

NUOVA **ANTOLOGIA**
MILITARE
RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI STORIA MILITARE

N. 6
2025

Fascicolo 24. Novembre 2025
Storia Militare Contemporanea (6)



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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Nuova Antologia Militare

Rivista interdisciplinare della Società Italiana di Storia Militare

Periodico telematico open-access annuale (www.nam-sism.org)

Registrazione del Tribunale Ordinario di Roma n. 06 del 30 Gennaio 2020

Scopus List of Accepted Titles October 2022 (No. 597)

Rivista scientifica ANVUR (5/9/2023) Area 11, Area 10 (21/12/2024)



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Grafica: Nadir Media Srl - Via Giuseppe Veronese, 22 - 00146 Roma

info@nadirmedia.it

Gruppo Editoriale Tab Srl -Viale Manzoni 24/c - 00185 Roma

www.tabedizioni.it

ISSN: 2704-9795

ISBN Fascicolo 979-12-5669-253-8

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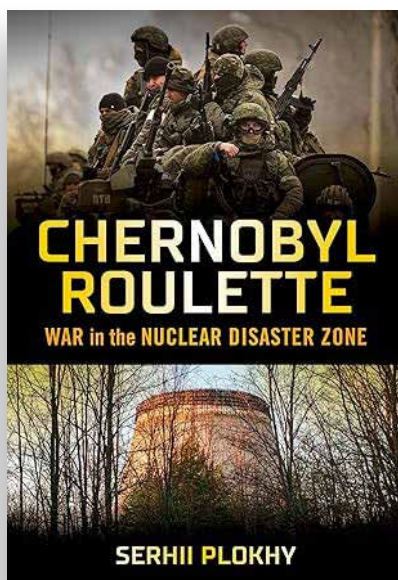


Estandart Reyau d'a Cheneralísma, prencipal bandera carlista d'a primera guerra bordada por María Francisca de Braganza em 1833 Royal Standard of the General in Chief, main Carlist flag of the First War embroidered by Maria Francisca de Braganza in 1833). Wikimedia Commons

SERHII PLOKHY,

Chernobyl Roulette. War in the Nuclear Disaster Zone

[W.W. Norton & Company Ltd., New York, 2024, ISBN 978-1-324-07941-5]



“**T**he realisation that the war in Ukraine had already gone nuclear, threatening radioactive contamination of people and the environment, was largely missed by the world after the takeover of Chernobyl¹.² Is one of the most compelling affirmations from this book. At the moment of writing this review, conventional nuclear weapons have not been used

1 As the author did in his book, I will proceed to use the Russian transliteration “Chernobyl” to indicate the nuclear power plant – from later on “Chernobyl NPP” - and the subsequent disaster of April 26th, 1986, because this is how it became known in international literature, but will favour the Ukrainian “Chornobyl” to refer to the actual town and Ukrainian institutions or organizations.

2 S. Plokhy, *Chernobyl Roulette, War in the Nuclear Disaster Zone*, W.W. Norton & Company Ltd., New York, 2024, pag. 71

in the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine but, as Serhii Plokhly states very clearly, this doesn't mean that the conflict has not already gone nuclear. Nuclear power plants, radioactive contamination – or the menace of it – played a main role in the first stages of the war and they still do. A Russian drone striking the New Safe Confinement shielding Chernobyl NPP on 14th March 2025³, causing a fire that took several weeks to be fully extinguished⁴ is a telltale sign of the ongoing relevance of the nuclear element in the conflict.

The war between the Russian Federation and Ukraine started on the 24th of February 2022 with the invasion and sieging of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone by the Russian Army. The site was safeguarded by a unit of the Ukrainian National Guard that, being well aware of the dangers posed by an eventual damaging of the structures of the New Safe Confinement or the spent nuclear fuel storage units stored in the proximity of Chernobyl NPP, immediately surrendered in order to avoid collateral damage. The Russian contingent then proceeded to occupy the NPP and took the Ukrainian personnel working there as hostages.

This siege and occupation of the Chernobyl Zone lasted thirty-five days and Serhii Plokhly reports it in a very detailed way, integrating direct witnesses with official declarations and, in a very interesting approach, social media statements. This interpenetration of different sources creates a very defined picture of the first thirty-five days of the Russo-Ukrainian war and could be taken as an example by contemporary historians. The use of social media as a source could prove – and has been, in this instance, proved – very useful to reconstruct events in very recent and ongoing conflict, both by researching official declarations of politicians involved and offering a direct line with survivors and eyewitness, however biased it may be. The recording and publishing of photos and videos from the soldiers directly involved in the conflict has also been proven useful for charging and identifying perpetrators of war crimes, as in the instance of a Russian unit filming the brutal torture and killing of a Ukrainian POW in 2022⁵.

Serhii Plokhly himself is very closely involved with the ongoing conflict, both

3 UN News, Strike on Chernobyl: 'No room for complacency' says atomic energy watchdog, 14/02/2025, online.

4 World Nuclear News, Chernobyl: emergency work completed after drone strike on shelter, 07/03/2025, online. Nuclear Newswire, Fires extinguished at Chernobyl following drone strike, 13/03/2025, online.

5 Amnesty International, Ukraine: Russian soldiers filmed viciously attacking Ukrainian POW must face justice, 29/07/2022, online.

as a Ukrainian, as a Professor of Ukrainian History and a friend and family member of people fighting or, in general, being affected, by it⁶. A possible conflict of interests that he, as a Historian, is very well aware of: “At first, he [Serhii Plokyh] says, he resisted the idea of a book about the invasion, produced during the invasion. To write such a volume would be ‘to go against the basic principles of the profession’. ‘Our wisdom as historians comes from the fact that we already know how things turned out,’ he says.”⁷ In this particular instance, he was referring to his book *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*, published in 2023, yet I believe this statement is also true for *Chernobyl Roulette*. As historians it is our duty to interrogate ourselves whether it may be appropriate or not to write and analyse ongoing events. As military historians this self-interrogation is particularly recommended as we may risk becoming unwilling agents of propaganda for either side. In this case, while it is quite clear how deeply the author feels for the fate of his country, he doesn’t fall into the rhetoric of blatant nationalism and tries instead to give as an impartial report as possible.

Chernobyl Roulette is also very significant in presenting the aforementioned theory that the Russo-Ukrainian war already is a nuclear conflict, even if conventional nuclear weapons have not – in the moment of writing – yet been deployed. Yet, this war already is a nuclear war. First of all, because it’s the first conflict being fought in a radioactive area, the Exclusion Zone contaminated by the Chernobyl disaster. So far, the most relevant consequence has been the exposure of Russian soldiers to radiation as they dug and used trenches in the Exclusion Zone, and their subsequent evacuation due to Acute Radiation Sickness⁸. An event that’s particularly significant since the USSR Ministry of Defence issued an acute radiation syndrome guide for soldiers and doctors, using video footage from the firefighters affected by the Chernobyl disaster in Moscow Hospital 6, which can still easily be found online⁹. The video very clearly explains the effect of radiation exposure and how to behave in a radioactive zone, either presuming

6 Aspect of History, Serhii Plokyh on the Russo – Ukrainian War, 2023 (online).

7 Charlotte Higgins, Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokyh: “This may not be the last chapter of the Russian Empire but it’s an important one”, *The Guardian*, 12/05/2023.

8 Reuters, Unprotected Russian soldiers disturbed radioactive dust in Chernobyl’s ‘Red Forest’, workers say, 29/03/2022, online. Kirk Jensen, Inadvertent Radiation Exposures in Combat Zones: Risk of Contamination and Radiobiologic Consequences, *Military Medicine*, Vol. 187, Issue 11-12, November-December 2022, pp. 303–307.

9 Acute Radiation Syndrome, The Ministry of Defence USSR 1988. Online.

a direct exposure to a nuclear explosion or the necessity of fighting in an area that was affected by nuclear bombings. And, yet, from eyewitnesses accounts reported in *Chernobyl Roulette*, it is also apparent that the Russian occupation force had no real idea on how to behave and how to protect themselves from the risks posed by the Exclusion Zone, nor were the soldiers equipped with devices for radiological protection.

The title itself is also indicative of the importance of the nuclear element in the Russo-Ukrainian war: purposely targeting nuclear power plants, occupying them and holding the personnel hostage poses a significant increase in the risk of accidents happening, with possible consequences at global level. The words of Chernobyl NPP administrator Valentyn Heiko to General Sergei Burakov and Colonel Andrei Frolenkov, in response to the high alert of Russian nuclear strategic forces in March 2022, are significant in expressing the tension and uncertainties that the occupation of Chernobyl caused: “We now have nothing to lose. [...] I promise you that you will slowly and certainly die here together with me. I have enough knowledge to ensure that you will remain here with us forever. Tell your commanders that either they conduct themselves in a civilized manner or there will be another Chernobyl here!”¹⁰. The threat of sabotaging the Chernobyl NPP was carried out with the intention of having the Russian occupation force realise that they were sailing through very dangerous waters and was very effective in March 2022. However, the same cannot be told about the Zaporizhzhia NPP, which is still being “held hostage” by Russian occupying forces and is still playing an important role in the control of the region, while also being a source of major concern for nuclear agencies and specialists¹¹. Another demonstration of the primary importance of the nuclear element, both as a deterrent and a leverage, in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

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10 *Chornobyl 22*, a film by Oleksiy Radynski, *The Reckoning Project* (2023), 14:00; interview with Valentyn Heiko, *The Reckoning Project*, 2022; Yuras Karmanau, Jim Heintz, Vladimir Isachenkov & Dasha Litvinova, *Putin puts nuclear forces on high alert, escalating tensions*, AP News, 27/02/2022 cit. in S. Ploky, pp. 79-80.

11 The events regarding Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant are far too extensive and complex to be treated in this review, but they were given extensive coverage by the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*. Online.



William Balfour Ker (1877-1918), *Knights of Columbus*, 1917 / Poster showing a priest looking heavenward and raising a crucifix, blessing kneeling soldiers. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. Reproduction Number: LC-USZC4-10131
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