

Web 57DHYAFZZFLKB March 30 2026 Their husbands both died after responding to the Chernobyl disaster

Their husbands both died after responding to the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. In November 2025 Natalia was 76 and Zoya around her age. They both lived in a high rise tower called a panelka on the left bank of Kiev. Natalia and Zoya were among the surviving families of “liquidators” the first responders and cleanup crews who contained the radioactive waste after the nuclear accident at Chernobyl in April 26 1986 including Zoya, whose husband, Valeriy Perevozchenko, succumbed to radiation poisoning in 1986 only 48 days after the blasts at Reactor Number 4. In recognition of Zoya’s suffering and loss, the Soviet authorities of that time awarded her an apartment in the newly erected panelka tower in Troieshchyna, which was expanding into the farmland of Kyiv’s left bank. Other surviving families from the disaster resettled in the same tower, including Natalia the widow of Valeriy Khodemchuk, an engineer who worked under Zoya’s husband and was Chernobyl’s first fatality. He too was honored at the same cemetery as his boss, though his body, lost within the rubble, was never found. Joined in grief and horror, determined to live and bestowed with official Kremlin recognition, Zoya and Natalia became close, enduring friends. Five years after the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the Soviet Union collapsed. Russian officials continued to venerate Natalia and Zoya and hosted them at annual memorial services in Moscow. Relations remained warm until they turned cold. Honors dwindled after Russia illegally annexed Crimea in 2014 and organized a separatist war in eastern Ukraine. Civilian travel between the two countries declined. After the full invasion of 2022, back-and-forth travel all but ceased. Natalia was Ukrainian. She chose her people’s side. Almost 40 years later in November 2025 Russian drones arrived at night. Zoya was in her third floor apartment, listening to the distinctive buzzing sound of Russian Shahed drones as they passed overhead. Natalia was on a couch in her seventh-floor apartment’s corridor when a Shahed crashed through her window. Shaheds often carry warheads spiked with incendiary compounds; fire burned Natalia in the first flash. She rushed to the kitchen to douse herself at the sink, only to find, when she turned toward the apartment door, that a rising blaze blocked her path. Like her husband almost 40 years before, she was trapped. She did not give up. She plunged into the flame, reached her door and forced herself into the corridor, then staggered down four flights of stairs to Zoya’s door, screaming for help. Burns covered more than 40 percent of her body. An ambulance hurried her to care. She died the next day. After the strike, the blackened apartment, full of Natalia’s charred possessions, was open to the air. The tower still stood. Many residents remained, only to lose heat and electricity in January 2026. The next morning, Zoya recalled Natalia’s arrival at her door, burned like her husband before her. Together the two women had survived one of the Soviet Union’s most spectacular failures to become celebrated in Moscow as living examples of citizens whose families gave all. Now the full circle of their relationship to the Kremlin closed in darkness, cold and long-distance betrayal. If weaponizing winter had meant to bring Ukraine at last to compliance and heel, in the panelky high tower of Troieshchyna, it failed. “The only feeling I have toward them”” Zoya said of the Russians who formerly embraced her, “is hate.”