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Unraveling the Secrets of the Past: Contested versions of Nuclear Testing in the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan

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Abstract

The people of Kazakhstan have been grappling with the legacy of nuclear testing for over a decade. The different versions of the past are hotly contested when it comes to issues of the Soviet government's culpability. Did the government take proper precautions to limit radiation dose exposures, or did it knowingly expose its own citizens to harmful levels of radiation? If the tests exposed people to dangerous levels, did the government do this intentionally in order to test the effects of radiation on human health? And did it do so covertly in a way that limited people's knowledge of nuclear testing and the risk of radiation?

This paper addresses these questions from three different perspectives. First, it describes the perspective of nuclear scientists who designed and executed these nuclear tests in Kazakhstan. In recent publications and personal interviews, these scientists have defended their actions in the name of national security and claimed that the certain precautions accompanied the tests to limit impacts to the health and environment. Second, it presents the arguments made by medical researchers in Kazakhstan who stress the harmful health impacts of nuclear testing. Finally, it describes the perspective of Kazakh and Russian villagers who lived near the test site. Although the individual stories vary, most villagers do not feel that the government adequately protected them, and many believe that it used them as guinea pigs.