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Author(s)	Yesbol, Sartayev
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Book Reviews

Serhii Plokhy, *Chernobyl Roulette: War in the Nuclear Disaster Zone* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2024), 240 pp.

Serhii Plokhy, in his book, delivers a harrowing, meticulously researched, and urgent account of how Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine weaponized one of the world's most tragic nuclear sites: the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant (CNPP). A leading historian of Ukraine and the former Soviet Union, Plokhy is renowned for his scholarship on Eastern Europe and the Slavic world. Drawing on his earlier work on Chernobyl catastrophe, he demonstrates in Chernobyl roulette how the war in Ukraine exposed both the country and the world to a new and terrifying form of nuclear threat. The Russian occupation of Chernobyl and the armed assault on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) marked the first-ever attack and seizure of a civilian nuclear facility in human history during armed conflict—shattering historical norms and setting a dangerous precedent for global nuclear security. Yet the book's most gripping moments come from the human stories of engineers, volunteers, and civilians in the Russian-occupied nuclear station, whose quiet heroism under extreme danger shows the courage needed to prevent disaster.

Plokhy opens Chernobyl Roulette by recounting how Russian forces invaded Ukraine through the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone on February 24, 2022—an unexpected move given the site's radioactive legacy. Ukrainian guards surrendered the plant without resistance to prevent shelling that could have endangered the facility. Station staff, fully aware of the potential nuclear consequences, neither resisted nor fled but chose to remain on duty under occupation to prevent a facility failure that could trigger another nuclear disaster. Despite decades of extensive international efforts and resources, Chernobyl remains a hazardous site, requiring thousands of workers for reactor maintenance and waste management. Once a symbol of nuclear failure and global solidarity, the site was transformed into a chilling battleground—blurring the line between radiological catastrophe and modern warfare. Yet, the international response was weak; without protocols for managing a nuclear facility under military occupation, the IAEA and global community failed to act decisively to halt violations and safeguard nuclear security.

In the *Invasion* and *Holdup* chapters, Plokhy traces the lead-up to Russia's invasion through a mix of political warnings and nuclear pretexts. A few days before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, President Zelensky reminded the West that Ukraine had relinquished its nuclear arsenal—the world's third largest—under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, in exchange for security guarantees from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia, and with strong backing from European powers. These assurances, meant to safeguard Ukraine's sovereignty, had been broken. In contrast, Putin invoked false claims that Ukraine was developing nuclear weapons—some allegedly using materials from Chernobyl—as part of his justification for war, reinforcing this narrative with imperial rhetoric denying Ukraine's statehood. Russian forces advanced through the radioactive Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and surrounded the plant with a large army. Engineers at the CNPP, left without guidance for wartime operations, remained at their posts to ensure reactor safety. Ukrainian pesonnel had expected that the Russians would not seize the station, as doing so would constitute an act of nuclear terrorism under international law.

The Geneva Conventions and a 2009 IAEA resolution prohibit armed attacks on peaceful nuclear facilities. The *International Crisis* chapter Plokhy highlights the global community's failure to respond decisively to this unprecedented nuclear threat. Despite these blatant legal and moral violations, the IAEA—hampered by Russia's influence and internal politics—avoided labeling the act as nuclear terrorism. Director General Rafael Grossi refrained from issuing any condemnation of Russian aggression, even as Ukraine urgently appealed for concrete actions. Plokhy frames this institutional hesitancy not merely as bureaucratic inertia, but as a dangerous form of complicity—one that left Ukraine and the world exposed to the weaponization of nuclear infrastructure.

The chapter *God's Grace* recountes the Russian assault on the ZNPP—Europe's largest—characterized by reckless shelling near reactors and spent fuel storage, with verified footage capturing tanks firing alarmingly close to critical infrastructure. Experts described the incident as a "near miss" of nuclear catastrophe. At the height of conflict, Chernobyl personnel reportedly employed psychological deterrence, threatening sabotage should Russia escalate its nuclear aggression. *Shadow of Fukushima* serves as a stark metaphor for the total power outage at Chernobyl on March 9, which endangered the cooling systems of spent fuel pools. Diesel generators provided temporary relief, but the risk of another nuclear disaster loomed. While diesel generators offered temporary relief, the specter of another nuclear disaster loomed large.

The heart of the book is not just the geopolitical analysis or violation of international order, but the human dimension. The *Volunteers* and *Battle for Slavutych* chapters offer a moving account of the quiet heroism and moral strength of the Ukrainian people. Plokhy paints vivid portraits of Ukrainian engineers, foremen, and volunteers who bravely risked their lives to keep the plant operational. After more than a month of nonstop work under armed guard, a shift change became critical for the exhausted and depleted Chernobyl staff. Yet for the proxy volunteers, entering the occupied zone meant risking capture—or worse. In Slavutych—the town where most workers and their families lived—residents gathered and faced Russian guns with nothing but their voices. When the city fell, plant staff warned: harm our families, and we will blow up Chernobyl. It was a bluff, but emotionally powerful. Plokhy highlights what endured: bravery, human courage, solidarity, and the refusal to surrender under armed threat.

The book delivers a sobering warning: the war in Ukraine has not only weaponized nuclear infrastructure but exposed the global system's failure to prevent it. Russian forces turned peaceful nuclear sites into tools of war, while international community and institutions remained powerless, constrained by outdated mandates and political entanglements. The world witnessed nuclear facilities held hostage, and the threat of nuclear catastrophe looming dangerously close. The crisis exposed more than just the vulnerability of reactors—it revealed the fragility of our legal and moral orders in the face of military aggression. Without urgent reform of the international law and governance, nuclear energy—once heralded as a solution to climate change—risks being remembered instead as a tool of terror and ecocide. To prevent another "Chernobyl II," Plokhy argues, the world must draw a new red line: no war must ever again be allowed near a nuclear site.

Yesbol Sartayev