

## Book Review

**Akerke Sultanova**

***Living in a Nuclear Test Site: The Present of Kazakhstan's Semipalatinsk*  
Kadensha Publishing House, Tokyo: July 2018, 224 pages.**

(アケルケ・スルタノヴァ 『核実験地に住む—カザフスタン・セミパラチンスクの現在』 花伝社、2018年)

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For many years the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site, located on the territory of Kazakhstan, was one of the primary assets of the nuclear program of the Soviet Union. The test site became the place where the Soviet Union first tested its atomic bomb on 29 August 1949 and thermonuclear detonation on 12 August 1953. The first device, RDS-1, was similar to the “Fat Man” bomb dropped on Nagasaki, and was also based on plutonium. From 1949 until the test site was closed in 1991, 456 nuclear tests, including 340 underground and 116 atmospheric tests, were carried out at the test site facilities, which harmed more than 1.5 million people. The combined power of all devices exploded at the test site was 2.5 thousand times higher than the power of the bomb dropped in 1945 on Hiroshima.

The first published book for Akerke Sultanova, the result of extensive academic research, pursues the efforts of more than one generation of scholars, including Kazakhstan and foreign ones, in covering the sinister heritage of one of the saddest places on Earth - the Semipalatinsk test site (known locally as the Polygon).

This book, however, focuses on the human dimensions of this tragedy, namely the stories of eyewitnesses to these tests. Unfortunately, as in Japan, the number of Kazakhstan hibakusha is rapidly declining allowing less time for collecting and classifying information about the victims of the deadly nuclear race.

Speaking about the author, it is necessary to mention that she is a native of the region, where the Polygon is actually located. Her personal story, reflected in the book, unambiguously confirms the fact that she and the local people around her were in constant contact with the Polygon and its terrific explosions. Her incredible story shows that at a young age she was well aware of the moods and phobias experienced by the local inhabitants. Apparently, the conscious choice of the topic of research and this essential book was not accidental for her. She can rightly be called “Akyn.” The Kazakhs used this term for the poet-musicians who played the social role of communicators in this nomadic society.

Moreover, the author studied for many years in Japan, including in Hiroshima and

Tokyo, and also collaborated with various antinuclear movements in the two countries. It is evident that the spirit of Hiroshima and Semipalatinsk had a profound influence on the academic and professional interests of Akerke. Another noteworthy fact is that Akerke has worked in the Embassy of Japan in Kazakhstan and the Embassy of Kazakhstan in Japan, and accordingly she is well aware of the possibilities and functional limitations in the anti-nuclear policies of the two states.

The author went to significant effort to achieve a balance in the contents of the book. The present book includes extremely valuable data on the nuclear program of the former Soviet Union, nuclear testing at the Semipalatinsk test site, environmental legacies of the tests, studies of Japanese scientists at the Polygon, as well as valuable information on the specific activities of the antinuclear movements in Kazakhstan, which were carefully collected and translated by the author into Japanese. Archival maps, accurate tables, historical photographs and selected samples of sacred art deserve particular attention.

At the same time, the chief treasure of this book is the testimony of Kazakhstani hibakusha, which are indeed another, critical argument in favor of a total ban on nuclear weapons and nuclear tests. Akerke very accurately, and at the same time genuinely, conveys the personal stories, experiences and unspeakable pain of Kazakhstani hibakusha. There are a significant number of testimonies of women who lost as a result of the tragedy their closest friends and family, sometimes including their adolescent children.

Given the combined number of innocent victims of the Polygon (1.5 million people), the stories collected by Akerke during her fieldwork in Kazakhstan and exclusive interviews could have been multiplied hundreds and thousands of times. The author was able to impart a human face to the Polygon and preserve the voices of Kazakhstani hibakusha. It is evident that this book, and its powerful emotional effects, will be of intense interest to all those who are not indifferent to the legacies of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the Lucky Dragon No. 5. The book should take a prominent place in the list of recommended reading for future politicians, diplomats and representatives of international organizations, academia and NGOs.

As a whole, the book is appropriate for many academic fields, and includes a review and analysis of various publications about the Polygon, including technical volumes. This book, as the author reasonably expects, can and should undoubtedly enhance the academic community's interest in the human dimensions in describing situations similar to the Polygon's histories. At the same time, for the convenience of readers and future scholars, who probably don't speak Kazakh or Russian, I would like to heartily recommend Akerke to indicate Japanese or English transliteration for the archival documents that she would use in her next publications.