

Togzhan Kassenova, *Atomic Steppe: How Kazakhstan Gave Up the Bomb*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022. 384 pp.

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Nuclear policy scholarship is often mostly about disarmament and deterrence, global strategic stability and national security, arms control and verification mechanisms, geopolitics and nuclear “poker” - nuclear diplomacy driven by deterrence, non-proliferation and safeguards, etc. The topics immensely vary, however, what they all have in common is that primary subjects of the narrative and analysis are states, international organizations, non-state actors, corporations, but never people. These areas are often far-fetched, too technical or too political, too sophisticated or too overtheorized, too exclusive or too specific. For this reason, nuclear policy literature is too niche even for many scholars, not to mention folks outside of the global academic and policy communities. Such distancing from “human” world leaves nuclear policy a pariah when it comes to what people actually care about and are willing to explore and contribute to. Why is that an issue? Nuclear policy stands for numerous developments that can equally ameliorate and exacerbate lives of many, which is why interest and participation of these “many” significantly matter/count. Winning people’s hearts and minds with distant analysis of what is happening in the nuclear bastion and minds of its decision-makers might not appear as the most successful strategy. Whereas appealing to humanitarian consequences of various nuclear policy decisions may do the trick. Scaling especially nuclear weapons issues down to humane dimension would make a reader realize that behind a state-level involved security veil one can discover numerous involved individual lives, communities often damaged and left-out from a conversation. Stories that have never been told, damage that has never been adequately addressed, heroism that has never been truly praised, decisions that have always been damaging and questionably justified – all these can be found in a book of the incredible nuclear politics and weapons of mass destruction non-proliferation expert, Togzhan Kassenova.

Togzhan Kassenova, Kazakh Atomic Steppe story-teller and historian, has documented and unearthed a comprehensive, sincere and recondite nuclear history of Kazakhstan that had been for a long time overshadowed by the Soviet Union nuclear narrative. After the demise of the USSR, the former Soviet Republic, Kazakhstan, had been blessed with independence and sovereignty (not without repercussions and obstacles) and cursed (or blessed? heavily depends on your perception

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of nukes) with a fourth-largest nuclear arsenal in the world on their territory. However, the chapters of Kazakh nuclear history started long before 1991. From 1949 to 1989, 456 atmospheric and underground nuclear tests had been conducted at the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site causing irreparable, cross-generational, trans-boundary damage to communities living nearby the test site (so-called “Polygon” from Russian language). To reflect on both major chapters of Kazakh nuclear history, Kassenova splits the book into two parts: Soviet nuclear testing and Kazakh efforts to handle nuclear legacy. The peculiar feature across the fabric of her narration is always keeping people in spotlight – survivors, activists, scientists, soldiers, medics, politicians, presidents. Atomic Steppe is not solely a land where testing program was carried out but most importantly a community, a nuclear community that has united many lives and generations.

The first part is expectedly the most daunting since it sets a reader off to an unpleasant journey depicting damaged Kazakh lives, “who paid the price for Soviet nuclear might”, and contaminated Kazakh precious and even sacred land – the Steppe, which “Soviet officials referred to as almost uninhabited” and where “in fact, only 120 km (75 miles) away lay the city of Semipalatinsk, home to 120,000 residents at the time” (13). Soviet nuclear testing program contaminated water, food, animals, people, having led to abnormal development among population of such health issues as various types of cancer, stillbirths, miscarriages, birth defects like anencephaly, cleft palate, cleft lip, club foot, polydactyly, etc. Many suffered and keep suffering from various mental issues that have led to countless suicides in the nearby communities: “Rumor has it that in the villages neighboring the Polygon... the youth succumb to suicide. Would you believe it? Teenagers of fifteen or sixteen years are giving up on life...The youth of yesterday, who looked after cattle and chased balls, suddenly go into the corner of the barn in the middle of the night and hang themselves” (63). Notably, the Polygon closed in 1991, however radioactive echo is still haunting those who have been born in affected families even significantly later. These anomalies keep appearing in the second, third generations of the descendants of the Semipalatinsk region.

One of the greatest contributions of Togzhan’s work is a gift of voice that she granted to many injured people through pages of her book. When preparing her research, she travelled to the affected regions in Kazakhstan to talk to survivors of nuclear testing and see for herself the eternal nuclear shadow left in her homeland. It is especially terrifying to read testimonies of those who were kept in dark and even used for research and “noble” scientific cause as rabbits or rats in the labs to evaluate the effect of radiation exposure on a human body: “They examined us for a month and a half. They drew blood, gastric juice, urine. When they let us go, they gave us some certificates and told us that everything was done for the sake of the people and science” (39).

Another revelation of Kassenova’s book was the story behind vocal Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement’s role in halting nuclear testing program for good - “it

[antinuclear movement] restored the fabric of Kazakh national identity by uniting all the ethnicities of Kazakhstan around the same cause to stand up to Moscow...motivated by a single, noble cause – the cessation of nuclear testing” (79). To me as a person coming from a similar political and geographical background, it was startling to learn that civil society’s push was important on the way to achieving nuclear-testing-free Kazakhstan which is generally not a common thing considering totalitarian political nature of the USSR.

The second part of the book discovers the intricate political “nuclear poker” between Kazakhstan, Russia and the US following the dissolution of the Soviet Union when Kazakhstan along other former Soviet Republics attempted to achieve the best possible “exit” trade-off. Being left with nuclear weapons on its territory, Kazakh leaders had an advantage and, at the same time, a “ticking bomb” on its land, however, negotiating a just deal was vital not only for Kazakh leaders but also for Kazakh people taking into account all the damage caused due to 40 years of nuclear testing. Kassenova writes a nuanced chronicle reflecting on Kazakhs’ efforts to retain the middle-ground position between Russia and the US; to solve the major conundrum – to keep or not to keep nuclear weapons, and if to rid of poisonous arsenal, then what the decent price would be; to secure its sovereignty and territorial integrity; and to establish the right image of newly emerged independent country in the international arena. Surprisingly, again, her narrative is based on faces, political but personal bonds between major “nuclear poker” players, which is why this history reads more as fiction literature rather than puzzled historical overview of troubled post-Soviet 90-s.

The main ingredient of this excellently researched and explicitly well-written book is love. Not only is Togzhan Kassenova Kazakh herself, but she also comes from a family that had a say in managing post-Soviet Atomic Steppe. Her father, Oumirsek Kassenov, was the head of the Kazakhstan’s first think tank, the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, and he was responsible for assisting in developing Kazakh nuclear policy decisions in the 1990s. Like father like daughter. Nuclear has become a family business for Kassenova, and this family-like loving touch to her work makes Atomic Stepp captivating, sincere, emotional alongside with compelling, informative, sometimes shocking, and, indeed, thought-provoking. Atomic Steppe will be a good source for those from non-proliferation, disarmament and arms control fields to uncover the untold history of a not-long-ago “temporary nuclear power”. Atomic Steppe would serve as a decent start for researchers interested in nuclear justice as a unique case-study highlighting the way Kazakhs’ sufferings have been addressed (or have not). Atomic Steppe may be of interest for those who struggle with pairing first-class archival research with real-life stories collected from witnesses and victims. Finally, this book would make anyone closer to understanding why nuclear world is not far-fetched and overtheorized, because Atomic Stepp is not only about politics or even a nuclear bomb, it is, most importantly, about people.