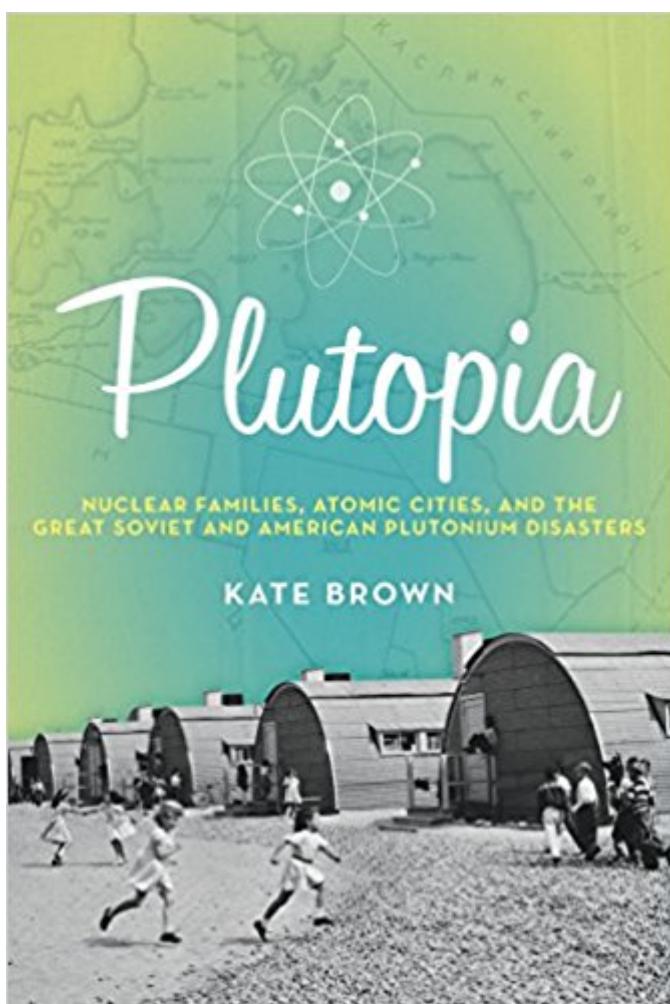


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# Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, And The Great Soviet And American Plutonium Disasters



## Synopsis

While many transnational histories of the nuclear arms race have been written, Kate Brown provides the first definitive account of the great plutonium disasters of the United States and the Soviet Union. In *Plutopia*, Brown draws on official records and dozens of interviews to tell the extraordinary stories of Richland, Washington and Ozersk, Russia—the first two cities in the world to produce plutonium. To contain secrets, American and Soviet leaders created plutopias—communities of nuclear families living in highly-subsidized, limited-access atomic cities. Fully employed and medically monitored, the residents of Richland and Ozersk enjoyed all the pleasures of consumer society, while nearby, migrants, prisoners, and soldiers were banned from plutopia—they lived in temporary "staging grounds" and often performed the most dangerous work at the plant. Brown shows that the plants' segregation of permanent and temporary workers and of nuclear and non-nuclear zones created a bubble of immunity, where dumps and accidents were glossed over and plant managers freely embezzled and polluted. In four decades, the Hanford plant near Richland and the Maiak plant near Ozersk each issued at least 200 million curies of radioactive isotopes into the surrounding environment—equaling four Chernobyls—laying waste to hundreds of square miles and contaminating rivers, fields, forests, and food supplies. Because of the decades of secrecy, downwind and downriver neighbors of the plutonium plants had difficulty proving what they suspected, that the rash of illnesses, cancers, and birth defects in their communities were caused by the plants' radioactive emissions. *Plutopia* was successful because in its zoned-off isolation it appeared to deliver the promises of the American dream and Soviet communism; in reality, it concealed disasters that remain highly unstable and threatening today. An untold and profoundly important piece of Cold War history, *Plutopia* invites readers to consider the nuclear footprint left by the arms race and the enormous price of paying for it.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Winner of the Ellis W. Hawley Prize of the Organization of American Historians Winner of the Albert J. Beveridge Award of the American Historical Association Winner of the George Perkins Marsh Prize of the American Society for Environmental History Winner of the Wayne S. Vucinich Book Prize of the Association for Slavic Studies, East European, and Eurasian Studies Winner of the Heldt Prize in the category of Best Book in Slavic/Eastern European/Eurasian Studies from the Association of Women in Slavic Studies Winner of the Robert G. Athearn Prize of the Western History Association "Turning up a surprising amount of hitherto hidden material and talkative survivors, Brown writes a vivid, often hair-raising history of the great plutonium factories and the privileged cities built around them... Readers will squirm to learn of the high radiation levels workers routinely experienced and the casualness with which wastes poured into the local air, land and rivers... An angry but fascinating account of negligence, incompetence and injustice justified (as it still is) in the name of national security." --Kirkus Reviews (starred review)"An unflinching and chilling account." --Seattle Times"Harrowing... Meticulously researched... Plutopia has important messages for those managing today's nuclear facilities, arguing for caution and transparency." --Nature"The book tells two intertwined stories. One is an appalling narrative of environmental disasters... The second narrative is about the towns, the townspeople, and the creation of a spatially segmented landscape that enabled those disasters... This is admirable comparative history." --Carl Abbott, Environmental History"Fascinating." -- Dissent"One of the Cold War's more striking perversities never made it to public view. ... Brown is a good writer, and she describes with precision the construction of the two sites (a difficult process in the U.S. case, an unbelievably horrid one in the Russian case), the hazardous occupations undertaken by their inhabitants, and the consciously contrived bubbles of socioeconomic inequality both places became." --Foreign Affairs"Brown's account is unique, partisan and occasionally personal in that she includes some of her thoughts about interviews she conducted... But because she is open and thorough about her sources, those are strengths to be celebrated, not weaknesses to be deplored. It also means her book is engaging, honest and, in the end, entirely credible." --New Scientist"An amazing book... Brown found many parallels between Richland and Ozersk that disrupt the conservative Cold War dichotomy between

the 'free world' and the totalitarian one. Her research included not only uncovering previously secret documents in both countries but also tracking down and interviewing old-time residents of Ozersk and Richland. Her picture of the treatment of plutonium workers on both sides of the Iron Curtain is enough to make you gnash your teeth or cry." --Jon Wiener, American Historical Review"Arresting, engagingly narrated... Kate Brown skillfully mixes Cold War policy assessment and associated political intrigue with sociological study of the lives of those who lived and worked in those places... Plutopia is history told through the voice of drama and investigative reporting." --Stephen E. Roulac, New York Journal of Books"Plutopia is reporting and research at its best, both revealing a hidden history and impacting the important discussions about nuclear power that should be happening today." --Glenn Dallas, San Francisco Book Review "An untold and profoundly important piece of Cold War history, Plutopia invites readers to consider the nuclear footprint left by the arms race and the enormous price of paying for it." --H-Soyuz "Kate Brown has written a provocative and original study of two cities -- one American, one Soviet -- at the center of their countries' nuclear weapons complexes. The striking parallels she finds between them help us -- impel us -- to see the Cold War in a new light. Plutopia will be much discussed. It is a fascinating and important book." --David Holloway, author of *Stalin and the Bomb*"Kate Brown has produced a novel and arresting account of the consequences of Cold War Nuclear policies on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Interweaving documentary research in government archives, reviews and revisions of the public record, and a host of personal interviews with the citizens -- perpetrators, victims, and witnesses -- Brown's Plutopia makes a lasting contribution to the continuing chronicle of the human and environmental disasters of the atomic age." --Peter Bacon Hales, author of *Atomic Spaces: Living on the Manhattan Project*"It may be the best piece of research and writing in the nuclear history field in the last 25 years - perhaps the best ever... Extremely impressive." -- Rodney Carlisle, Prof. Emeritus, Rutgers University, author of *Encyclopedia of the Atomic Age*

Kate Brown is Associate Professor of History at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and the author of *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland*, winner of the American Historical Association's George Louis Beer Prize. A 2009 Guggenheim Fellow, her work has also appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *American Historical Review*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Harper's Magazine Online*.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union built Plutonium manufacturing plants and their supporting cities. This book talks about the building of these plants, the elite way of life of the

scientists and technicians that lived in these cities compared to their other country men, the nuclear accidents and disasters that contaminated the surrounding countrysides, and the long term adverse effects still taking place today.

Kate Brown has done the almost impossible, using vast files of information long classified in America and the former USSR to plumb the depths of the secrecy and the cover-ups involved in the pursuit of plutonium for weapons production. While some Americans as well as Russians dispute the accidents and cover-ups, one can only surmise that they were so patriotically blinded by their participation as to deny anything which besmirched their remembrances of the programs and their lives in the secret cities. Some of the evidence, to be sure, is anecdotal, however Brown has managed to document her assertions and is to be commended as a brave historian for attacking an investigation into a part of history that many would wish to remain unknown. Having spent a good part of the past 20 years traveling in Russia and seeing the fear of contemporary Russians that the walls still "have ears" demonstrates the degree of difficulty Brown must have had to gain the confidence of people there in telling this story, not to mention similar challenges in the U.S., particularly among people still residing in and near Hanford.

This book is an interesting, illuminating read that details the negligence of American and Russian government nuclear programs and their reckless dumping of radionuclides into unwitting nearby communities. This book does an excellent job documenting how the US and Russian governments "handled" the exposure of their citizens and their various attempts to ignore and bully sick workers and citizens into quiet submission. If you are from an Eastern Washington family and you wonder why half of the people in your family over the age of 50 have had thyroid cancer.... tragically this book might be of interest to you.

The production of plutonium is a oft-forgotten piece of the global conflicts which have long shaped multiple societies. In this refreshing inquisitive work, Kate Brown illustrates that the tragedy and ingenuity wrapped up in this colossally dangerous process should never depart from any related narrative. The book carries an activistic tone, but at the same time reliably articulates the histories of two (surprisingly similar) communities, Richland in Washington State, and Ozersk in the Ural mountains. Brown intricately illustrates how, as radiation mutated bodies and landscapes, the production of plutonium mutated cultures. Brown constructs local histories which weave together into an intriguing global tapestry. Well worth reading.

Good book to add to my collection on the dawn and continuing saga of the nuclear age in Washington State and America.

Kate Brown did a beautiful job collecting the history and writing about the nuclear disasters. I have heard about Marshall Islands nuclear bomb testing but not about Mayak plant and or the Techa river poisoning. What striking to me was the propaganda after Fukushima reactor malfunction the immediate propaganda how the nuclear energy is "safe" and "wonderful" or how accidents do not happen and how everything is under control. The book with its historical footnotes will stay as part of history with us and hopefully a good reference for those who would like to learn more.

This is a very interesting book about history.

I felt sorrow for the thousands of citizens suffering for the cause of paranoia due to the US and Soviet governments. This book and others I have recently read made me realize, as a child of the 1950's, the depth of the deception the US Government displayed. Disappointing in some respects as this book just adds to my distrust of our government. In light of current events, Snowden et.al. this book illustrates how much we need to keep an eye on our (the US Government) leaders.

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