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Kate Brown

Chernobyl Mono-Cropped

In 2004, I spent a week in the Chernobyl Zone of Alienation. Strangely, I found that the post-nuclear landscape had the feel of an open-air ethnographic museum. In the largely abandoned villages I came across hand-carved tools, horse carts, timber-frame huts, bee hives, and canoes hacked out of logs with a blunt axe. I traveled with a naturalist who spotted 150 different species of birds. He pointed out the rough tearing of the earth by boars. I spotted a skittish wild horse and saw three-foot long catfish thriving in the warm water of the nuclear power plant's cooling ponds. Since the mid-nineties, Ukrainian archeologists have found evidence of a very old rural culture, which survived in the Zone until 1986. They argue this region is the cradle of Slavic civilization (Omeliashko 1996; pers. comm. with author 2004).

Indeed, much of contemporary media attention on the Chernobyl Zone sends a message that the aftermath of nuclear destruction has returned the territory to a state of natural order. Tour agencies and journalists promote the Zone as a preserve, alive with wildlife (Mycio 2005; PBS 2011). But the story is more complicated than that. In the twentieth century, modern technologies streamlined the cultural, demographic, and biological diversity of the region. In this paper, I will argue that these processes of simplification were related—that mono-cropped populations of the thirties and forties led to genetically and biologically depleted flora and fauna in the twenty-first century.

In my history, *A Biography of No Place*, I described the demographic transformation of Right Bank Ukraine from a multi-ethnic border zone to homogenous Ukrainian heartland from 1925 to 1955 (Brown 2004). In the twenties, observers in Right Bank Ukraine did not see diversity. They said that there was nothing to see: no civilization, no culture. Observers remarked with pity or derision on the illiteracy of the inhabitants of the region, on their poverty and political backwardness.¹ Soviet census-takers reported that no two villages were alike; each place contained a different mix of language

1 For memoirs of the territory, see Zofia Kossak, *Pozoga: wspomnienia z Wołynia, 1917–1919* (Warsaw: Pax, 1996) and Maria Dunin-Kozicka, *Burza Od Wschodu: Wspomnienia z Kijowszczyzny (1918–1920)* (Lodz: Wydawn, 1990). For remarks by a Soviet official in Polesia, see Tsentral'nyi Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Vykonnykh Orhaniv Ukrainy (Kiev) (TsDAVO Ukrainy), 413/1/49, l. 48 (1925) and 413/1/172, ll. 50–2 (1926).

and ethnicity (TsDAVO 1926). Languages, later to be separated into formal Ukrainian, Polish, Belorussian, Yiddish, and German, merged in a creative patois that, because languages were oral and non-standardized, were in constant play among those who spoke it. There was also a confusion over identity. When asked to state their nationality, many peasants replied simply “catholic,” “peasant,” or “local.” This self-ignorance provoked observers to call the locals “dark and deaf.”

Local architecture, too, appeared paltry because it was largely tensile, collapsible, and dynamic. Stores were small and unstorelike. Healing, teaching, advising, and local governance occurred at home or on the square. There were some churches and synagogues, but because of long distances and sectarian interests many people preferred to pray at home or in the woods. As daily life was not fixed by architecture, identities and histories too were rarely erected on the rigid structures of literary texts and documents. In a region where 90–95 percent of the population was illiterate, language and meanings were as dynamic and fluid as the seasonal country fairs.

This spatial anarchy facilitated social mingling, cultural autonomy, and linguistic diversity, which, because it was hard to pin down, was difficult to uproot or transform. From Moscow, in other words, the borderland was difficult to characterize. Security officials finally took over the conduct of the 1925 census because the arguments over disputed ethnic identities created so much acrimony and uncertainty. For Moscow officials, the borderlands’ lack of clarity constituted a security problem on the vulnerable border with Poland. In the thirties, NKVD agents reconfigured locals’ cultural persistence as rebellion. In *Biography*, I show how the multi-ethnic borderland was cleansed through mass arrests, deportations, and genocidal campaigns from 1935 until 1947. All parties who occupied the borderlands—Soviet reformers, German occupiers, Ukrainian and Polish nationalists—were confused by the ethnic and cultural complexity of the borderlands and sought to eradicate it.

After the war, the region, gutted and depopulated, did not flourish. It was a poor agricultural zone where collective farms failed to prosper. Moscow leaders saw the region as economically backward and in need of investment, jobs, and development. In the late sixties, Soviet officials decided to build what they projected would be the country’s largest nuclear power complex, with ten nuclear reactors alongside the small

log cottages, homes to subsistence farmers who still left sacrifices to forest sprites.² The metaphor of advanced technology eradicating superstition and rural poverty must have been attractive.

A major feature of the projected “nuclear park” was the new modern city of Pripiat, founded on emptied land in 1970 to accommodate plant workers and their families. Pripiat grew out of dreams of the twenties, when utopian theorists imagined cities fashioned out of the promise of limitless energy and industrial abundance.³ The socialist city entailed bulldozing the disappointing facets of the dark and deaf countryside and the grimy, crime-ridden, bourgeois city (Kaganovich 1934, 82).⁴ Soviet cities would be planned rationally. Industrial production, populations, and green space could be logically distributed across the countryside so as to eventually erode the distinctions between town and country, and between the haves and the have-nots, in order to showcase society’s accomplishments and egalitarianism (Kudriavtsev 1971, 3).⁵ The Soviet *sotsgorod* was to be a place where a unified, classless population could have it all: the conveniences, education, and services of a city, and the greenery, peace, and quiet of the country.

Of course, things do not always go according to plan. By the mid-sixties, Soviet cities were suffering from the same kind of sprawl, over-taxed infrastructure, housing shortages, traffic congestion, and pollution as cities in the capitalist world. In 1966, Nikita Khrushchev reasserted the principles of the socialist green city (CPSU, 387–88). Pripiat was a product of this renewed resolve. It was built in a remote area where urban services and opportunities were scarce. A green “oxygen” zone surrounded the city in the form of miles of undisturbed pine forests, bogs, and lakes. Powered by abundant, cheap, and clean nuclear energy, the air and environment were pure and pristine, a naturalists and outdoorsmen’s paradise. The city population of 50,000 constituted what planners considered the optimal ratio of population to the supply of goods and services (DiMaio 1974, 60).

- 2 For an excellent description of the park, see Paul R. Josephson, *Red Atom: Russia’s Nuclear Power Program from Stalin to Today* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 2000).
- 3 See Konstantine Melnikov’s Green City proposal in Frederick S. Starr, *Melnikov: Solo Architect in a Mass Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 176–77.
- 4 See also Steven Harris, “Moving to the Separate Apartment: Building, Distributing, Furnishing, and Living in Urban Housing in Soviet Russia, 1950s–1960s” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2003), 94.
- 5 As the Soviet architectural theorist, B. Svetlichny, put it, “The city is the most accomplished form of human establishment.” “Nashi goroda na puti v budushchii,” *V Pomoshch politicheskomu samoobrazovaniuu* (Moscow, 1959), 10.

Even better, Pripjat was wholly modern. There was no tiny cottage, garden shed, hunter's shack, no vernacular or ecclesiastical architecture, no small chapel or grotto to a forgotten God. Everything, absolutely everything, was built according to one streamlined plan.⁶ Until one entered private space, there was nothing made by hand; nothing created outside of factory assembly lines. In the twenties, Walter Benjamin wondered what life would be like surrounded by mass produced elements. Pripjat would be a fine place to answer that question. Except there is no one left to question.

After the explosion of reactor no. 4 in 1986, 130,000 residents were removed to create the Chernobyl Zone. This last demographic purge was accompanied by a biological cleansing, which has occurred largely beneath the radar of the popular media. The pine forests near Chernobyl have been devastated and with it many of the species that inhabited it. Recent studies have shown that species, especially birds, fly in from outside the contaminated zones, get food because of lack of competition, and thrive until the radioactive effects take them out. The lives of the birds and animals we saw in the Zone are shorter than those living outside the Zone, and they are less successful reproductively (Nesterenko 2009; Mousseau and Moller 2011).

In sum, the solution to cultural diversity was to streamline culture, demography, and architecture. Those processes were followed by a radical biological simplification. What remains in the irradiated terrain is a worrisome diversity of radioactive isotopes that will continue to regenerate in the future.

6 Of the almost eight hundred approved standard designs for apartment buildings, less than ten percent were in use by the mid-seventies. "And even these are as alike as peas in a pod," noted one Soviet commentator (DiMaio 1974, 72).

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