



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Kazakhs stop nuclear testing (Nevada-Semipalatinsk Antinuclear Campaign), 1989-1991

February

1989

to: August

1991

Country: Kazakhstan

Location City/State/Province: *Semipalatinsk and surrounding area*

Goals:

- (1) To abolish nuclear testing at the Nevada-Semipalatinsk testing site, and, later, across Kazakhstan.
- (2) To restore the environment destroyed by nuclear testing.
- (3) To study the health of the population effected by nuclear testing, and win compensation for those who suffer.
- (4) To be act in solidarity with other campaigns against nuclear testing across the world.
- (5) To enact the conversion of nuclear-testing facilities to serving peaceful purposes.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 030. Rude gestures › Throwing stones at the "evil" testing site
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications

- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 170. Nonviolent invasion

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 6th segment:

Notes on Methods:

Although no methods are listed here for Segment 6, this is because during that period reforms were occurring through legislative channels. It is likely that the organizations would have continued their nonviolent direct action pressure had these reforms not succeeded in closing the nuclear testing site.

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Environment

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Citizens of the area surrounding Semipalatinsk
- Kazakh environmentalists

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Poet Olzhas Suleimenov; Vladimir Yakimets, Maidan Abishev, and others, who organized the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Antinuclear Movement

Partners:

American Peace Test; Novaya Zemlya-Nevada Committee; Nevada-Semipalatinsk-Moruroa International Movement to Halt Nuclear Warfare

External allies:

International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War; Greenpeace

Involvement of social elites:

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev quietly supported the campaign

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Nevada Semipalatinsk Antinuclear Movement
- Nursultan Nazarbaev

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- American Peace Test
- Nevada-Semipalatinsk-Moruroa International Movement to Halt Nuclear Warfare
- Novaya Zemlya-Nevada Committee

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Greenpeace
- International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 5 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Government and military of the Soviet Union

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Not Known

Repressive Violence:

Soviet forces continued nuclear testing throughout the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Antinuclear Committee's activities, causing lasting harm to citizens and activists in the surrounding areas.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Though they didn't achieve some of their loftier goals (ending all nuclear activity worldwide), they succeeded in ending nuclear testing in Kazakhstan, the more concrete goal.

The organization still exists today.

The demonstrations grew from 5,000 to 50,000 people, and included many anti-nuclear allies from around the world.

Beginning on August 29, 1949, Soviet officials conducted aboveground nuclear tests at the Semipalatinsk facility in Kazakhstan. More than one million people resided in villages in the Semipalatinsk oblast. In the next oblast, Karaganda, there were two million residents. Until 1963, all tests were above ground and created large, radioactive clouds that engulfed villages in the area, resulting in skyrocketing rates of cancer and other diseases. After 1963, the tests were conducted below ground. However, on February 12 and 17, 1989, radioactive material leaked from the underground facility, towards the residents of neighboring areas, once again threatening their lives.

Attention was paid to this matter when, on February 26, 1989, Olzhas Suleimenov, a poet and candidate for the Congress of People's Deputies interrupted a reading of his poetry on national television to speak on the matter of nuclear testing at Semipalatinsk. He called on concerned citizens to come together and demonstrate their disapproval. Two days later, 5,000 Kazakhs from a wide variety of backgrounds gathered at the National Writer's Union's headquarters, and, under the leadership of Vladimir Yakimets and Maidan Abishv (among others), formed the first meeting of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Antinuclear Movement. Named in solidarity with those demonstrating against the Nevada Test Site in the United States, they hoped to draw attention to the shared destiny that nuclear capacity indicated.

By the end of the meeting, they had adopted a declaration entitled "High Time," which 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. Circulated as a petition, "High Time" received over a million signatures within days.

On August 1, 1989, the Supreme Soviet adopted a resolution, authored by Suleimenov, calling for a moratorium on all nuclear testing by the United States and Soviet Union.

The Nevada-Semipalatinsk Antinuclear Movement began holding regular rallies near the test sites, but the largest documented demonstration was on August 6, 1989, the 44th anniversary of the nuclear attack on Hiroshima. Approximately 50,000 people converged at the foot of the Karaulnaya volcano beside Semipalatinsk, and threw rocks at the test site, following the Kazakh tradition of tossing stones at evil. At the August rally, a statement was adopted that read, "Our consciousness is poisoned by the fear of the future. We are afraid of drinking water, eating food, giving birth to our children."

Demonstrations continued, and on November 17, 1989, Chair of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union, Nikolai Ryzhkov announced that there wouldn't be any nuclear testing for the rest of the year (1989). A week later, Deputy Prime Minister Igor Belousov announced that there wouldn't be any testing through January 1990.

Though not seen supporting the movement, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev was quietly supportive, hoping that they would bring about a resolution that he could usher through the legislative system. In November of 1989, the Supreme Soviet adopted a four part resolution on environmental issues, and a section of it requested that the government consider closing Semipalatinsk, and conduct more extensive studies at Novaya Zemlya, the Soviet test site in the Arctic. Though the resolution lacked the votes to pass, the antinuclear activists balked at this proposition, unwilling to pass their suffering onto another group. They formed the Novaya Zemlya-Nevada Committee with their Arctic allies, and pledged to fight until nuclear testing ended for all of the Soviet Union.

In December 1989, Suleimenov travelled to the United States, where he met with Kazakhstan's allies in the anti-nuclear movement, like American Peace Test and International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW). During his trip, the Soviet Union admitted that they had cancelled eleven out of eighteen planned nuclear tests, because of the burgeoning movement. Protests and demonstrations at Semipalatinsk continued, and, with the lack of testing there, began to focus on Novaya Zemlya. In early 1990, in an effort to placate activists, the Soviet government promised a total of 27 more tests, and the

closure of the site by 1993. This was rejected as insufficient.

The strengthened alliance between Kazakh and American antinuclear groups led to a conference co-sponsored by the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Antinuclear Movement and IPPNW in May of 1990. Nearly 300 delegates from around the world gathered to discuss antinuclear strategy, and bear witness to the sickness and despair that existed in Kazakhstan as a result of nuclear testing. The delegates were greeted by 20,000 cheering demonstrators, brandishing signs and flags.

During the summer of 1990, the miners of Kazakhstan threatened to go on strike over their list of demands during contract negotiations. Their chief demand was an end to nuclear testing at Semipalatinsk.

In September 1990, Greenpeace sailed a ship into the waters of Novaya Zemlya, where they confronted Soviet guards, and tested the radioactive contamination levels of the area. Energy continued to build, and international attention continued to heighten, as the suffering of children and families was covered the media.

Despite the international outrage, the Soviet Government was able to secretly conduct a test on October 24, 1990, at Novaya Zemlya. This was the last nuclear test to take place in the Soviet Union. In December of 1990, the Kazakhstan parliament passed a bill banning nuclear weapons testing in the republic. In August 1991, the President of Kazakhstan officially closed Semipalatinsk from nuclear testing, and opened it to activists for rehabilitation. In October 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev established a yearlong moratorium on Soviet nuclear testing, and three weeks later, Boris Yeltsin banned nuclear testing in Russia for one year, and specifically stated that Novaya Zemlya would never be used again.

By closing Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan and the Soviet Union became the first nation to close a nuclear test site, anywhere on earth.

Having eradicated nuclear testing within Kazakhstan, the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Antinuclear Movement continued to act in solidarity with other groups struggling against nuclear testing around the world, particularly in the United States. They continue that work to this day.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Nevada-Semipalatinsk campaign gained inspiration from, and shared solidarity and resources with activists protesting the Nevada Nuclear Test Site in the United States (1,2).

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Additional Notes:

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Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Hanna King, 29/11/2010

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