



Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Disasters*, New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2013, 406 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-985576-6

American historian Kate Brown's award-winning *Plutopia* is a highly original and important scholarly work with broad appeal. This work is focused on a seemingly unlikely comparison between "atomic cities" in the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Brown combines political and social history with the history of science to draw intimate portraits of the two plutonium-producing cities of Richland (in the U.S. state of Washington) and Ozersk (in the Soviet Union's Urals). She tracks the lives of these cities' populations, both the privileged and the less so. She demonstrates the ways in which these cities, to paraphrase the author, shared common features that transcended politics, ideology, and national culture, based on the fears and needs of nuclear security. The similarities in the development and fate of these two cities are astounding, demonstrating how the cold war ironically brought the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. together in the most negative ways.

Brown begins her history at the Hanford Plant in Richland, Washington. Here she shows the roles of the U.S. government and corporate science in creating a kind of totalizing incubator for nuclear development. Located in an isolated area with plentiful water and electricity, the Hanford Plant was built under strict security by a combination of non-white migrant workers, soldiers, and (for farming) prison labor. Construction sought to cut costs at every corner, with grave consequences for future safety. The town of Richland became the "new atomic city," populated by white middle-class families living in prosperity in an American model town, in which "the residents gave up their civil and biological rights in return for consumer rights." Here was a version of the American dream with costly natural and biological consequences for the indigenous people pushed out of their native hunting and fishing areas, local farmers, and, indeed, the people of Richland.



Ozersk, under Soviet rule, was “conceived and made in the American image.” Brown details the history of the Soviet nuclear project under Beria, moving to Ozersk for a ground-level view of the results. Although Ozersk was “no Richland” (in countless ways, including early chaos and lack of security on site), it too was situated in an isolated region with access to necessary raw materials; it too depended upon the labor of prisoners and soldiers in its early days. Ozersk was also a “model town” like Richland in so far as upward social mobility was the reward for work in this dangerous setting.

In both Richland and Ozersk, “the residents gave up their civil and biological rights in return for consumer rights.” This is an echo of Vera Dunham’s “Big Deal,” in which the equivalent of a Soviet “middle class” exchanges political loyalty for economic well-being. Although Dunham’s notion of the “Big Deal” comes from the 1970s, it fits well not only the description of the Soviet upwardly mobile; it also fits the postwar American middle class. However, within the context of nuclear cities, this compromise between political loyalty and economic stability came at a deadly cost.

Brown is at her best in documenting the immense environmental disasters caused by these projects. She is able to show who knew what, and when, about the dangers of radioactivity and its waste; she demonstrates the ways in which big science and government sought to mask and deny the dangers of these nuclear projects, at the risk of the enormous contamination of adjacent farmland, rivers, animals, and human beings. She brings these dangers home to the reader through extensive and sometimes heart-breaking interviews with local residents in Richland and Ozersk. She shows the ways in which these very dangers served to mobilize civic activity and protest in both places.

This is a book that warns us of the power of the state, surveillance, and information-gathering, as well as the dangers of state-led “big” science. It is also a book that warns us about the power of *fear* and how it impacts on domestic politics, a lesson no less important in the present. *Plutopia* is transnational history at its best, demonstrating the ways that conditions of fear and (cold) war shaped the policies of these two enemies in the arms race. The book is beautifully written and based on exhaustive research, including research in Soviet and U.S. archives. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of this subject and the originality and creativity that Brown brings to this work.

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