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FORTY YEARS SINCE THE CHORNOBYL NUCLEAR POWER PLANT ACCIDENT THROUGH THE POSTERS OF STUDENT DESIGNERS

Abstract. April 26, 1986, divided the life of the then-Soviet Ukraine into before and after the accident at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant. In 2026, students of the Applied College "Universum" of Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University, majoring in "Design", investigated the public's views on the historical aspects of the events and on modern life in the radiation-contaminated zone. The article presents the students' posters as an illustration of their research.

Keywords: *graphic design, student project, poster, Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant, exclusion zone*

Topicality. April 26, 1986, divided the life of the then-Soviet Ukraine into before and after the accident at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant. In 2026, students of the Applied College "Universum" of Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University, majoring in "Design", investigated the public's views on the historical aspects of the events and on modern life in the radiation-contaminated zone. The article presents the students' posters as an illustration of their research.

The projects of design students cover various spheres of human life, addressing the urgent cultural and environmental issues of our time. Through their own posters, graphic designers can communicate more than mere facts; they can translate collective emotion, pain, and profound anxiety for our shared future into a visual language.

This project commemorates 40 years since the Chornobyl disaster, an event long shrouded in Soviet secrecy. Since Ukraine gained independence, the 'secret' classification has been lifted from the archives, revealing a stark disconnect between the Soviet leadership's internal knowledge and the sanitized version of events presented to the public and the international community. Thanks to the researchers and journalists who bring these facts to the public, the world continues to learn the lessons of this global tragedy.

Using open-source facts, student designers created posters titled "Chornobyl Then and Now." They conducted their own research into what those 40 years were like, how the Chornobyl zone is perceived today, and the lingering threats and scientific insights it offers.

In the posters "Victims of 1986," Yaroslava Syrota began a story about the horrific facts of the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant disaster.

On April 26, 1986, time seemed to stop in a pause of terror and uncertainty. The disaster was worsened by a government that prioritized secrecy over safety, delaying the containment of the fire and hiding the facts from the public. This negligence claimed the lives of the first responders - firefighters and medical personnel - as well as the station's workers and the innocent residents nearby.



Posters by Yaroslava Syrota "Victims of 1986"

The posters say: "Nurses and medical staff who treated the dying firefighters and plant workers absorbed lethal doses of radiation alongside their patients. Many were later documented to have fallen seriously ill or died."

"At 1:23 a.m., a powerful explosion occurred at the fourth power unit, destroying the reactor. Everything in the vicinity - kindergartens, homes, and streets - was exposed to radiation, which resulted in numerous casualties."

Evacuations were carried out using ordinary city buses. Upon arrival, many residents were forced to abandon their belongings after radiation checks revealed that their clothes, shoes, and personal items had become contaminated. Displaced and dispossessed, thousands fled their homes in search of safety as a 30-kilometer Exclusion Zone was established around the ruined reactor.



Exhibition by Oleksandr Moskalenko, a teacher at the Applied College "Universum", "Models of vehicles during the accident liquidation period"

Access to the zone was restricted to personnel and security guards, and certain areas were closed to the public due to high radiation levels.

One of the first reports from the KGB Office for the city of Kyiv and the region, sent to the KGB of the USSR on April 26, stated: "In order to prevent the leakage of information, the spread of false and panic rumors, control of outgoing correspondence has been organized, and subscribers' access to international communication lines has been limited." [5]

At the same time, the USSR authorities tried to hide the true consequences of the accident and its impact on the population and the environment. On May 1, 1986, residents of Kyiv, together with their children, took part in a festive parade, although the radiation background exceeded the permissible norm by dozens of times.

As historian Andriy Kohut points out, the government's own records later admitted that the clothes of children after attending the May Day demonstration were highly radioactive. [6]



Posters by Karolina Repetilo “#Chornobyl_deception”

Poster text: #Chornobyl_Deception. IT'S NOT THAT BAD.

WE DIDN'T FORCE YOU!!!

THERE ARE MORE VICTIMS! RADIATION KILLS SLOWLY. Concealed statistics. Officially – 31 victims. In reality, thousands. The KGB covered up the truth. The effects of radiation exposure appeared years later. Outpatient medical record.

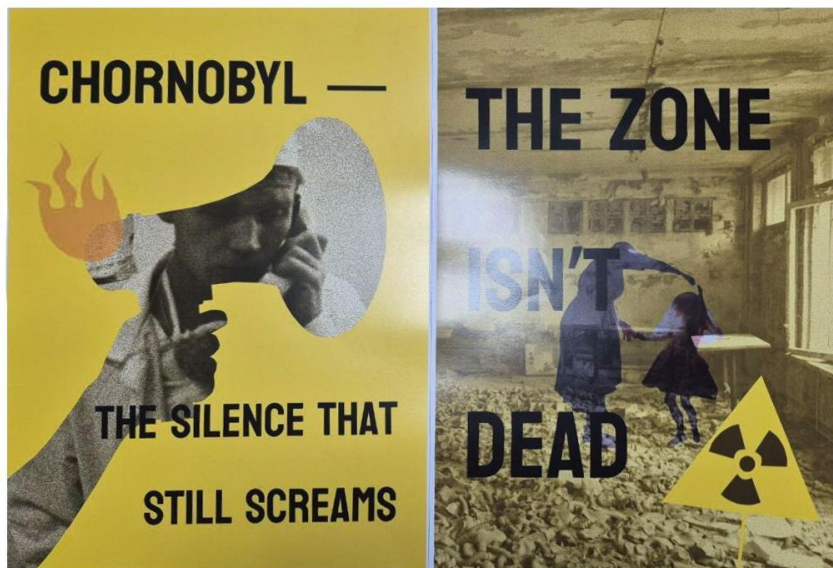
Diagnosis: Vegetative-vascular dystonia.

In her posters “# Chornobyl_deception,” Karolina Repetilo presented the works titled “It’s Not That Bad,” “We Didn’t Force You,” “Concealed Statistics,” and “Diagnosis...”, which reveal various aspects of the government’s concealment of real facts from its own population and the international community.

A report from the 6th Department of the Ukrainian SSR’s KGB in Kyiv dated May 13, 1986, states that patients showing signs of radiation sickness were diagnosed with "vegetative-vascular dystonia" in their medical records.

On May 5, the G7 leaders, during a meeting in Tokyo, prepared a joint statement on the Chornobyl accident: “We call on the Government of the Soviet Union to urgently provide all the information requested by our and other countries.”

The USSR authorities turned the territory of the Chornobyl disaster into a "zone of silence," which existed in this format until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Historians and politicians now largely agree that the disaster was a pivotal factor in the eventual collapse of the Union.

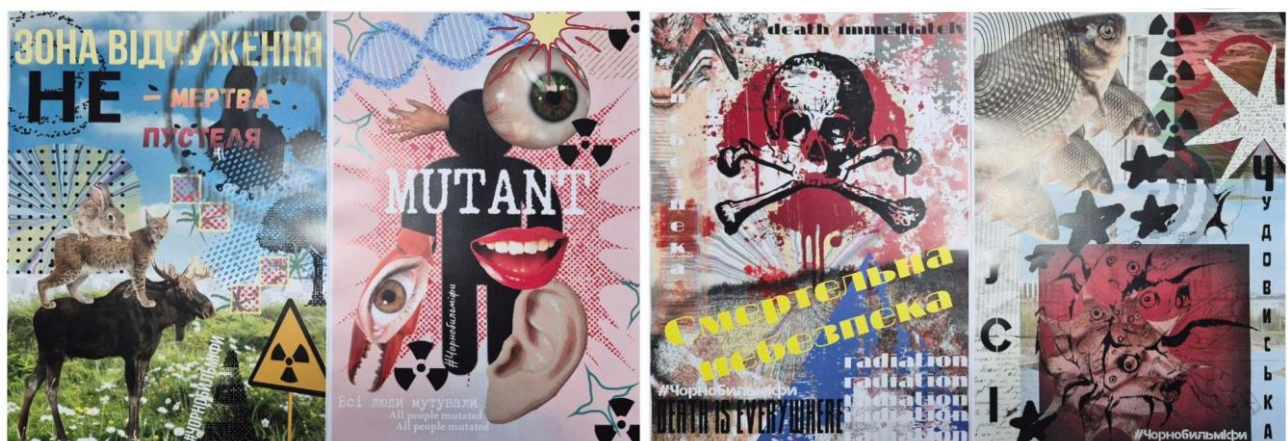


Posters by Pavel Shchipsky “The zone isn’t dead”

During the years of independence, Ukraine opened the Chornobyl territory to international organizations, transforming it into a site of shared global responsibility. In 2000, the last remaining reactor, Unit 3, was permanently shut down. By 2016, construction of a new protective sarcophagus over Unit 4 was completed, marking one of the largest and most ambitious engineering projects in the world. Supported financially by the G7 countries and the European Union, the area surrounding the plant has since been turned into a strictly controlled zone and an important hub for scientific research.

Over time, the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone has also become a powerful cultural symbol. It attracts tourists, inspires filmmakers, and serves as a setting for numerous video games. Titles such as *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Chernobylite* use the zone as their primary backdrop, while *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* features a memorable mission set in Prypiat.

The site has also been recreated in simulators and virtual tours. Its influence extends into cinema as well - for instance, in *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, where characters travel to the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant in search of hidden extraterrestrial technology.



Sofia Zabiyaка's posters “#Chornobyl_Myths”

Poster text: THE EXCLUSION ZONE IS NOT A DEAD WASTELAND. EVERYONE HAS MUTATED. LETHAL DANGER. EVERYONE IS A MONSTER.

Over time, Chornobyl has become surrounded by numerous myths and misconceptions. Sofia Zabiyaка sought to explore and challenge some of these ideas through her poster series.

One of the most widespread beliefs is that the 30-kilometer exclusion zone is completely deserted and uninhabitable. In reality, a small number of residents have returned to their homes despite the risks. In addition, the area is regularly inhabited by workers, security personnel, firefighters, and scientists who maintain the site and monitor environmental conditions.

Another persistent myth involves so-called “mutants”: multi-headed creatures, giant man-eating catfish, or entirely new species of flora and fauna. While such stories are popular in mass culture, they have no scientific basis. For example, large catfish - sometimes reaching up to two meters in length - do inhabit the cooling channels near the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant. However, their size is natural, influenced by a lack of predators and regular feeding by workers, and they pose no threat to humans.

The claim that “anyone who visits Chornobyl will develop cancer” is also misleading. Although the disaster had serious long-term health consequences, radiation levels vary significantly across the zone. Certain locations remain highly dangerous - such as the basement of the hospital in Prypiat, where contaminated clothing from first responders is still stored. However, much of the territory now has relatively low radiation levels.

This uneven distribution has made it possible to organize controlled visits, turning the exclusion zone into one of Ukraine’s most unusual tourist destinations. Guided tours follow carefully planned routes designed to minimize exposure, allowing visitors to safely explore selected areas under expert supervision.

Up until 2022, the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone maintained a complex existence shaped by scientific research, cultural fascination, and enduring myths.



Posters by Yaroslava Syrota “Chornobyl 2022-2024”

Poster text: 14.02.2022 At the start of the full-scale invasion, Russian forces occupied the plant and the Exclusion Zone.

14.02.2024 Major wildfires, triggered by weather conditions and military operations, pose a significant environmental threat.

In 2022, the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone became one of the corridors used by Russian forces advancing toward Kyiv. Columns of military equipment moving through the area were captured on camera by the organization Chornobyl Tour.

During the occupation, staff at the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant were held hostage for 36 days. They worked under extreme pressure, with minimal rest and limited access to food and medical

care. As the occupation ended, many were taken into captivity. At the same time, Russian soldiers dug trenches in the Red Forest - one of the most contaminated areas following the disaster, known for its dangerously high radiation levels. Reports that emerged later suggested that none of those in these trenches survived.

The Red Forest itself is a stark symbol of the disaster. Its name comes from the reddish-brown color pine trees turned after absorbing high doses of radiation. The dead vegetation created a lasting hazard as it could become a source of secondary contamination, particularly in the event of fires. In 1987, contaminated trees and topsoil were buried in trenches and covered with about a meter of clean soil; in total, more than 4,000 cubic meters of radioactive material were contained in this way.

After Ukrainian forces regained control of the zone, widespread destruction and looting became evident. Archives, laboratories, and storage facilities were heavily damaged or stripped. The full extent of what may have been removed and potentially transported to territories such as Belarus or Russia remains unclear, raising concerns about the uncontrolled spread of contaminated materials.

In February 2025, a drone strike damaged part of the protective structure over Reactor 4 at the Chernobyl site. According to an assessment by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the main supporting structures and monitoring systems were not critically affected. Repairs to the damaged sections are planned for 2026, though ongoing threats from missile and drone attacks continue to pose risks to the facility's safety.



Posters by Daria Ruban "Arrow. The Power of Nature"

Poster text: **#ChornobylKnocking.** Knocking... knocking. Abandoned old homes. The graphite ash is not forgotten. We are not forgotten; we will remain as an eternal lesson. They cling to the past. We are not forgotten!

They cling to the past. We are not forgotten. Soulless products of "progress" and "reliability." It is hard for the ghosts of the past to be forgotten. But nature will come with new life. Knocking... knocking...

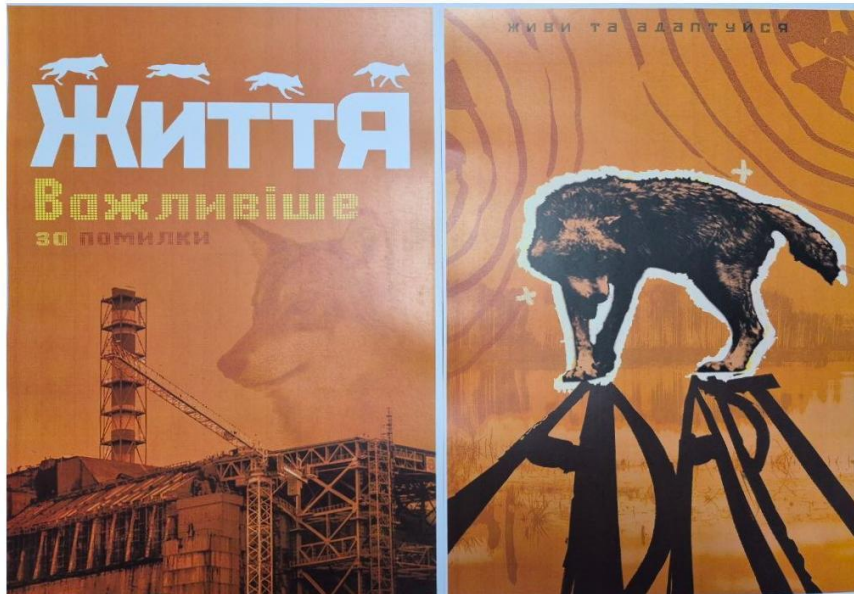
Nature will recover from human errors. It will cloak everything in a dense forest. ...and so, knock after knock, as if a woodpecker is speaking. Knocking... knocking...

Fauna is restoring. It tames the metal in a way that will cover over human mistakes. Knocking... knocking...

The Duga radar, constructed in the 1980s, was designed for the early detection of intercontinental ballistic missile launches. As part of the USSR's nuclear defense system, it once played a key role in the country's "nuclear shield," but became obsolete with the rise of satellite technologies and after the Chernobyl disaster. Its immense antennas - reaching up to 150 meters in height and stretching roughly 500 meters in length - emitted a distinctive repetitive signal that earned it the nickname "Russian Woodpecker."

Daria Ruban reinterprets this structure as a symbol linking past and present. In her work, the radar embodies how once-grand technological achievements fade into abandonment, leaving behind traces that echo into the future. Over time, nature reclaims these remnants, restoring life in rhythm with the imagined “knocking” of the woodpecker.

Because of its restricted access, the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone has also evolved into an unintended wildlife reserve. Rare plant species have re-emerged, and animals such as Przewalski's horse roam freely. Camera traps regularly capture wolves, foxes, bears, black storks, and many other species that have grown largely unafraid of humans, often approaching surprisingly close to the zone's inhabitants.



Posters by Olena Kotenko “Life is more important than mistakes”

Poster text: Life is more important than mistakes. Live and adapt.

Radiation has no color, smell, or taste. Once inside the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, a person may notice nothing unusual - at most, mild discomfort such as a headache. The only visible reminders of its presence are warning signs placed in the most contaminated areas, marking the otherwise invisible danger.

What began as a catastrophic accident - caused by human error and worsened by a failure to acknowledge it - has since evolved into a vast open-air laboratory. Through the combined efforts of international and public organizations, the zone is now a site for studying the long-term environmental effects of radiation and the processes of ecological recovery following the Chernobyl disaster.

At the same time, students of the Applied College “Universum” of Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University engage with this legacy through creative and research projects. Their work draws public attention not only to the disaster itself, but also to the broader consequences of radiation exposure and the importance of a responsible, thoughtful approach to human technological advancement.

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