

## Against ‘Sophisticated Barbarianism’ –

### 25 years of the international anti-nuclear movement “Nevada-Semipalatinsk”.

“Not only quarrels of states and ideologies are threatening mankind. We are absorbed in a global war against nature, executed in the name of pretended progress.” ‘Worpswede – Declaration’, 1989: International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW).

*The following article, written by Ursula Gelis (co-founder of the Global Women’s Association against Nuclear Testing), was written to mark the commemoration of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the anti-nuclear movement “Nevada-Semipalatinsk”. It also highlights the link, and shared experiences, of other testing sites around the world, particularly in the United States. It is being printed in this publication in preparation for a two-week visit in mid-May 2014 from a high delegation of the Global Women’s Association against Nuclear Testing to the capital city of Astana as well as eastern Kazakhstan.*



Kazakh poet Olzhas Suleimenov speaking in front of a label of the ‘Nevada-Semipalatinsk’ anti-nuclear movement.

### **Participation: history is made by people**

In 2014, activists of the anti-nuclear movement ‘Nevada-Semipalatinsk’ are celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closure of the former Soviet nuclear weapon test site in Eastern Kazakhstan.

In February 1989, with the end of the Cold War, the movement was founded when ordinary people stood up to oppose nuclear weapon testing. The famous

poet, politician and anti-nuclear activist Olzhas Suleimenov was crucial in initiating the first Soviet anti-nuclear movement but acted in concert with a great number of fellow activists; among them, some of the most prominent were the strong women in the Semipalatinsk area.

According to Suleimenov the “anti-nuclear movement is still on” and people “should recall how active they were”.<sup>1</sup>

At the first meeting, attended by about 5,000 people, the declaration ‘Hightime’ called for:

“ (1) the closure of the Semipalatinsk facility and a cleanup of the area; (2) the end of nuclear weapon production; (3) citizen control over nuclear waste; (4) the creation of a map showing the extent of radiation damage in the Soviet Union; and (5) the elucidation of the plight of radiological victims in the Soviet Union.

They stated that their end goal was to abolish nuclear weapons worldwide. The petition received over a million signatures within days.”<sup>2</sup> A resolution was adopted by the Supreme Soviet in August 1989 calling for a moratorium to stop nuclear testing by the US and the Soviet Union. Rallies and demonstrations continued.

The Kazakhs were inspired by the US-American activists who wanted to see the Nevada nuclear test site shut down. In the United States nuclear fall-out from tests led to the resistance of ‘down-winders’, people who became ill after being exposed to radioactive elements coming with the winds from the Nevada test site.<sup>3</sup>

“The general consensus of health studies conducted at the [Semipalatinsk] site since it was closed [...] is that radioactive fallout from nuclear testing has had a direct impact on the health of local residents.”<sup>4</sup>

Andrei Sakharov, the ‘father’ of the hydrogen-bomb, spoke about the health effects from testing nuclear weapons in the atmosphere: “Only an extreme

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.inform.kz/eng/article/2585330>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/kazakhs-stop-nuclear-testing-nevada-semipalatinsk-antinuclear-campaign-1989-1991>.

<sup>3</sup> [http://historytogo.utah.gov/utah\\_chapters/utah\\_today/nucleartestingandthedownwinders.html](http://historytogo.utah.gov/utah_chapters/utah_today/nucleartestingandthedownwinders.html).

<sup>4</sup> <http://thebulletin.org/lasting-toll-semipalatinsk-nuclear-testing>. From 1949 through 1989 nuclear weapons testing carried out by the former Soviet Union at the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site (SNTS) resulted in local fallout affecting the residents of Semipalatinsk, Ust-Kamenogorsk and Pavlodar regions of Kazakstan. To investigate the possible relationship between radiation exposure and thyroid gland abnormalities, we conducted a case review of pathological findings. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10838808>.

deficiency of imagination can distinguish the suffering of contemporaries [from] that of posterity.”<sup>5</sup>

Responsible citizens took action against the prospect for a growing danger of a radioactive earth.<sup>6</sup>

In 1991, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev officially closed the test site and ordered that medical help and compensation be provided to those suffering from illness due to testing.”<sup>7</sup> - Decree #409 by Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of the Kazakh Soviet Socialistic Republic. Almaty, August 29, 1991.<sup>8</sup>  
- Since then, many medical projects became reality.

United, civil society and politicians, succeeded to close the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapon test site.



At the 'Stronger than Death' memorial site in Semey, August 2012. Photo: Ursula Gelis

## The sacred worlds

Let us have a look at the label of the movement with its first picture: A Native American – apparently sitting in the Nevada desert or in the midst of the Kazakh steppe - smokes the peace pipe, *Calumet*, with his Kazakh counterpart.

<sup>5</sup> Natalia Manzurova/Cathie Sullivan. *Hard Duty. A Women's Experience at Chernobyl*. New Mexico 2006, p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> See: Rosalie Bertell. *No immediate danger. Prognosis for a Radioactive Earth*. 1985.

<sup>7</sup> Toghzan Kassenova. <http://thebulletin.org/lasting-toll-semipalatinsk-nuclear-testing>.

<sup>8</sup> *Building a Nuclear Safe World: The Kazakhstan Way*. 2011, p. 31.

According to American Indian culture, the ceremonial pipe was used as a major means of spiritual communication with the universe.<sup>9</sup>

In Kazakhstan, some are seeing Tengrianism (a sky cult) as the origin of Kazakh religiosity. [...] - “The specificity of Islam in Kazakhstan is determined by its intertwining with national traditions, the devotion of Kazakhs to customs”.<sup>10</sup>



Tengriist World. The *World-tree* is growing in the centre and connecting the three Worlds: Underworld, *Middleworld* and *Upperworld*. <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Tengriism>.

Tengrianism centers the deity Tengri - in the ancient Turkish world the name for God. “Tengri, identified with a “celestial sky,” timeless and infinite, was the chief deity responsible for the creation of the universe.”<sup>11</sup> Living in harmony with the universe guaranteed prosperity.

The *Shanyrak*, the top of the Kazakh yurt, is the sacred symbol of a family’s wellbeing and peace. It is the window to the upper world.

### **The end of harmony**

The year 2014 is special because it also marks the beginning of the First World War one hundred years ago. Sophisticated technologies led to unprecedented man slaughter through the use of mustard gas, automatic guns and shell-splinters. Lenin and Hitler admired this German war machinery, identifying it as unleashed war, proclaiming: ‘You are nothing, your nation is everything’ – which can be viewed as the ultimate pretext to totalitarian dictatorship.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Source: Encyclopedia Britannica.

<sup>10</sup> Saniya Edelbay. Traditional Kazakh Culture and Islam. In: International Journal of Business and Social Science Vol. 3 No. 11; June 2012, p. 124. [http://ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol\\_3\\_No\\_11\\_June\\_2012/15.pdf](http://ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol_3_No_11_June_2012/15.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Tengriism>.

<sup>12</sup> Hagen Schulze. Kleine deutsche Geschichte. München 1996, p. 160.

The Second World War resulted in even more destruction and pushed mankind into the nuclear age. In 1938, German scientist Otto Hahn<sup>13</sup> discovered nuclear fission. During the First World War, he had already performed extensive research on the use of gas as a faster way to kill soldiers.

### **Social responsibility**

Olzhas Suleimenov emphasizes the need for young Kazakhs to study their history in order to become responsible citizens; in my opinion the need for addressing responsibilities of scientists in a world still more prone to confrontation than dialogue is essential too.

We can simply not effort to continue to produce weapons of mass destruction!

Scientists working to create weaponry are responsible for their findings; especially if it leads – beside millions of death or ill people! - to ‘Ecocide’.

“Ecocide is the extensive damage to, destruction of or loss of ecosystem(s) of a given territory, whether by human agency or by other causes, to such an extent that peaceful enjoyment by the inhabitants of that territory has been or will be severely diminished.”<sup>14</sup>

In the post Second World War world, the hunt for more sophisticated weaponry continued and the sacred soil of Kazakhstan became a test ground of the nuclear arms race. Between 1949 and 1989 more than 456 nuclear bomb explosions (340 underground and 116 above ground) took place at the Semipalatinsk Test Site (STS), about 160 kilometers away from Semipalatinsk, today’s Semey.

### **Global fall-out**

Due to the alarming rise of contamination in the atmosphere, and findings of radioactive deposits in wheat and milk, the Partial Test-Ban-Treaty came into force in 1963.

The treaty prohibited atmospheric testing yet did allow underground explosions. Often radioactivity could find its way out of test tunnels and the contamination

---

<sup>13</sup> Together with Lise Meitner.

<sup>14</sup> <http://eradicatingecocide.com/overview/what-is-ecocide/>.

of the environment continued, and this fails to consider the problem of the remaining contaminated materials after tests resumed at STS.<sup>15</sup>

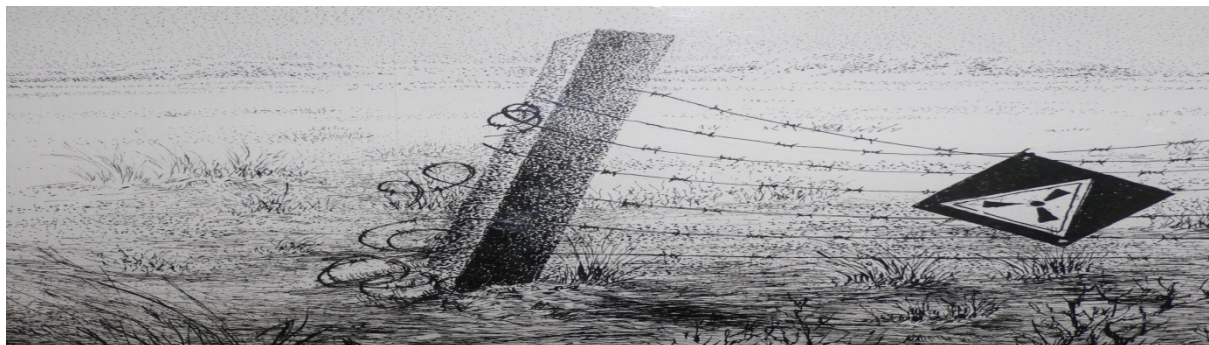


Photo taken at the conference for a nuclear weapon free world. Astana 2011.

“Each person on Earth carries a small amount of radio strontium in their bones, and radioactive iodine in the thyroid, that would not be there but for the testing of nuclear weapons.”<sup>16</sup>

Nuclear test sites were spread all over the planet, constructed by ‘colonial masters’, exercising racism by degrading innocent people to guinea-pigs: - from Algeria and Australia over the Marshall Islands and Nevada to Novaya Zemlya and Semipalatinsk.

French philosopher Simone Weil described the reckless abuse of indigenous people as the ultimate deprivation of respect and was convinced that Bolshevism was incompatible with the anthropological need for participation.<sup>17</sup>

### **Why to conduct nuclear tests?**

What we have, we want to use. Better weapons for better kill. How does one measure the heinous effects of nuclear weapons? Through testing. Due to the fact that they are constructed to eliminate on a large scale people and material, one measures the effects on humans, animals and the habitat.

<sup>15</sup> [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/23327/plutonium\\_mountain.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/23327/plutonium_mountain.html).

<sup>16</sup> Nuclear Almanac. Confronting the atom in war and peace. 1984, p. 417.

<sup>17</sup> Simone Veil. Political writings: Suppression and freedom.



Wall painting by Georgy Kozlitin (1977) at the Dostoyevsky museum in Semey. Photo: Ursula Gelis, 2012.

“The Soviet military and scientific personnel conducting the tests knew that the rain and wind would make the local population more susceptible to radioactive fallout. But at the time, authorities disregarded the consequences for the sake of military and political goals.”<sup>18</sup>

I vividly remember the discussions in the 1970/80<sup>th</sup> about the ‘neutron bomb’, also called ‘enhanced radiation weapon’. This killer bomb would destroy soldiers and civilians but not much of the surroundings. Fatal to life but not destructive to buildings!<sup>19</sup> ‘When will humans become humans’?<sup>20</sup> Will more culture and education relief us from de-humanizing each other?<sup>21</sup> A thought also Suleimenov might reflect upon?

### **A modern Hecuba**

Let us listen to Mrs. Makin Rahimova (born in 1938) from the village Ak-Bulak near the former test site. Her life resembles the fate of Hecuba, the queen of Troy.

<sup>18</sup> Toghzan Kassenova. <http://thebulletin.org/lasting-toll-semipalatinsk-nuclear-testing>.

<sup>19</sup> See: Nuclear Almanac. Confronting the atom in war and peace. 1984, p. 185.

<sup>20</sup> Heiner Müller. ‘Zement’ (1972).

<sup>21</sup> In 1957, the military built the Anti-Brucellosis Dispensary No. 4, purportedly to monitor tuberculosis infections in the area [around the STS]. In reality, though, the facility was built to secretly observe the impacts of radiation exposure from nuclear testing on local people. Today, bitterly, locals note that they were nothing more than “guinea pigs” in a grandiose experiment. <http://thebulletin.org/lasting-toll-semipalatinsk-nuclear-testing>.

Hecuba saw the death of her husband and most of her children, as well as the sacking of her home.<sup>22</sup> Greek militarism and brutal war had taken all her beloved from her and she was crying for revenge. Makin Rahimova is not looking for revenge.

1956 was a decisive year in her life. Married and pregnant, she recalls a nuclear test. Soviet soldiers were stationed near Ak-Bulak and transported the villagers to a mountain massif before testing. A nuclear bomb exploded and the Kazakh peasants could see the mushroom cloud.

The simple explanation given by the soldiers was that the temporary removal from the village was a precaution. Due to potential earth cracks, remaining in their houses would be too dangerous. - Not a word about the danger of nuclear fall-out, environmental contamination and radioactive clouds!

Cancer became the ruler in the villages at the edge of the test site and in the region as a whole.



Makin Rahimova. Ak-Bulak, September 2012. Photo: UG

Makin was in her forties when she buried her husband who died of brain cancer. From that time on she had to bring up her eleven children alone. Three years ago she lost her oldest son who died from heart problems. Her other children moved to Semey. She is alone in Ak-Bulak, taking care of grandchildren. All her ten siblings are dead.

Needless to say, she herself suffers from health problems and has to travel to Semey for proper treatment. Due to the fact that all her children moved to the city, she wants to join them. In the village, schools and medical services are not sufficient. She is looking for some government help to support a small apartment

<sup>22</sup> [http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/trjans/g/bl\\_hecuba.htm](http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/trjans/g/bl_hecuba.htm).



in the city.

Makin sees a direct link between poverty and nuclear testing.

While nuclear testing was carried out, food shortage in the villages was normal.

With environmental degradation and so many people ill or struggling with other long-term effects of testing, as psychological problems, poverty is a frequent guest in local homes.

### **Education is Key**

Makin wants a brighter future. She often speaks to her grandchildren about the bomb explosions. “It is very important that people get as much information as possible about the deadly effects of nuclear weapons. We all have to learn more about radiation dangers.” Education is important to fight for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Women should have the opportunity to attend workshops about long-term radiation effects. Meeting places for exchange of experiences are crucial, especially for rural women. Medical and psychological help are preconditions for a decent life.

A new museum to honor nuclear testing victims will be established in Semey.<sup>23</sup> The history of the test site and its humanitarian consequences will be documented and testimonies of people suffering from nuclear testing certainly figure high on the agenda of the museum. Makin would like to see her interview made available for educational purposes.

### **The future in our hands**

To maintain nuclear weapons and the related industry means staying prepared for nuclear war. After gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan renounced the 4<sup>th</sup> biggest arsenal of nuclear weapons in the world which it inherited from the Soviet Union. Since then the country is one of the strongest advocate for a nuclear weapon free world.

---

<sup>23</sup> [www.inform.kz/eng/article/2489634](http://www.inform.kz/eng/article/2489634).

In 2006, in Semipalatinsk, the Central Asia nuclear weapon free zone was established. Kazakhstan made it convincingly clear that nuclear weapons will never guarantee national security.

Needless to say, the country supports the creation of more nuclear weapon free zones in the world, among them in the Middle East.

The 29<sup>th</sup> of August, the day of the first explosion at the Soviet test site in 1949, marks today the date of the closure. Since 2009 this day is also the international day against nuclear testing, a Kazakh initiative.

*This article is dedicated to my deceased friend Omirzhan Zhakupov who took me to villages around the former test site and informed me about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear explosions.*

*He not only wrote a book about the affected families in the region (published 2010) but also honored local poet Tolegen Ismailov, who died at the young age of 40 in 2012. Omirzhan collected his writings and made his work known.*

‘Harm nobody and help everybody as good as you can’ (Schopenhauer).

Oslo, May 2014

Useful readings:

- A. embkazjp.org/cover\_book\_cover.pdf.
- B. <http://www.theatomproject.org/en/about/what-is-the-atom-project/>.
- C. Akanov, S. Yamashita, S. Merimanov, A. Indershyiev, A. Musakhanova, *Nuclear Explosions and Public Health Development* (Nagasaki-Almaty, 2008), p. 113. [In Russian]. <http://thebulletin.org/lasting-toll-semipalatinsk-nuclear-testing>.
- D. Masami Fukuda. Radioactive and Other Hazardous Contamination in Arctic Siberia. Copyright (c) 1998 by the Slavic Research Center. <http://srch.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/sympo/97summer/fukuda.html>.
- E. [http://www.breakingthenuclearchain.org/documents/129875579/130263921/No\\_vayaZemlya.pdf](http://www.breakingthenuclearchain.org/documents/129875579/130263921/No_vayaZemlya.pdf).
- F. Jared Diamond. The World until Yesterday. What can we learn from traditional societies? 2012/13.