

Ursula Gelis, 'No-to-nuclear-weapons', Norway

February 1, 2012

### No time for irresponsibility: learning from Kazakh women



The head of the election committee welcomes the new young voter.  
*Semey/Eastern Kazakhstan, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2012. Photo: Ursula Gelis (UG).*

What do we in the West actually know about tyrannized nationalities of the former Soviet empire? Regimes based on totalitarianism tend to oppress people and outsiders have no clue to what is really going on behind an 'iron curtain'.

Living in the 1980s in West Berlin I recall visits to the Eastern part of the city on a day visa. A gray, scary, unfamiliar world took shape in front of my eyes; colorless streets, an appalling smell from coal fires and people running with faces turned downwards on sadness-emanating sidewalks.

No one dared talk with me and I was too shy to approach a soul. A silent city filled with desperation and distrust – this is my memory of East Berlin under Communist rule: the absence of individualism and pluralism.

Today I am travelling in Eastern Kazakhstan talking to strong women living in a young state, 20 years past Soviet domination. Soviet ideology was about vivid participation of women in society and at the workplace, although the reality was 'double shifts' -- at work, then home. However leading positions were almost always reserved for men (See: *Russian women in politics and society. Ed. by W. Rule/N. C. Nooman. 1996, p. 29*).

Nonetheless, women kept their self-confidence and participatory spirit, and these are now decisive in strengthening the Kazakh identity. Recovering long-existing traditions is part of the endeavor.

In January 2012 during the parliamentary elections (the Majilis) public health issues were at the top of party candidates' agendas. Women emphasized the needs for better health care services in the region.

Due to their proximity to the former Soviet atomic bomb tests site in Semey (in Russian: Semipalatinsk), many Kazakhs are suffering from cancer and other effects of exposure to radiation.

The civilian death toll of twentieth century wars is tremendous and many innocent people were caught up and injured in the nuclear arms race. Their suffering did not end along with the cold war.

Gulnar Zhigitbayeva, a candidate of the Nur Otan (light of the fartherland) party welcomes the competition with other parties as crucial for a democracy. She talked with me about programs to implement international human rights laws. She stressed the importance of educational TV programs and was enthusiastic about a young generation keen to learn and absorb new ideas.

The thoughtful commentary of another candidate invited the Kazakh people to really live up to their independence by strengthening a Kazakh way of thinking. People should not stay mentally bound by Soviet cultural patterns, nor blindly follow US American concepts.

As to the question about what was good in Soviet times, Mrs. Zhigitbayeva mentions free education, sufficient medical services and the absence of unemployment. The independent state is now addressing those problems. She is happy about the improvement of small businesses in rural areas. Microcredits and gender balance are crucial to the development of disadvantaged citizens. Equal rights of women are the yardstick of social activities and progress.

While travelling to villages around the former test site, I could see what it meant to have been exposed to nuclear fall-out. From 1949 to 1989, the former Soviet military tested more than 450 nuclear weapons in Eastern Kazakhstan, until 1963 above ground.

'Colonialism at its best' because the cold warriors put the lives of innocent villagers at risk without hesitation. Local army personnel was also contaminated, as at the US American test site in Nevada and elsewhere. Many are ill, others died very young. Not to mention the fate of many unborn and children with handicaps.



*'The dead son'. Abraly village, October 2011. Photo: UG.*

I was invited into several homes. There were pictures on the walls of deceased family members, curious hosts looking at me while I drink the traditional kumis, fermented mare's milk which easily makes you drunk if you drink a whole cup. I listened to the stories of people who had to live with atomic bombs for decades.

When a bomb test was about to happen, the school kids went to the courtyard and could witness "the light of another sun". When the explosion was over, classes resumed. The earth was shaking, an eruption like an earthquake, that people could feel up to hundreds of kilometers away. Nobody knew what to do. The deadly consequences of exposure to radiation were not disclosed to them.

The command center was a place named after the scientist Kurshatov, at the north-eastern part of the huge testing area, called the polygon. Today the Kurshatov museum documents the effects of nuclear weapon explosions. There is, for instance, an 'icon' of technical barbarism and abuse: the apparatus with the 'PUSH' button which released the bombs.

Franz Kafka's "In the penal colony" comes to mind: where the torture instrument, the harrow, destroys the body and soul of the innocent while the tormenter is around. The anonymous 'push' button (you do not see the victim) reached many, near and far, with the infliction "beneficial" for scientific research. I saw for myself original Soviet documents where the date of the test and the fall-out direction were written down – with a simple colored pen.



*Museum at Kurshatov. 'Apparatus'. October 2011. Photo: UG.*

Since mankind has been around, a lot of energy has been invested in directing weapons against 'the other'. Will this pattern really remain forever? As long as security is based on aggressive politics and offensive weapons the spiral of violence will not cease. Nuclear weapons apparently do not distinguish between friend and foe and radiation goes with the wind anywhere.

If you travel through the vast Kazakh steppe you can feel the groaning of the lands about the amount of destructiveness inflicted.

Official Kazakhstan is calling for a spiritual culture which breaks the heinous circle. "The human family is one. We are all sustained by the same immeasurable power of life – regardless of nationality, race, religion, gender, or ethnicity. This power gives us the qualities of love and compassion and the capacity to know ourselves, nurture and protect the natural world, express beauty, pursue justice, and establish institutions to honor this sacred power living in every person". See: [http://www.astanaforum.kz/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=181:vision-statement-world-forum-of-spiritual-culture-astana-kazakhstan-october-18-2011&catid=32:main](http://www.astanaforum.kz/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=181:vision-statement-world-forum-of-spiritual-culture-astana-kazakhstan-october-18-2011&catid=32:main).

To see women tackling the past makes me silent in admiration. For instance Gulmire Z., a 46 year old teacher who returned to her village in Tanat, another village near the former testing ground. For 16 years she has been the director of the school there.

She feels the effects of long-term exposure to low-radiation in her bones. She underwent several operations and the connection between her illness and the nuclear bomb explosions has been officially recognized.

The United Nations Development Program and microcredit projects make conditions more bearable in the village, and Gulmire introduced me to the local production of warm winter clothes. She is a proud and ambitious woman who is a symbol for Tanat. She could have chosen a more convenient city life, but decided to cope with the daily challenges of village life.

Other women are working to establish a meeting place in Semey where all the difficulties related to radiation illnesses could be addressed: a safe harbor for women with the guarantee that open talks remain secure, a space to go for helpful information.

Women from all generations are united in this effort to work for a future in dignity, and thanks to the younger women who speak at least three languages, the country is and will even more be a crucial partner in the struggle for a world free of nuclear weapons and for human justice.

In a way the words of the German writer Anna Seghers reveal the universal meaning: that people have an inner center they must rely on and not subjugate to an oppressive 'Zeitgeist', but cope with their time in a constructive way.

There is much to learn from the brave women of Kazakhstan.