

A chilling account of more than half a century of nuclear catastrophes, by the author of the “definitive” (*Economist*) cold war history, nuclear folly.

Almost 145,000 Americans fled their homes in and around Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in late March 1979, hoping to save themselves from an invisible enemy: radiation. The reactor at the nearby Three Mile Island nuclear power plant had gone into partial meltdown, and scientists feared an explosion that could spread radiation throughout the eastern United States. Thankfully, the explosion never took place—but the accident left deep scars in the American psyche, all but ending the nation’s love affair with nuclear power.

In *Atoms and Ashes*, Serhii Plokhy recounts the dramatic history of Three Mile Island and five more accidents that have dogged the nuclear industry in its military and civil incarnations: the disastrous fallout caused by the testing of the hydrogen bomb in the Bikini Atoll in 1954; the Kyshtym nuclear disaster in the USSR, which polluted a good part of the Urals; the Windscale fire, the worst nuclear accident in the UK’s history; back to the USSR with Chernobyl, the result of a flawed reactor design leading to the exodus of 350,000 people; and, most recently, Fukushima in Japan, triggered by an earthquake and a tsunami, a disaster on a par with Chernobyl and whose cleanup will not take place in our lifetime.

Through the stories of these six terrifying incidents, Plokhy explores the risks of nuclear power, both for military and peaceful purposes, while offering a vivid account of how individuals and governments make decisions under extraordinary circumstances. Today, there are 440 nuclear reactors operating throughout the world, with nuclear power providing ten percent of global electricity. Yet as the world seeks to reduce carbon emissions to combat climate change, the question arises: Just how safe is nuclear energy?

**SERHII PLOKHY**, Mykhailo S. Hrushevs’kyi Professor of Ukrainian History and director of the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University, is a leading authority on the history of the Cold War. He lives in Burlington, Massachusetts.

READ BY LEIGHTON PUGH



Running Time: 12 Hours • Unabridged

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