Nuclear Anxiety Is Nothing New. Here's How to Handle It

March 22, 2022

If you look at the Google trends analysis for the term "nuclear war" over the past 30 days, it's pretty hard to miss: On Feb. 24th, when Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine, the search term's popularity soared. Just a few days later, it surged again, when President Vladimir Putin placed Russian nuclear forces on high alert — the first time its government had done so since 1991. And on March 4th, there was another spike, right after Russian forces captured a Ukrainian nuclear power plant in Zaporizhzhia.

Alex Wellerstein, a science historian at the Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey, is familiar with such signs of concern about nuclear war. In addition to his work studying the history of nuclear weapons, Wellerstein is also the creator of NUKEMAP, a website that allows users to model how much destruction different types of nuclear bombs might wreak if dropped on a given location. He says that NUKEMAP has seen well over 300,000 daily visitors in recent weeks — about 20 times the site's normal traffic. In the days following the invasion, the site was so overloaded with traffic that it crashed regularly.

This undeniable rise in nuclear anxiety is perfectly understandable, too. Russia's invasion of Ukraine isn't just a humanitarian crisis; it's also a conflict taking place in the shadow of the world's biggest nuclear arsenals. While these stockpiles — built during the Cold War — may seem like relics of a bygone era, the threat they pose is very real. And scientists are still learning new things about their dangers. Beyond any immediate casualties, for example, the smoke and soot from the fires that would rage in the wake of a nuclear explosion could trigger a climate change that threatens both global food supplies and overall human health, according to a 2021 study in the *Journal of Geophysical Research: Atmospheres*.

…