and heritage, the zone had become a military site and a borderline grey zone, dangerous not so much because of ever-present radioactivity that one learned to measure and manage in order to protect oneself, but because of Russian mines, bombings, and other ongoing military threats and defense-related activities.

"FAR FROM A PLACE OF COMMEMORATION AND HERITAGE, THE ZONE HAD BECOME A MILITARY SITE AND A BORDERLINE GREY ZONE."

THE FOLLOWING essays in this theme-issue aim to capture a snapshot of that 40th anniversary amidst the ongoing war. These essays were written by researchers in life sciences, humanities and social sciences, as well as practitioners of the arts, many of whom have worked on Chornobyl issues in Ukraine, in Eastern and Western Europe and in North America for some time. They engage the effort to understand the impact of the ongoing violence unleashed by Russian troops on the legacy and memory of Chornobyl writ large. These impressions have been laid out in multiple, layered visions and memories of Chornobyl: Chornobyl as a symbol of technological failure, a reminder of local and national tragedy and resilience, and a place for international technoscientific and humanitarian cooperation and collective reflection about nuclear and other technogenic risks.

The authors have experienced the ongoing violence in different ways and through different personal lenses. Those authors who, like Denys Vyshnevskyi, worked in the Chornobyl exclusion zone for extended times expe-

A photo showing the damaged containment vessel at the New Safe Confinement (NSC) in the Chornobyl exclusion zone, following a drone attack on February 14, 2025.

PHOTO: TETIANA DZHAFAROVA/AFP/TT

rienced its destruction and transformation firsthand, and feel how their daily work has been profoundly affected by the war. Several continue to live, work and write in Ukraine, between Kyiv and the CEZ, under incessant aerial attack alerts, explosions, and interruptions in electricity and heat which they have chosen not to highlight in their compelling analyses of the issues and events. Others have endured the war on a daily basis, yet in a mediated way, in physical safety, sometimes virtually, and other times through testimonies of relatives and friends in Ukraine.

The war has affected the way we see Chornobyl and nuclear issues more generally. In spite of the profound differences in our experience of the war, several common themes go through the contributions in this issue. They include the changing spatiality and temporality of the disaster; the difficulty in disconnecting peaceful and military technologies and risks; the physical legacies of geopolitical shocks and constraints; and the role of individual, collective and political memory in the disaster.

THAT RADIATION has no borders was one of the first lessons that international community learned after Chornobyl disaster, indeed in its first days when the Soviet authorities tried to keep secret from Soviet citizens and international community alike the extent of the dangers. The radiation cloud was detected first in Sweden and then other European countries and beyond. However, national and nuclear borders dramatically reappeared in importance when they were violated by Russian troops who invaded Ukrainian territory through Chornobyl exclusion zone in February 2022, stirring up radioactivity and taking station personnel as hostages. More than 400 kilometers of the Ukrainian border with Belarus go through the CEZ as Denys Vyshnevskiy reminds us in his essay. The war made it impossible for zone personnel to commute as normal to and from Slavutych, the residential city built to replace the evacuated atomic city of Prypiat and support CEZ research, monitoring and other activities, to their places of work.

“THE WAR HAS AFFECTED THE WAY WE SEE CHORNOBYL AND NUCLEAR ISSUES MORE GENERALLY.”

The closing of the borders due to the military conflict challenges the many transnational connections that became possible through various forms of cooperation to mitigate the consequences of the Chornobyl accident, from scientific research to humanitarian assistance to children’s aid. Olena Pareniuk and Kateryna Shavanova write how scientific cooperation came and went during the post-Chornobyl decades, but became a source of support to researchers and others after the Russian invasion and war. Olga Bubich followed a generation of young Belarusians who faced severe social and economic crises after the disaster and collapse of the USSR. Yet international programs for “Chornobyl Children” allowed hundreds of thousands of them to experience life abroad and created

PHOTO: OLGA BUBICH

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life-long ties between the people whose countries used to be on the different side of the Cold War divide. While making physical space of the Chornobyl zone inaccessible, the war made more prominent virtual storytelling about the disaster, writes Magdalena Banaszkiewicz. The CEZ has become a "zone of memory," shaped by digital mediation and virtual immersion.

THE WAR ALSO transformed dominant temporalities of the disaster. As Pareniuk and Shavanova insist in their essay, the war reveals that the Chornobyl disaster was never a completed event of the past, but an ongoing disaster that will have to be mitigated for decades, and it is finally a source of important new understandings about the nuclear enterprise. Counterintuitively perhaps, they also show that Chornobyl has recently been transformed from a "territory of consequences" into a "territory of solutions", becoming a source of expertise that helps Chornobyl scientists to document and evaluate the damage brought about by the current war on the environment and to anticipate the ways to recovery. For instance, drainage of the cooling pond at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) generated important data that could be used in environmental remediation after Russian troops blew up the Kakhovka Dam on the Dnipro River in June 2023. Unfortunately, the opportunity to apply knowledge generated in Chornobyl zone elsewhere testifies to the repetition of the patterns of colonial destruction of people and nature.

The recent invasion of the Chornobyl zone reminds of other wars. The "liquidation of the consequences of the Chornobyl disaster", as the Soviet authorities called the post-disaster mitigation effort, relied heavily on military personnel and machinery. For some Soviet citizens witnessing the effort, such as the talented Ukrainian artist Maria Prymachenko, who lived in the village of Bolotnia a few kilometers from the Exclusion Zone, it brought back the memories of the deathly battle against the Nazis during the Second World War. Oksana Semenik shows how the theme of the war, and more specifically of nuclear war, emerges in Prymachenko's paintings. The post-disaster emergency effort was also intentionally portrayed as a life-and-death battle against a dreadful (radioactive) enemy in the Soviet official media, as Stanislav Menzelevskyi analyzes in his essay on the Soviet Chornobyl documentaries. Prymachenko, who died in 1997, could not witness the current war. Yet, symbolically, during the first days of the Russian invasion a shell struck the Ivankiv Local History Museum where 25 of Prymachenko's paintings were on display – 14 of the works could be saved.

The cyclicity of time and violence was felt by the inhabitants of the village of Vilcha, situated in the CEZ, who were forced to abandon their homes twice. First, the entire village was relocated from Polissia, the extensive forested and marshy area that surrounds the power plant, to Kharkiv region, where a new Vilcha was built, and more recently its residents have had to evacuate because of the full-scale Russian invasion of Eastern Ukraine. The cycle of violence confronts communities and societies with the challenges of fragility and resilience. In her essay Viktoria Naumenko shows how, in spite of having lost twice their physical homes, Vilcha residents strive to rebuild their sense of belonging through solidarity, care and shared memories.

THE WAR AND occupation point to another crucial lesson of the Chornobyl disaster that has not been learned: the vulnerability of civilian nuclear infrastructure in times of military conflicts and the need to integrate this infrastructure into international security regimes. More broadly, Russia's ongoing violence against Ukraine highlights the critical entanglements between so-called "peaceful" and military nuclear technologies. The atom was "born violent", as Robert Jacobs, quoted by Stanislav Menzelevskyi, reminds us: indeed, the first nuclear reactors were created to produce plutonium for nuclear bombs. In her contribution Mariana Budjeryn provides the overview of Ukrainian nuclear history that encompasses both military and civilian nuclear technologies. The Chornobyl-type RBMK reactor itself had its origins in the USSR's graphite-moderated military reactors and could, if needed, produce plutonium (Pu). Pu is used mostly for bombs, although the failed promise is that it will be used in so-called breeder reactors – but only Russia has operating commercial scale breeder reactors. The Chornobyl disaster, Budjeryn shows, played a role in the Ukraine's decision to abandon its nuclear weapons arsenal upon the Soviet collapse. This decision ultimately made Ukraine vulnerable to Russia's aggression. Russia has been regularly threatening to use its nuclear weapons both against Ukraine and against Western countries supporting Ukraine in the war. Moreover, Russia's war on Ukraine involved its total disregard for nuclear conventions in its

"RUSSIA'S ONGOING VIOLENCE AGAINST UKRAINE HIGHLIGHTS THE CRITICAL ENTANGLEMENTS BETWEEN SO-CALLED 'PEACEFUL' AND MILITARY NUCLEAR TECHNOLOGIES."

conquest of the Zaporizhzhia NPP, the largest NPP in Europe, and its transformation into a military outpost and a potential dirty bomb.

In their scientific analyses, sociological investigations, and cultural studies, the authors of this *Baltic Worlds* edited volume have emphasized the many, often paradoxical meanings of the Chornobyl zone and of the Chornobyl disaster that are in constant flux. In her discussion of the testimony of Japanese hibakusha and accounts of Chornobyl survivors, Florence Fröhlig points to one of the sources of this diversity: the contrast between two kinds of memory, political and cultural. The former often serves to support state efforts at "closure and national integration," whereas the latter preserves "trauma, ambiguity and [...] loss."

EVEN THE WAYS of spelling Chornobyl point to the ongoing transformations of, and clashes between different meanings, temporality and spatiality of the disaster. The most widely used derivation of Chernobyl is from the Russian language; English language dictionaries still propose it as the only correct one.[2] Yet, if we follow the geographical principle, we should use the spelling derived from Ukrainian, that is "Chornobyl", as the site where the NPP is situated. Adopting the less-used Ukrainian spelling, as we do in this special issue, matters politically, of course, as it signals one's positionality towards, and distancing from, the legacy of the Russian colonial violence. As Banaszkiewicz points out in her essay, this shift gained formal recognition through the United Nations General Assembly resolution endorsing the Ukrainian transliteration "Chornobyl" instead of "Chernobyl" in December 2025. We have used "Chernobyl" when quoted sources and organizations use that spelling, as Robert Jacobs does in his review of Melanie Arndt's book which also employs "Chernobyl". Yet, Chornobyl has become so much more than a concrete geographical or physical place: it has marked imaginaries, environments and bodies beyond Ukraine and Ukrainians, and other affected people might claim the right to their own way of spelling Chornobyl. For instance, Belarusians, whose territory received most of radioactive fallout from the accident, might defend the right to refer to "Charnobyl," coming from Belarusian.

Granted, it is not possible to erase the impact of colonial violence by simply changing spelling. Indeed, "decolonization is not a metaphor," as scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang insist, but should refer to the return of land to indigenous populations.[3] And it is clear, and has become even more painfully obvious during the Russian invasion, that the Ukrainian people are still dispossessed from the land in Chornobyl by radiation and elsewhere by Russian occupiers. Svitlana Matviyenko describes this type of colonial legacy as "vertical occupation."[4] This occupation transpires in the long-term underground contamination, such as radioactive pollution from nuclear sites, including Chornobyl. Similarly, widespread laying of mines and unexploded ordnance will continue to dispossess Ukrainians from their land long after the occupiers have left.

Some people will have the possibility–and choose to–escape to less contaminated and safer places. Others will not be able to escape, like the artist Maria Prymachenko, who chose to stay, being acutely aware, as another elderly woman cited in Oksana Semenik's essay, that it is impossible for them to escape their own poisoned or otherwise occupied land "far or for long." After all, as Melanie Arndt discusses in her book on the Chornobyl children – reviewed here by Robert Jacobs – we all have to learn "the art of living on a damaged planet"[5] wherever we end up.

IT IS IMPORTANT to remember that technogenic, military and other damage will never be inflicted equally everywhere or on everyone at the same time in the same ways, and that deep injustices will persist. This holds for the ongoing war in Ukraine. Our obligation, therefore, should be to recognize and to name this injustice and search ways of remediating it.

The essays here ultimately demonstrate that the peaceful atom is always at risk of being a site of war. They reveal how engineers and scientists struggling to do their work in the face of fluctuating border zones, drones and mines; citizens and their children caught trying to live between war and peace; farmers and Chornobyl re-settlers eking out daily life while soldiers fire rifles in the distance; artists, film makers and others striving to make sense of the invasion; and government officials seeking geopolitical and military advantage have transformed and are transformed by the violence of war. Chornobyl's temporal and spatial; military and economic; and cultural and political impacts will remain in flux far beyond the decay of radiation that first overwhelmed the zone 40 years ago.

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references

1 Yet see the study of this phenomenon by Magdalena Banaszkiewicz in her book *Heritage and Tourism in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone* (2022), and read her essay in this theme issue, see page 26.

2 For definition of Chornobyl in British English see "Chernobyl", *Collins*: https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/chernobyl and "Meaning of Chernobyl in English", *Cambridge Dictionary*: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/chernobyl

3 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor", *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* vol. 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

4 Svitlana Matviyenko, "Vertical Occupation," *London Ukrainian Review*, March 4, 2024. Available at: https://www.londonukrainianreview.org/posts/vertical-occupation/

5 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al. (eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), quoted in Melanie Arndt, *Chernobyl Children: A Transnational History of a Nuclear Disaster* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 8, 11 and elsewhere.