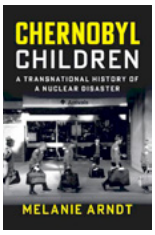
review

The Chernobyl Children.

A generation growing up with radiological contaminations

Chernobyl Children: A Transnational History of a Nuclear Disaster

Melanie Arndt, transl. Alastair Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 368 pages.



On April 26, 1986, children across the Western Soviet Union woke up to a normal late winter Wednesday. As they headed to school, or helped their parents, or tended to animals, radioactive particles were falling out of the sky and settling onto the trees and shrubs, and into the soil. Following the early morning explosions in reactor number four at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant on the border of the Ukrainian and Belarusian Soviet Republics, a fire burned for several weeks, streaming a river of particles into the sky to spread downwind and contaminate children and families and pastures. At first no one knew a thing. The events of that morning, and the journey that those radioactive particles began during the disaster would shape the lives of those children in profound and complex ways.

For historian Melanie Arndt the children of Chernobyl, defined in multiple ways, serve as guides to the unsteady history that has unfolded since that day: from embodying the ideology and then collapse of the former Soviet Union, the emergence of a post-bipolar transnational order, and ultimately the solitude with which each of us has entered the Anthropocene.

ARNDT'S DEEPLY RESEARCHED and profoundly compassionate 2020 study of the "Chernobyl children" has been translated from its original German into English by Alastair Matthews. The book is an essential guide to how nuclear crises cannot be contained by the timeframe of their initial disasters, but slowly morph into international, transnational, and deep-time ecological continua of ongoing disaster. While such a study could become bogged down by this overarching narrative, Arndt's work achieves a powerful humanity by remaining close to the people who lived this history as she slowly expands her scope.

From the start there were shifting definitions foisted on the children by various state and institutional interlocutors. Arndt describes the "uncertainties surrounding what is meant by the terms 'Chernobyl child' and 'affected'" (14) and thus the uncertainties about who was included, and what being affected might mean for subsequent health outcomes. Against this managerial framework she engages us with many of the harms experienced by the children, what their resilience shows us, and their ultimate journey from signifiers of pure Soviet children to children of a wounded planet.

The "First Chernobyl Children" were the roughly 17,000 child residents of Prypiat, the energy worker town adjacent to the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, who were evacuated two days after the explosions. Of Prypiat, Arndt writes, the:

> **[...] inhabitants had an average age of twenty-six, and there were numerous facilities for children and young people, including thirty-five playgrounds, fifteen kindergartens, five middle schools, one vocational school and one art school. (89)**

It was a young city, but it was mere kilometers away from the fatally wounded reactor that was belching fallout over the city and region even as children were allowed to play outside for several days.

In the following weeks and months, hundreds of villages would be evacuated, and it would become clear that tens of thousands of children, at a minimum, had been exposed to worrying levels or radiation, and that these levels extended far outside of the immediate zone of the disaster. Large populations of children were now being restricted from playing outside or in the woods. During the early months of the disaster, when the scale of the contamination was unclear, supporting the children became a means of enacting and performing state care by Soviet officials.

As decisions were slowly taken at the republic or oblast levels to evacuate children, toddlers and babies, tens of thousands were evacuated in the late spring and summer of 1986 from both the Belarus and Ukrainian Republics, many placed in holiday facilities or pioneer camps. Arndt tells us:

> **These stays were primarily paid for by enterprises and trade union organizations, which also operated many of the facilities. In addition, a number of ministries, including the Ministry of Health and Education, as well as the Komsomol and various agencies, not only allowed Chernobyl children to stay at facilities they ran but also footed the bill. (99)**

However, she notes, not all intended to join the programs were able to find slots, allowing for the corruptions of the old system to steer and taint many efforts.

As the Soviet Union declined in the years immediately after Chernobyl, funding and infrastructure to continue the programs, even at the republic and oblast levels faltered. Some of the groups supporting various cohorts of the children began to reach out to supportive socialist and communist countries to help fund or receive and host various groups of the children. Cuba, with its strong national emphasis on healthcare, began bringing Chernobyl children to the island nation for medical care in 1990, continuing until 2011:

Children gather for a parade celebrating the success of the Chernobyl power plant in April 1986, a few weeks before the accident. Plant director Viktor Brukhanov (in hat and tie) and the plant's Party secretary Sergey Parashin (in glasses) are visible on the far right. At the time, children made up more than a third of Prypiat's population.

PHOTO: PETR VYHOVSKY/PRIPYAT-CITY.RU

> **[…] the legacy of the Cuban efforts to support the Chernobyl children can still be felt in Ukraine – and not only there – today. (140)**

At about this time, philanthropic groups in the United States and Europe began to fund numerous Chernobyl children's charities, and to welcome children for visits and medical treatments in Western countries. Arndt calls this period one in which the "children" went from being "Soviet Chernobyl Children" to "Children of the Whole Planet," seeing the participants becoming poster children for various causes or issues each charitable group was advancing. In this role, the children were repositioned as innocent victims of the brutalities of modern politics and technology. They were wounded innocents standing as sentinels, warning the people of the world about the risks and dangers of the late Cold War, and post-Cold War worlds. Many of the support groups sought increased awareness of the plight of the Chernobyl children in the press, and public awareness of the Chernobyl children as a group of innocents rose worldwide.

PART OF WHAT was being advanced was notions of the trans-nationality with which the children could be cast, not solely as victims of inferior Soviet technology, but human recklessness and lack of care for the most vulnerable among us. Rather than individuals, they were placeholders for emerging Western concerns about collapsing ecological wellness, or extensions of religious service work. Witnessing the health impact of the radiation on the children, and the bright resilience with which they entered the future from their dystopian origin story was imagined as compelling concerned citizens to think beyond the bipolar death struggle of the Cold War. The children stood as refugees of that bipolar struggle, and as harbingers of the world emerging in its wake.

Arndt presents a solid institutional history of these various groups, many of which suffered through funding, embezzlement, and mismanagement scandals, detailing how the concerns of the "children" were often left behind as organizations slowly disbanded.

> **The opening and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union also released an unprecedented wave of humanitarian activism in civil society in the West. The Chernobyl children presented countless individuals and initiatives in the West with new ways to get involved, both at home and in the uncharted territory of their former enemies. (221)**

She describes the support movements in multiple host countries, for example that of Ireland, and of charitable efforts such as that of the YMCA in Michigan. Links between various of the participants, and residents of host countries, or of activists focused on nuclear industry sites, for example Nadja Neal Hinson who's activism around the contaminations of the Hanford plutonium production site in Washington State led her to work on behalf of specific groups of the children and to speak out about how their plight is linked to the harms experienced by the Hanford downwinders (184–192), dot this section.

WE SEE THE INITIAL period of high hopes and cooperation across various boundaries give way to the politics unfolding in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and specifically about how the autocratic and insular turn of Belarusian leader Lukashenka cut off Belarusian children from international cooperation. While detailing the complex web of national, international, religious, and philanthropic attempts at intervention, Arndt demonstrates that children were the vector that made this event transnational, but that in the end, while many did receive care and aid, they were also placeholders for players with larger concerns.

Chernobyl children is a solid history of the organizations that played key roles in these efforts as they unfolded, and of the specific people who participated as children and what their experiences were like, but the real power of the book comes as Arndt contemplates the larger implications of these histories. Ultimately, we are confronted with the unwillingness of governments to address the long-term consequences of radiological contaminations, and

Continued.
The Chernobyl Children

the inadequacy of these aid or philanthropic organizations to grapple with the legacies of nuclear disasters.

Arndt demonstrates how the universal innocence of children undergirded the defining and success of children as communicators of harm and as coal mine canaries of nuclear risk. Regardless of what you think about politics, about the bipolar landscape of the Cold War world, children occupied a space above these concerns. Unable to have made choices that led to the consequences of their illnesses, foregrounding children was an effective strategy by many to universalize various issues.

RECENT CHERNOBYL histories, often seeking to achieve a cinematic quality in the telling, obsess like nativity stories around the moment of creation (disaster) rooting the books to the years of the physically destructive events, giving barely a nod towards the Red Forest and the deep consequences unfolding less visually. Chernobyl children give us characters who inhabit this part of the story: bit players in the initial events, victims of a specific moment in time and technology, perhaps among the first people living in a world slowly coming into view: “They embody what it means to be at home on a damaged planet,” reveals Arndt (285).

Nuclearity, according to Gabrielle Hecht, in part raises mundane things out of time, and so the Chernobyl children occupied a liminal place in history and technology once they were tainted by the radiation spewing from reactor no. 4.[1] No longer optimistic Soviet children creating a socialist future, no longer transnational recipients of a sort of postwar charity, now they inhabited a world, and even bodies, marked by uncertainty.

Today the “children” are adults, but most of the fallout particles distributed in 1986, are now deeply embedded into the ecosystems of Central Europe and just starting their lifecycles. It is the very nature of radionuclides, which embed into the ecosystem once deposited, and then transport as does any chemical within that ecosystem: transporting spatially, via water, biota and wind, and transporting deeply into time. Many will remain active, radiating energy as the particle decays, for hundreds, thousands, or even billions of years, meaning that most of those who might experience harm from the Chernobyl distribution may not yet be born. This is the deep-time nature of the threat, putting the Chernobyl children at the front of what may be a long line of those who experience radiogenic illness in its deep wake.

Evacuation of children from Prypiat city in May, 1986.

SOURCE: CHERNOBYL.COM.UA

Still, Arndt reminds us that:

> **Those who have to live with Chernobyl on a daily basis for the rest of their lives, with the vague sense of uncertainty and the existential fear of illness and pain that this brings, have often been rendered invisible, left behind after the initial headlines fade. Only recognizing the importance of the long view – the seemingly unspectacular personal trajectories and intimate relationships between the body, health and the environment – can we start to understand what living on a damaged planet entails. (11)**

In writing about *Slow violence* (2013), Rob Nixon warns us that environmental violence often occurs over years and decades and is difficult to understand as violence.[2] Arndt invites us to envision big history, to slow down and see the forest; to imagine a timeframe that leaves nation states, and certainly political or economic systems of social organization, receding far away on the horizon of the past, as we join the Chernobyl children in facing and determining our future. ✕

Robert Jacobs

Historian of Nuclear Technologies, is a Professor Emeritus at the Hiroshima Peace Institute Hiroshima City University and a Visiting Professorial Fellow 2025–2028 at the School of Humanities and Languages, University of New South Wales.

references

[1] Gabrielle Hecht, *Being nuclear: Africans and the global uranium trade* (The MIT Press, 2012), 14.

[2] Rob Nixon, *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 2–3.