Nuclear Weapons Testing in Kazakhstan: The Shaping of Collective Memory and National Identity

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Abstract

This study investigates how the history of nuclear weapons testing at the Semipalatinsk test site in Kazakhstan is addressed in nation-building efforts, examining the alignment and disparities between state narratives and public perceptions. Employing a multimodal critical discourse analysis of the state-sponsored TV series “Polygon” and a thematic content analysis of a group discussion with young adults from the affected region, the research highlights that both the state and the people view the nuclear testing as a national tragedy. While the state narrative emphasizes the leadership of Nursultan Nazarbayev and downplays political activism, public perception also acknowledges other influential figures and reveals a complex interplay between national and post-Soviet identities. The thesis underscores the intricate dynamics between the state-led narratives and individual interpretations in the formation of national identity and collective memory in Kazakhstan.

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1. Introduction

In August 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, instantly killing almost 120,000 people, leaving some with injuries and later affecting many more with radiation poisoning. These bombings prompted the Soviet Union to hasten the development of its nuclear weapons. Lavrentii Beria, Stalin's chief associate, personally supervised the Soviet Nuclear program, choosing the Semipalatinsk region (now called Semey) located in the East of Kazakhstan as a testing venue. The test site, spanning over 18,500 km² and equivalent in size to modern-day Belgium, would later be recognized as the Polygon (Kassenova, 2022, p.13) (See Appendix 1). The term "Polygon" is of Soviet origin and refers to an area designated for testing military weapons and operations. From 1949 until 1989, the Semipalatinsk Polygon held over 450 nuclear tests with a total yield of 17.7 megatons, which equals to the destructive power of a thousand Hiroshima bombs (Kassenova, 2022, p.28).

The forty-year nuclear weapons testing has resulted in devastating consequences for human health and the environment. Radioactive fallout contaminated soil, water, and air, leading to the increased rates of cancer and other illnesses among the local population across generations (Kasseniva, 2022, p.58). In response to the dire consequences of nuclear testing, the Nevada-Semipalatinsk international anti-nuclear movement emerged in February 1989. This movement unified the nation, raised global awareness, and contributed to the closure of the Semipalatinsk test site. Today, the Semipalatinsk test site symbolizes the nation’s tumultuous history under Soviet rule and advocacy for a world without nuclear weapons.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, independent Kazakhstan was left with the Soviet nuclear arsenal, becoming the fourth-largest nuclear power in the world. Such a legacy caused international security concerns, pressuring the first president, Nursultan

Nazarbayev, to decide what to do with the nuclear weapons. Through numerous negotiations with the United States and Russia, the Kazakh government opted to renounce its nuclear weapons and embrace a policy of nuclear disarmament (Kassenova, 2022, p.125). On 14th of February 1994, Kazakhstan ratified the Non-Proliferation Treaty, becoming an active promoter of peace and the world free from nuclear weapons. Later, the renouncing story would be recognized as the peak momentum of Nazarbayev's political career and used in constructing narratives around his persona and the nation.

The scholarship on nation-building in Central Asia mostly focuses on a top-down approach to nation-building, meaning that elites construct the idea and sense of nationhood among people (Polese & Horák, 2015; Laruelle, 2015; Bohr, 1998; Kolstø, 1998). This focus is mainly explained by the region's authoritarian and closed nature. Here, national narratives are constructed around a central leader, often cementing their authority, and glorifying their actions (Fauve, 2019; Isaacs & Polese, 2015; Polese & Horák, 2015). This tight control over the narratives serves as a means to maintain power, suppress opposition, and perpetuate a sense of unity and loyalty within the population. However, little is known about how people receive, interpret, and respond to such nation-building efforts, even though their agency is crucial in understanding the construction of a nation (Polese, 2011; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). Therefore, in this research, I want to analyze the extent to which nation-building efforts initiated by the state are reflected in – and perceived by – ordinary people.

Specifically, I aim to understand the role of the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing site in Kazakhstan's nation-building. I employ theoretical frameworks of nation-building studies, collective memory, and nuclear politics, while also considering historical background of the Soviet Nuclear program and the socio-political context of Kazakhstan in 1980s. My research questions are *How is nuclear weapon testing addressed in nation-building processes in Kazakhstan, and whether disparities exist between the state's interpretation and people's*

perceptions of these events? If the disparities exist, what are they? To answer these questions, I divided this research into two parts. The first part is an analysis of a state-sponsored TV series about the closure of the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons test site, which helps to understand the state's narratives. The second part involves a group discussion, which reveals people's perceptions of the nuclear events.

I am using a non-conventional approach to nation-building in Central Asia, examining it from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives. This approach contributes to the existing scholarship by demonstrating how state and people narratives can diverge and converge, offering insights into the dynamic processes of nation-building. Moreover, while the previous research mainly focuses on the environmental and health impacts of the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing, this study delves into its socio-political implications.

This paper consists of seven chapters. In Chapter 2, I address the historical background of the Soviet Nuclear program and the Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement. Chapters 3 and 4 provide theoretical and methodological frameworks of the research, respectively. Chapter 5 provides the analysis of the TV-series and the group discussion, while in chapter 6, I discuss the findings of chapter 5. The final chapter concludes the research, describing its limitations and prospects for further development.

2. Historical Background

2.1. The Soviet Nuclear Program

"It worked," calmly and simply declared Igor Kurchatov, a leader of the scientific group that worked on the detonation of the first ever Soviet nuclear bomb, at 6:00 am, on 29th of August 1949 (Kassenova, 2022, p.25). In the ground zero, together with Kurchatov, Lavrentii Beria, Stalin's chief associate, was waiting for the moment of detonation with the top military and scientific personnel. One of the people who was a part of the nuclear project is Andrei Sakharov, a Soviet physicist, and the Nobel Peace Prize laureate. In his *Memoirs* (1990), he addresses classified information on the Soviet Nuclear program, showing its inside laboratory. He writes that they called the weapon "device" because they were not allowed to say its actual name (p.108). Sakharov shares that people followed the logic "the less you know, the better off you'll be" as they were afraid of the authority (p.108). He also points out that everybody knew that in the case of failure of the project, they could be shot or imprisoned. Sakharov's narrative illustrates the secrecy and strict control that characterized the Soviet Nuclear program.

The nuclear project was under strict secrecy, the local population and even some military workers did not know about the nuclear weapons test as the words "atom," "Polygon" and "Semipalatinsk" were forbidden from use. Moreover, workers coming to the Polygon did not know its exact location as the route was classified (Kassenova, 2022, p.23). Every individual's background was carefully checked to eliminate any potential connections with foreign agents as the Soviet authority did not want the information to be leaked. Workers had to live in the Polygon without any connection with their families for years. Although not all people working in the test site knew what they are doing, they all had the idea that they were part of the major state project (Kassenova, 2022, p.23). Sakharov (1990) mentions the feeling of fulfillment scientists had after detonation of the first bomb, some even said that "The Soviet

Union became the second nuclear power," demonstrating desperate desire of the Soviets to restore the power balance with the United States (Sakharov, 1990, p.115). Since the first bomb, which was called RDS-1 that stands for "Russia does it on its own" [Россия делает сама], there were over 450 RDS air and underground atomic bombs in the period between 1949 and 1989. The naming of the bomb illustrates the influence Russia had over the other Soviet states and points out to the core-periphery relations that Russia and Kazakhstan had. Later in this work, I would discuss Kazakhstan's geopolitics influenced by its Russian and Chinese neighbors as one of the factors that shape its nation-building practices. It can be said that the narratives around the Soviet Nuclear program in independent Kazakhstan is constructed with caution because of the state's close relations with Russia.

Togzhan Kassenova, a Kazakh scholar from the Semey region, wrote a book, *Atomic Steppe: How Kazakhstan Gave Up the Bomb* (2022) that reveals the story behind Kazakhstan's decision to renounce its nuclear arsenal after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Through the analysis of archival documents, memoirs, and interviews, Kassenova shares insights about the Soviet Nuclear program, and most importantly, about the life of the local population in relation to the history of nuclear weapons testing. She pays attention to the fate of the people living around the test site. Although the Soviet Union described the area of the Semipalatinsk test site as almost uninhabited, in fact, there were over 120 000 people living in the city of Semipalatinsk just 120 km far from the site, and there were many rural settlements with thousands of people around 80 km radius of the site (Kassenova, 2022, p.13). People were not informed about the nuclear weapons testing, but they encountered military presence, mushroom clouds, and loud explosions, leading them to realize that the Polygon was situated on their land.

David Holloway, in his book*, Stalin and the Bomb* (1994) writes that as the United States did not report on the effects of radiation, the Soviet scientists were curious about "the destructive power of the bomb," therefore, having open animal cages to observe initial nuclear

poisoning (p.214). Sakharov (1990) mentions that he and some of his colleagues reported that thousands of people should have been evacuated but the leadership decided to choose an alternative to evacuation. He writes that he remembers his colleague Zeldovich's words to comfort him, "Don't worry, everything will be fine. The Kazakh kids will survive. It will all turn out okay" (p.173). However, Sakharov admits that the evacuation was indeed necessary, and that the radioactive fallout contaminated the nearest rural settlement, Kara-aul (p.173). One of the people who lived in the near villages told that "The villagers believed that the new weapon would not allow the Americans to attack the Soviet Union, no one wanted a new war" (Kassenova, 2022, p.123). Here, it is seen that the Soviet propaganda worked successfully to convince people in the need for new weapons and combat "the Americans." However, later, the local people experienced health issues, soil problems, and their livestock became sick, which weakened their belief in the Semipalatinsk Polygon. By 1989, they started to demand its closer and support the Nevada-Semipalatinsk anti-nuclear movement.

Although the books that I have mentioned reveal essential details on Kazakhstan's history of nuclear weapons testing, the full picture of the Semipalatinsk testing site remains unclear. This is because of the classified documentation and Russia's potential to manipulate the data. Moreover, the stories behind the Semipalatinsk test site are still contested, for example, it is not clear whether the Soviet government did sufficient work to limit radiation or whether it harmed its citizens intentionally. Stawkowski (2022), in his review of Kassenova's book, has the same concern regarding materials from the Soviet Union. However, he also points out Kassenova's narrative being aligned with the state's official interpretation of the nuclear/post-nuclear story. Yet, there is nothing much can be said about "true story" as the past is often interpreted based on the present time's context.

2.2. Nevada-Semipalatinsk

On February 25 in 1989, Olzhas Suleimanov, a deputy of the USSR Supreme Soviet (the Soviet legislative body) gave a speech on national television during his reelection campaign. In his speech, he went off script and addressed the Semipalatinsk test site, sharing information about leaked gases after the underground detonations (Kassenova, 2022, p.77). He demanded Moscow to close the testing, and with other three other Kazakh elected representatives signed the statement to the USSR Supreme Soviet as follows:

> "We, the people of Kazakhstan, more than anyone in the world, have the right to express our concern and demand that production and testing of nuclear weapons stop. For the health of today's and future generations, for life on Earth, expressing the will of multiethnic Kazakhstan, we demand the shutdown of nuclear testing sites in our republic" (Kassenova, 2022, p.77).

In his speech, Suleimanov called people to assembly at the Writer's House in Almaty city. On February 28 in 1989, thousands of people gathered around the House to demand the closure of the Semipalatinsk test site (Kasseonva, 2022, p.78). While local people of the Semipalatinsk region shared their painful stories, Suleimanov proposed to create an anti-nuclear movement. This was "the birth of the most powerful public movement in the history of Kazakhstan and the world's largest movement against nuclear tests" (Kassenova, 2022, p.78). The movement was called Nevada-Semipalatinsk to join efforts with people from Nevada who were combating the Nevada Test site in the United States (See Appendix 2).

The Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement played a crucial role in closure of the testing site and providing humanitarian aid to the victims of the Polygon. It also showed people's frustration with the Moscow rule. Rozsa (2020) argues that the success of the movement both in Kazakhstan and the US can be explained with the model of trans-indigenous anti-nuclear

solidarity. He claims that the collective struggle against nuclear colonialism of the Kazakhs and Western Shoshone created an epistemic community that shared resources and assistance effectively (p.106). For the Kazakh leadership, Nevada-Semipalatinsk was not only an ecological movement but much of a political in which they tried to push the interests to the Moscow rule. Gorbachev was well-aware of the movement, and even asked Suleimanov to accompany him in his trip to London to meet Margaret Thatcher (Kassenova, 2022, p.80). Gorbachev needed to show that he supports the anti-nuclear movement although the Soviet military was interested in keeping the Semipalatinsk testing site. Later, other political actors, Kazakhstan Communist Party and Nursultan Nazarbayev, who was the head of the Kazakh Council of Ministries at that time, together with the members of the movement wrote a telegram to Gorbachev (Kassenova, 2022, p.81). Nazarbayev also saw a chance to get popular support, going to the Semipalatinsk to reassure the local population that the Kazakh leadership is doing their best to shut down the tests (Kassenova, 2022, p.83). Nazarbayev's active involvement in the case of the Semipalatinsk nuclear testing site would later be narrated in independent Kazakhstan both through media and political speeches. Moreover, the Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement is a critical narrative for the nation-building of Kazakhstan as it mobilized people across ethnic and social groups. During this research, I tried to look at how do state and people approach the movement and whether they think of it as one of the peak momentum of national solidarity. I am also interested in Nazarbayev's figure with regard to the movement and the closure of the Polygon.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Nation and National Identity

As my thesis touches upon nation-building and national identity, a good starting point is to look at scholarship and define these concepts. By referring to Kazakhstan as "nation," I employ Antony Smith's (1991) definition which is "a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members" (p.14). Addressing the "nation" cannot be fulfilled without the conceptualization of "national identity." Smith argues that national identity extends beyond political or legal definitions, being deeply embedded in shared myths, memories, traditions, symbols, and rituals. These elements contribute to a sense of solidarity and are transmitted through generations. He claims that "national identity is fundamentally multi-dimensional," meaning that it always overlaps and intersects with other forms of identity, such as ethnicity, religion, and language (p.14).

Although the distinction between ethnic and nation is not always clear from Smith's account, I look at nation not in a primordial way nor through ethnic lens. Here, Brubacker's *Ethnicity without Borders* (2002) appears to be more applicable. Brubaker suggests distinguishing between groups and categories to obtain more comprehensive analysis. Therefore, I consider nation as a practical category because I am examining what people and institutions "*do things*" with categories (Brubaker, 2002, p.169). Moreover, viewing nation as a category allows "analysis of the organizational and discursive careers of categories—the processes through which they become institutionalized and entrenched in administrative routines and embedded in culturally powerful and symbolically resonant myths, memories and narratives" (p.169). This conceptualization is crucial to my research, as I am examining the

narratives surrounding the Semipalatinsk Polygon. These narratives are now regarded as part of the national story and collective memory, which shape national identity.

Regarding national identity, I want to specify here that I approach the term 'identity' in a social-constructivist way, meaning that identity is a social construct. This approach is driven from the work of Berger and Luckman (1966) that provides a convincing account on identity. Identity, as they claim, is an essential component of subjective reality that is placed in "a dialectic relationship with society," (p.194). What they mean is that identity comes from social processes that are determined by social structures. When talking about identity, the divide between 'individual' and 'collective' is often made. However, Jenkins (2014) argues that these two identities interwind with each other and can be understood in a similar manner because 'individual' emphasizes difference while 'collective' similarity, and that each identity emerges "out of the interplay of similarity and difference during interaction" (p.40). Discussion of identity is needed in this research as I address national identity. Additionally, I am interested in the construction of so-called 'nuclear identity' emerged after the Semipalatinsk testing site was revealed.

3.2. Nation-Building and Regime Type

Since declaring its independence in 1991, a newly formed state of Kazakhstan started the nation-building processes. The scholarship on nation-building in Central Asia primarily focuses on a top-down approach due to the region's authoritarian and closed nature, nation-building policies of which are considered to intertwine with "power concentration and regime building" (Isaacs & Polese, 2015, p.371). However, it is critical to analyze a bottom-up perspective to grasp how people perceive the nation-building efforts and adopt "national" identity (Polese, 2011; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). Although nations are inherently constructed from above, they cannot be understood without a close look at people that make the nations

"national" (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.537). Therefore, by nation-building, I apply two meanings: (1) it is the efforts put by political elites to construct and popularize the idea of nation and nationhood through various means, (2) it is also about the agency of ordinary people in perceiving those efforts and creating national meanings (Isaacs & Polese, 2015). The combination of both top-down and bottom-up approaches to nation-building was utilized to have more nuanced analysis. People, like other institutions, are active actors of nation-building that contribute to the spread (or non-spread) of the national idea and feeling. The ways they receive and understand nation-building efforts from above do matter.

Regarding the nation-building in Kazakhstan, the mission was inherently challenged by ethnic diversity issues, the language policy dilemma, and economic hardships of that time (Insebayeva, 2015). Kazakhstan was and continues to be a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. The two major ethnics groups are Kazakhs and Russians, sharing almost the same percentage of the population back in 1991. Other ethnic groups include Ukrainians, Tatars, Chechens, Koreans, German, Polish and many more due to various settlement policies and forced migration during the Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union time. Moreover, the language divide, Russian vs Kazakh-speaking population, is persistent from the very beginning of the state formation. With such ethnic and language divides that were compounded by political and economic uncertainty, Kazakhstan decided to pursue a civic approach to nation-building (Rees & Williams, 2017; Insebayeva, 2015; Isaacs & Polese, 2015; Kolstø, 1998). After the crumble of the Soviet national identity that was based on the Marxist-Leninist discourse, there was a space to "re-imagine" a new identity via alternative Kazakh and/or Kazakhstani discourses (Insebayeva, 2015, p.5). Although the approach to the nation is meant to be civic, the very assumption that Kazakhs are the major, "state-forming" ethnic group is well-presented in public discourses. Therefore, discourses around Kazakhstan's national identity are always about the competition of ethnic vs civic or so-called "Kazakh vs Kazakhstani" identities

(Aitymbetov et al., 2015). National discourses are highly contextual, in the case of modern Kazakhstan, the state's geopolitics (relations with Russia, China, and the West), religious issues and domestic politics shape those discourses.

Scholars studying nation-building in Central Asia often view regional leadership as an extension of Soviet political culture, characterized by political hierarchy, while focusing on elite-centric accounts of nation-building (Polese & Horák, 2015; Laruelle, 2015; Bohr, 1998; Kolstø, 1998). Some suggest looking at the role of personality cult in nation-building processes of the region (Fauve, 2019; Polese & Horák, 2015). By providing Turkmenistan as a case study, Polese and Horák (2015) argue that personality cult, in specific conditions and context, can serve as nation-building tool that de-ethicize the nation. They followed Billig's (1995) banal nationalism to propose that "there is a wide range of nation-building tools that, despite not being visible and beyond the control of the country elites, may be crucial to national identity formation" (p.458). For example, in terms of personality cult, the depiction of a leader in public spaces may not directly mean a nation-building effort, but it might influence the national identity of people. As such, Polese and Horák (2015) also claim that construction of national identity from both elites and people can proceed consciously and unconsciously. This resonates with Fox and Miller-Idriss's (2008) concept of everyday nationhood that encompasses the production and reproduction of nationhood in everyday life. Utilizing theories suggested by Polese and Horák and Fox and Miller-Idriss benefits this research as I am considering nation-building from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives.

Considering Nazarbayev's authoritarian rule that last for 29 years, some may contend that a personality cult defines Kazakhstan's politics. However, Fauve (2019) disputes this notion, asserting that the term "personality cult" is too ambiguous to understand Nazarbayev's leadership. Instead, Fauve argues that Nazarbayev's rule has a monarchical character, wherein power is manifested through the re-invention of traditional authority and elements of charisma.

Another scholar, Isaacs (2010) also agrees that Nazarbayev meets only some elements of charismatic legitimation because his leadership relies not solely on his personality but on general belief that he succeeded in satisfying needs of the nation. He claims that Nazarbayev's perceived charisma as "the founding father of the nation" and as the only one capable of constructing the post-Soviet Kazakhstan is a well-crafted discursive project imposed by the elites. Isaacs adds to the existing scholarly accounts of post-Soviet Central Asian political landscape that emphasize the centrality of the leader to the nation. The figure of Nazarbayev is a critical element of Kazakhstan's nation-building and should not be omitted in any research touching upon its national identity. Therefore, an integral part of this thesis involves examining the portrayal of his character within the national narrative surrounding the history of nuclear weapons testing. This analysis is important for illustrating how the nuclear history is addressed in the nation-building processes.

3.3. Collective Memory and National Narratives

All definitions and concepts of the "nation" include some references to the past, history, or tradition. As Hobsbawm (1996) writes, "nations without a past are contradictions in terms," pointing out the significance of historical narratives and collective memory in constructing national identities (p.255). In this research, I deal with the history of the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing that lasted for forty years. Although examining what happened does matter, I am interested in the narratives surrounding nuclear events that constitute collective memory. I view the state as an active agent shaping collective memory to pursue various goals. Here, I take Halbwachs' (1992) instrumental approach to collective memory where he links collective memory with the concept of social frames. He states that "no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections" (p.43). Such a constructivist approach is driven from the assumption that collective memory as

the stories of the past is constructed, shaped, and modified by the current time's context. Halbwachs states that "collective memory reconstructs its various recollections to accord with contemporary ideas and preoccupations" (p.51). This means that collective memory is bound to a group's present and transforms depending on its goals and values.

Although the term "collective memory" is often overused in public discourses, it is an important notion that incorporates the past, historical narratives, and traditions. However, Assmann (2006), by agreeing with the methodological criticism of Kansteiner (2002), argues that the term "collective memory" is too vague and overlooks different dimensions of memory, such as the generation, culture and state in which individuals live (p. 211). She further continues that these dimensions intersect with each other, and people get memories not only through living the experience but also via interact

ing, communicating, identifying, and learning (p.211). Therefore, Assmann proposes four forms of memory that are individual, social, cultural, and political. Individual and social memories are "grounded in lived experiences," while political and cultural memories are "mediated" relying on external symbols, education, and collective participation (p. 215). Assmann's develops Halbwachs' account on collective memory by expanding taken for granted perceptions of individual vs collective memory. Jan Assman (2011), on the other hand, divides collective memory into communicative and cultural forms. Communicative memory refers to everyday memory that is expressed through social interactions and involves personal experiences (p.17). Cultural memory, in contrast, refers to the institutionalized memory that is preserved through cultural symbols, rituals, texts, and monuments (p.17). Assman argues that cultural memory is vital for nation-building. This is because, by emphasizing a continuous historical narrative, cultural memory promotes the notion of a timeless national identity. This continuity is often embodied in national myths, heroes, and central events that define the nation's character. In addition to Halbwachs' constructivist approach, I find Assmann's

accounts of collective (or cultural) memory compelling because they emphasize its function in shaping national identity and shows that collective memory is subjected to external influence.

At this point, one might ask the difference between memory and history. Bell (2003) stresses the concept of collective memory arguing that it is often misused and viewed as "an alternative to historical discourse" in nationalism studies. He suggests separating memory from myths rather than combining them under the monolithic concept of collective memory (Bell, 2003, p.66). Bell introduces "the notion of a 'mythscape', the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm in which the myths of the nation are forged, transmitted, negotiated, and reconstructed constantly" (p.66). I agree with the statement that "organic" memory should keep its meaning as an act of remembrance, and that history and memory should not be used interchangeably. In fact, they can even act in opposition to each other. However, I do think that collective memory is a useful concept to examine national identity as it incorporates complex processes of remembrance and constructed national narratives. There is no memory without narratives nor there is myth that uses memory. Moreover, it should be noted that although collective memory is manipulated and crafted from the above, it can also be transformed by the ones who hold it. There is a need to emphasize that imposed national narratives from the above have an impact on collective memory. Assman (2008) argues that "memory complements history, history corrects memory," pointing out that memory and history are never fixed and influence each other (p.63).

Lowenthal (2015) says "knowing who *we were* confirms who *we are,*" illustrating that stories of the past contribute to our sense of identity (p.324). These "stories of the past" make up the notion of collective memory that becomes complicated if one asks what stories of the past are and who tells these stories. Here, the power structures play a crucial role as often authoritarian institutions as church, or regimes, provide meanings and hold "a monopoly over truth and the past." (Assman, 2008, p.64). Assman (2008) states that there is difference in how

democracies and authoritarian countries construct collective memories. She suggests that democracies have more layered cultural memory as they allow to contest existing views on the past. In contrary, authoritarian regimes usually control media and restrict freedom of speech, thereby monopolizing the past (p.64). Additionally, a state's monopoly over the past can legitimize ruling regime as well as justify certain political decisions, for instance, the case of Putin's Russia (Koposov, 2022). States and any other power-holding institutions may popularize certain aspects of the past while suppressing the others (Coakley, 2004, p.532). Therefore, I should not omit the authoritarian character of Kazakhstan during my analysis. Overall, I believe that taking a constructivist approach to collective memory and considering the instrumentality of memory politics is an effective way to understand the relationship between national identity and collective memory.

3.4. Nuclear Politics

As this research touches upon nuclear weapons, I shall consider the scholarship of nuclear politics. Although there is rich literature on the hazardous effects of radiation on the environment and human health, less attention has been given to how the nuclear disaster affects the social, cultural, and political lives of people. Much of the extensive work on nuclear topics focuses on the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, with scholars examining the formation of national identity in postwar Japan (Katayanagi & Kawano, 2023; Shipilova, 2014; Saito, 2006). For example, Saito (2006) examines how the tragedy of Hiroshima transformed from a local to a national experience by applying Jeffrey C. Alexander's (2004) cultural trauma theory. This theory assumes that trauma becomes collective because of its social attribution that is often imagined and/or believed to have an impact on collective identity. It also highlights the role of carrier groups in constructing and institutionalizing the trauma as they share experiences and are involved in commemorative practices. He illustrates that commemorative practices make

non-carrier groups feel sympathy rather than a feeling of an observer, thus turning the trauma into collective (p.359). Atomic bombings, as Dower (2015) argues, cannot be fully comprehended as same as other tragic events, and that that the unthinkable tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki under the term "nuclear" forced the trauma to be told and felt by everyone. Moreover, the novelty of being the first cities to experience the atomic bombings played an important role in the commemoration (Shipilova, 2014). The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki demonstrated not only the devastating power of nuclear weapons but also initiated a global discourse on the ethics of their use.

The scholarship on nuclear politics often deals with ethical and moral concerns of the atomic bombs and addresses them in the context of security (Smetana & Wunderlich, 2021). Ritchie (2016) argues that understanding nuclear politics requires comprehending the meanings attributed to nuclear weapons within given social and historical contexts. By analyzing the case of the Scottish National Party (SNP), he claims that nuclear disarmament was a major part of the SNP's independence campaign. Ritchie's account demonstrates that the meanings behind nuclear weapons have an impact on the construction of shared identity and that nuclear politics is not only about security but also about nation-building.

Given Putin's threats to use nuclear weapons, today's global politics of nuclear disarmament is highly contested. Ritchie (2022) asserts that after the 2017 Treat on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the worldview on nuclear weapons has divided into "hegemonic nuclearism and subaltern anti-nuclearism." He argues that these are not just two views but fundamentally different understandings of nuclear politics that potentially can influence nuclear disarmament efforts. Hegemonic nuclearism refers to the belief that nuclear weapons are vital for national security while subaltern anti-nuclearism promotes disarmament policies and calls to reevaluate security means by prioritizing humanity and environment over power. These understandings can influence the construction of national identities as states need

public support on their decisions on nuclear politics. Therefore, in this research, the meanings attached to nuclear weapons should be taken into account during my analysis of the state's narratives surrounding the nuclear weapons testing.

4. Methodological Framework

To proceed with the methodological framework, there is a need to recall the goals of the research. This research aims to understand (1) how the nuclear weapons testing history is addressed in Kazakhstan's nation-building efforts, (2) whether the disparities exist between the state's interpretation and people's perceptions of the events. Nation-building is considered inherently from a top-down approach, meaning that elites construct the idea and feeling of nationhood among people. However, the ways people receive, interpret, and respond to nation-building efforts are also crucial in constructing the nation (Polese, 2011; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). Therefore, this research analyzes the extent to which nation-building efforts initiated by the elites are reflected in – and perceived by – ordinary people. It takes both the *top-down* and *bottom-up* approaches to understand nation-building. As such, the research is divided into two parts. The first part is the analysis of a state-sponsored TV series about the closure of the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons test site, and the second part is a group discussion.

It should be noted that both the TV-series and the group discussion are in Kazakh and Russian languages. I translated the parts that I used in this research to English. Next sections describe in-detail each part of the methodology and ethical considerations.

4.1. Nation-Building from Above: TV-Series, "Polygon"

In 2020, Khabar TV broadcast a series called "Polygon," consisting of 6 episodes about the events of the 1980s that led to the closure of the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons test site. The series depicted historical figures, such as the members of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, Keshirim Boztaev and Nursultan Nazarbayev, the leader of the anti-nuclear movement, Olzhas Suleimenov, and the last leader of the Soviet Union, Michail Gorbachev (See Appendix 3 for the list of characters). Khabar Agency is a major media outlet in

Kazakhstan, whose CEO until 2023 was Dariga Nazarbayeva, the eldest daughter of Nursultan Nazarbayev. The "Polygon" was aired in prime time on the most popular TV channel in the country. As the first part of my thesis, I analyzed the "Polygon" to understand the state narratives around the Semipalatinsk test site. I chose this series because it was ordered and funded by Khabar Agency which is equivalent to the state's order.

I applied a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) approach to examine the TV-series. MCDA is an extension of the critical discourse analysis that helps to recognize meanings and ideology created through a combination of linguistic, visual, and other semiotic resources (Machin, 2013, p.348). The "Polygon" series, as described by its director Ahat Ibrayev, was created "with a mix of historical fact and artistic touch" (Tengrinews, 2020). This blend of historical reality and artistic interpretation necessitates a thorough exploration of how the series communicates ideas and attitudes regarding the story of nuclear weapons testing.

Under the MCDA approach, three different modes of communication in the "Polygon" series were analyzed. (1) Linguistic mode analysis included a close look at dialogues and narration within the series. (2) Visual mode was about artistic choices (e.g., colors, editing) in depicting scenes. (3) Auditory mode analysis incorporated the soundtracks and sound effects used in the series. Such a multimodal approach to the analysis of the series reveals insights about how different modes interact to construct meanings, shape viewers' perceptions, and impose certain ideas and attitudes.

4.2. Nation-Building from Below: Group Discussion

To examine how the nation-building efforts were perceived by people, I conducted a group discussion. Unlike single interviews, group discussions provide an opportunity to study attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of individuals within the contexts they naturally arise (Flick, 2023, p.196). I had an almost two-hour long group discussion with a friend group consisting

of five people. I specifically looked for a friend group as such groups are natural and exist in everyday life. In such a friendly setting, participants are more likely to feel comfortable and secure around each other, thus expressing what they think freely. Moreover, a real friend group has already established shared meanings and common activities (Flick, 2023, p.198). This allows me to observe everyday communication and relations when the topics around the nuclear history are introduced.

I used the topical steering form of group discussion moderation where I introduced topics and some general questions around the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons test site. I also showed a photo of the monument, "Stronger than Death" dedicated to victims of the nuclear testing in Semey city (See Appendix 4). The monument illustrates the mother covering her baby from the atomic bomb. The photo facilitated the discussion as participants shared their feelings and opinions about the monument. As a moderator, my goal was to not to disturb the participants' initiative but to create an open space in which opinions are shared and generated (Flick, 2023, p.199). The friend group is not mine and I did not know any of the participants before the group discussion.

There were three male and two female participants with the age range of 22-25 years old. They are from the villages in the East of Kazakhstan and now live in the city of Oskemen (administrative capital of the East-Kazakhstan region). As they are from the region that was affected by the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing, I aimed to understand their perception of the events. This is because they were the primary targets of state narratives about the history of nuclear testing. Although the group does not represent the general public of Kazakhstan, it gives insights into the state's efforts in constructing and shaping the perception of the nuclear history as well as national identity. All participants had bachelor's degree obtained from the local university and one of them had a master's degree. Two of them were engineers, one is a psychologist, and the other one is a teacher of English and Korean languages. As individuals

from the region affected by nuclear weapons testing, they are entitled to "ecological vacation days," which are 10-day offs from work mandated by labor law. The participants said that they follow national and independent media on social media channels, but they do not use traditional media. Although two of them saw the series, "Polygon," there was no requirement to watch it.

To analyze the group discussion, I used a thematic content analysis, where I identified and examined themes or patterns addressed in the discussion. This type of analysis provides a deep understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences, revealing valuable insights and patterns (Flick, 2023). I recorded the discussion and transcribed most parts of it so that the coding process would be easier. First, I highlighted significant segments of the text and later collated them into broader themes. I identified six themes from the discussion and named them as follows: *History of Polygon, Tragedy of the Nation, Soviet Union and Kazakhstan, Nevada-Semipalatinsk, Nursultan Nazarbayev, Nuclear Weapons Today*. Such analysis allowed analyzing key ideas and opinions discussed by participants. I analyzed their overall perception of the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing. I then assessed whether the state narratives were reflected in their perceptions of the events.

4.3. Ethical Considerations

No research is secured from biases and this research is not an exception. I am a young Kazakh scholar who was born and raised in the city of Semey located in the region that had the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing. I acknowledge that personal connection to the region can be both an enhancement of the research's credibility and a source of potential biases. Throughout the research, I reflected on the ways my personal connections could influence my analysis by discussing the topic with the faculty and my peers. As English is my third language, I may also have a language translational bias, meaning that some inaccuracies may occur during translations from one language to another.

I understand that nuclear testing can be a sensitive topic for my participants as all of them are from the affected region. I asked for the consent of the participants, and I informed them about my background and research. I explained that they could stop the discussion at any time without providing a reason. I framed the questions in an appropriate manner and provided a safe space for the discussion. I anonymized data, not pointing out who said what specifically, to ensure confidentiality of the participants.

5. Data Analysis

5.1. TV-series, “Polygon”

In this section, I provide an in-depth analysis of the TV series “Polygon” (2020) to understand the state’s interpretation

n of the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing. By applying a multimodal approach, I examined the linguistic, visual, and auditory aspects of the series. The findings from these analyses were synthesized to understand how these modes interact to create cohesive narratives around the nuclear testing. In order to organize the analysis coherently, I divided it into three parts:

- **The People and the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement:** In this part, I examine the portrayal of the local population and the Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement in the 1980s.
- **Historical Figures: Nazarbayev, Boztaev and Suleimenov:** This part focuses on the depiction of key individuals such as Nursultan Nazarbayev, Keshirim Boztaev, and Olzhas Suleimenov.
- **The Soviet Regime:** Here, I explore how the series represents the Soviet regime during the period of nuclear testing.

Before proceeding to the analysis, I shall address the commentary given by the series’ director, Ahat Ibrayev to the state-funded news outlet, *Tengri News.* During the press release of the show, he said:

> “We had about 4-5 months to create this project. In the film, I wanted to create the show with a mix of historical fact and artistic touch. I was inspired by the famous movie "House of Cards". We weren't looking for the realness, we were looking for the truth. And the truth remains the same for all time: any weapon is a consequence of people stop talking with each other. I am grateful to the *Khabar Agency* for raising the topic of the Polygon and for the courage to implement the project.”(Tengrinews, 2020).

Ibrayev's commentary demonstrates an insider perspective to the show, revealing that the purpose was to uncover a deeper truth. This truth is not about the factual accuracy of the events but rather about the realities of politics and the use of weapons. He highlights the courage of *Khabar Agency* to fund the project, acknowledging the challenges of filming real historical figures and the Soviet regime.

As Ibrayev admitted himself, the series is clearly inspired by the famous "House of Cards," a political thriller television series, in which politics has a game-like logic, where players act strategically to make their opponents lose. The message that politics is "a big game" is shown in the opening of the "Polygon." The opening scene of the series depicts the hands of a child playing a board game with little miniatures of the Soviet army and the Soviet nuclear project. At the end of the scene, there is a packaging of the board game called "Polygon: The Political Game." Throughout the 6 episodes of the "Polygon," viewers are involved in the political game between the Soviet officials and the Kazakh members of the Communist Party.

5.1.1. the People and the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement

The series begins with an introduction of a local doctor, Sabyrzhan, and his family. He is concerned about the health situation in the region as people have been diagnosed with cancer frequently. The hospital was not receiving enough medications to treat the patients, and the hospital is at its maximum capacity. There is tension between Sabyrzhan and the administration of the hospital because he is confident that the main reason for the patients' condition is the nuclear weapons testing. The scenes depicted in the hospital are colored in darker shades, and are accompanied by instrumental intense music, suggesting the tragedy of the people. Later on the show, Sabyrzhan's son would die from blood cancer. He then interrupts the local party meeting, screaming "why don't you tell the truth? our land is being poisoned and you are acting

as if everything is fine" (episode 4). After his words, Sabyrzhan was taken away by the Soviet soldiers and did not appear again in the show.

Meanwhile, there is a scene of a grieving mother surrounded by tombs in bare steppe. Such scenes emphasize personal and communal tragedies resulting from the nuclear testing. They also humanize the broader historical narrative, making the abstract consequences of nuclear testing more tangible and relatable. This approach not only engages the audience emotionally but also encourages a critical reflection on the nuclear events. A figure of a mother protecting her child was used in commemoration of the history of the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing. The "Stronger than Death" (See Appendix 4) monument depicts a mother protecting her child from a nuclear bomb. This imaginary serves as a reminder of the innocence and vulnerability affected by these catastrophic events. Based on Assmann's (2011) account, the "Stronger than Death" monument is a part of cultural memory as it constructs perception of the events among people. The monument and scenes from the series both aim to illustrate the profound impact of the nuclear tests on the local population. They highlight the enduring pain and resilience of those who lived through this dark chapter in Kazakh history.

Throughout the series, the audience sees how the community comes together to confront the Soviet army in the testing site. However, the active members of community who did cooperative actions, for example, obtained medications from the soldiers, were mothers, as they were described "the ones who have nothing to lose." Other members of the community were not as confrontational. Villagers were mostly presented as sick and passive. In Eurasian steppe culture, the concept of Mother Earth, or "Umay Ana" holds significant importance. Umay is revered as a protective mother goddess, symbolizing fertility, the nurturing of life, and the guardianship of the land. The depiction of mothers in the series can be seen as an extension of this cultural archetype. By depicting these women as central figures in the resistance, the

series draws on the cultural reverence for Mother Earth, demonstrating how the nuclear tests violated not only the physical land but also the spiritual and cultural fabric of the community.

Grounding the analysis in historical context, nothing much can be said about organized actions by mothers as portrayed in the series. Yet, the Nevada-Semipalatinsk anti-nuclear movement played a crucial role in the history of the Semipalatinsk test site. In the series, the movement was mentioned only once, during the scene, in which a news channel was describing Olzhas Suleimenov's campaign for his candidacy as a regional Communist Party representative. The protesting people were also depicted when Suleimenov visited the affected villages, however, the series does not demonstrate the intensity and fervor of the protests as they occurred in real life. In reality, the movement galvanized widespread, becoming one of the largest ecological movements of that time. People had large-scale demonstrations across the country, demanding the closure of the testing site.

In Nazarbayev's dialogue with young people, Nazarbayev says, "We didn't want second December events. We need to act strategically and be cautious." By "December events," Nazarbayev is referring to the protests that occurred in Almaty in 1986. Thousands of people protested the replacement of Dinmukhamed Kunaev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, with Gennady Kolbin, an ethnic Russian from the Russian SFSR. The sentence "We didn't want the second December" appeared several times during the series, suggesting that the fear of another large-scale uprisal was a concern for the authorities. Moreover, it should be noted that the "Polygon" series was released in 2020, less than a year after the 2019 protests in Kazakhstan. In 2019, Kazakhstan held a presidential election in which the current president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, was elected. Right after the election results were announced, protests broke out in the cities of Astana and Almaty, with demonstrators claiming that the poll was not fair. The emphasis on historical protests and the people's attitudes towards authority in the series could have drawn uncomfortable parallels to the contemporary

political climate, potentially enhancing the further unrest or criticism. By downplaying these elements, the series could aim to avoid controversy and maintain a safer narrative that does not directly challenge the current political situation. Overall, it can be assumed that the message behind such portrayal of the people and silencing the Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement is to show that politics is determined by "political game" of the leadership and that the agency of people is not that critical.

5.1.2. Nursultan Nazarbayev, Keshirim Boztaev and Olzhas Suleimenov

The ways how historical figures are depicted in the series suggests a careful consideration of the political context of Kazakhstan. The figure of Nursultan Nazarbayev is standing out in the series as the one behind the "big political game" happening around the Semipalatinsk nuclear testing. His character is charismatic, confident, and critical. The plot twist of the series reveals that Nazarbayev was playing a double game, secretly working with both Soviet officials and Kazakh party members. His goal was to close the Polygon and become the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, which he eventually achieved. In the final episode, he admits that "I can help the nation only by getting the power," showing that all his actions were driven by "greater good to the nation." As Polese and Horák (2015) argued, personality cult can be a tool to construct national identity. Although Nazarbayev's rule does not fully meet the criteria of personality cult, it is clear that his persona is tightly linked to Kazakhstan's nation-building.

The secret meetings and search for classified documents made the series entertaining while also demonstrating Nazarbayev's advanced skills at playing "political games". In the first episode, Nazarbayev joins a secret meeting of young people in Almaty:

Nazarbayev: "I am here to know your goal. What do educated youth want?"

> The young people: "Perestroika would lead to poverty, there is nothing much there…If you are not member of the party, you will not reach anything…our faith is determined by people we don't know, the decisions are made in Moscow!... how do they know what the needs of Kazakh people are?!...We have many issues that are not solved: the language issue, Kazakh villages and land issues. We should be included in decision-making about our nation! We have a right to determine our lives!"
> Nazarbayev: "I understood it. Boys and girls, I am happy that you are worried about our nation. It is good that you are concerned about the future. But we don't want second December right. Do you all agree? We should act strategically. We cannot reach everything all at once. We need to take small steps to achieve big goals. And remember the future in the hands of young people."

Such a dialogue positions Nazarbayev as a leader who is concerned about its people and listens to diverse perspectives. The portrayal aligns with a narrative highlighting his strategic and thoughtful approach to leadership. Moreover, his character in the series appears to be unifying and capable of bridging generational and ideological gaps within society.

Nazarbayev's presence in the series is often accompanied by dynamic and inspirational music. One particularly memorable scene depicts him ascending the stairs in the Kremlin, with the soundtrack featuring a reading of Olzhas Suleimenov's poem, "A Wild Field." (episode 6) This poem, written by Suleimenov in 1964, aims to raise awareness about the ecological devastation in the testing region. It also illustrates the historical context of the Kazakh steppe being used for imperial and Soviet prison camps, and as a destination for exiled and deported "enemy people." The choice of this poem and its integration into the soundtrack shows Nazarbayev's role as a determined and culturally aware leader, striving to assert Kazakh identity and interests within the larger Soviet framework. Such a combination of visual and auditory elements serves to present him as both a visionary and a pragmatist, committed to the interests of his nation.

The "Polygon" series is not the first time Nazarbayev has been portrayed in popular culture. He also appears in the biopic series of six movies called "Leader's Path," which was also a state-funded initiative. The biopic narrates the biography of Nazarbayev based on his books and memoirs of his friends and colleagues. The final movie in the series concludes with

the sentence, “What began as the dream of one man has now become the victory of a whole nation”" Such a statement and, in general, the biopic itself show Nazarbayev as a national hero who brought independence to the nation. A similar idea, or a constant reminder that Nazarbayev deeply concerns about the nation, lies in the series “Polygon.” For example, in his dialogue with Kulakov, a member of the Communist Party Secretariat, Nazarbayev says, “I follow the interests of my nation, and I want my nation to live better.” To which Kulakov responds, “So you want to say you don’t have your own interests?” Nazarbayev replied, “My nation is my interest and goal” (episode 5).

Moreover, Nazarbayev’s character is strategic and committed to his goal although he seems manipulative. For instance, in his dialogue with Olzhas Suleimenov, Nazarbayev tries to provoke Suleimenov to make actions and attract public attention:

> Nazarbayev: “…Maybe you should do something new?”
> Suleimenov: “You are once again! I do not want to be involved in power. I do not want. Everything about it is an illusion.”
> Nazarbayev: Why illusion?
> Suleimenov: Because people are driven by the idea. They are ready to fight and even die for an idea. To make them follow you, you need an idea for which they will believe in. But what do you have? Factories for workers, lands for peasants? Sorry, but such promises were already there, and I don’t believe in it.
> Nazarbayev: Time is changing, Olzheke [diminutive for Olzhas]
> Suleimenov: And people too. Young people, for instance. Do you know what they want? A? No. and I don’t know. Sorry, but all of it is empty talks.
> Nazarbayev: There should be goal, Olsheke, the idea will come up eventually. You should be better and take actions, I am confident about you”

Scenes of Nazarbayev’s interactions with Suleimenov appear frequently, in which they act as friends and discuss the Polygon and the future of the nation. The character of Olzhas Suleimenov is portrayed as an old poet, almost losing hope in the societal change. Suleimenov is depicted as having excellent public speaking skills and charisma, which allows him to attract people. However, in comparison to Nazarbayev's character, Suleimenov is not depicted as strategic or interested in power. Instead, the series seems to present Suleimenov more as an inspirational leader rather than a politician. For example, there are scenes in which he reads his

poem at the Writers' House or at the local café in Almaty. Olzhas Suleimenov was a leader of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement, actively participating in negotiations, meetings, and public debates (Kassenova, 2022). Thus, limiting his character to merely an inspirational speaker undermines the depth of his involvement and impact in the closure of the Semipalatinsk test site. Moreover, the actions taken by Suleimenov in the series are consistently presented as a result of Nazarbayev's involvement. This narrative highlights Nazarbayev's essential role as the decision-maker or orchestrator of events. It can be said that the series shows Nazarbayev's dominance and control within the narrative.

Regarding the character of another influential figure, Keshirim Boztaev, almost the same conclusion can be made. Keshirim Boztaev was the First Secretary of Semipalatinsk Regional Committee of Communist party during the timeline of the series. His character is deeply concerned about the ecological disaster happening in the region. As soon as he noticed the problem, he went to the villages to talk with the local people. After knowing about the consequences of nuclear weapons testing, he was determined to speak with Soviet officials as he believed that they were not aware of the severity of the testing. He wrote a letter to Gorbachev, requesting the closure or relocation of the Polygon. This action brought him into trouble with higher authorities, who questioned how he had obtained classified information about the nuclear testing. In this situation, Nazarbayev emerges as a crucial ally, having assisted Boztaev in drafting the letter and providing the classified information. Nazarbayev once again emerges as a key figure in the narrative around the closure of the Semipalatinsk test site. It is clear that although the series demonstrates the contributions of Boztaev and Suleimenov as significant, they were still driven and supported by Nazarbayev's influence and guidance.

5.1.3. The Soviet Regime

After the letter of Boztaev to Gorbachev, there is a dialogue between Gorbachev with Kolbin (the First Secretary of Communist Party of Kazakhstan):

> Gorbachev: "…Is it really that bad out there?
> Kolbin: "I don't know, maybe"
> Gorbachev: "But that little secretary knows. He knows something we don't. We should be together; how don't you get that?! Military is hiding something from me, you are hiding something, you all are making a mess of the country"

This scene serves to demonstrate the Soviet Union's dysfunction because Gorbachev, who is the highest authority in the Soviet Union, did not know about the condition of local people in the Semipalatinsk region. Moreover, Gorbachev is portrayed as neutral to nuclear weapons testing and, throughout the series, he is only concerned about not having any scandals prior to the visit of the US delegation to Moscow. The portrayal of the Soviet regime in the series is chaotic, marked by poor communication between different levels of government and a clear divide between "good" and "bad" officials, with the military depicted as particularly untrustworthy. There is a scene depicting the sufferings of people in a village while the Soviet military reports on "safety" measures taken during the testing. Such a contrast enhances a negative perception of the Soviet military.

It can be argued that the series aims to demonstrate the disintegration of the Soviet Union due to its inability to address critical issues, emphasizing systematic failures. Furthermore, the Soviet officials were not depicted as "enemies" but rather as bounded by the security concerns. The officials constantly refer to the US, wishing to restore the balance of power. Such a careful depiction of the Soviet regime can be explained by Kazakhstan's geopolitics. As a former Soviet republic, Kazakhstan maintains a relationship with Russia characterized by cooperation and mutual interests, particularly in economic and security domains. Therefore, portraying Moscow as "enemy" is not of interest of the state.

5.2. Group Discussion

In this section, I provide the key moments from my analysis of the group discussion. Using thematic content analysis, I identified six themes that emerged: *Tragedy of the Nation, History of Polygon, Soviet Union and Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, Nevada-Semipalatinsk, Nuclear Weapons Today*. The following sections present key takeaways from each theme. Some themes have been combined because they naturally appear together. This was done also to ensure a more coherent analysis.

5.2.1. Tragedy of the Nation and History of Polygon

When I asked the first question, "What do you know about the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site?" The participants immediately responded that the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing is a "tragedy of the nation". Participants discussed the health issues, environmental damage, and the socio-economic consequences of the region. One of the participants remembered that during their high school, they were asked to draw pictures about the Polygon:

> "Almost all students would draw mushroom cloud colored in gray, black and red. I draw a ruined house behind a mushroom cloud, for example. We read poems and novels about nuclear testing. I remember the novel about a mother having twenty or so miscarriages and when she finally has a baby, the baby had heart disease. That was so sad and after such classes we were all sobbing. However, now re-thinking about these classes, I think we didn't know almost nothing about the tests itself. Like I know the years [period of testing], but do you remember any other details expect for tragic stories?"

This response further developed a discussion on the participant's knowledge about the nuclear events. They all agreed that they are not well-informed about the history of the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing. Such responses show an important aspect of how the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site is remembered and taught. While the tragic human stories are vividly remembered, there seems to be a lack of detailed knowledge about the nuclear tests. This indicates that the narrative around the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing may be more focused on human impact rather than of its actual history. Two participants shared that:

> Participant 1: “I can’t process that this was for forty years. People were experiencing detonations as if they were normal. But now how much you guys think about Polygon? I don’t think people actually care about it except the ones in the region.”
> Participant 2: “Right, I don’t care to be honest. I think most people do not care unless they meet the affected ones. My friends from other regions just joke about me being mutant or having six fingers, which is annoying. I have a friend from Karaaul [the closest village to the testing site] and I think he is more affected than me [laughs].What happened is a tragedy, people and land were literally poisoned, but we need to move on, I guess.”

These responses demonstrate that there is a consensus on the tragic nature of the nuclear testing among participants. This can also represent a perception of the broader population. However, Participant 2 openly admits that they do not have a personal concern, reflecting indifference that might be present among the population outside of the directly affected regions. Moreover, the jokes that the participant 2 mentioned can identify a regional disparity, in which people from the region being externally categorized based on their connection with the affected region. The closer people are located to the testing site, the more they are targeted to be categorized.

5.2.2. Soviet Union and Kazakhstan

Discussion around the Soviet Union came up naturally once one of the participants said that, “Wasn’t the idea of nuclear weapons testing emerged because we [Soviet Union] wanted to restore power during the Cold War? I mean the country needed weapon. We were just unlucky ones.” For which, another participant argued “Do you really think we were just unlucky ones? They [Soviet Union] chose us because we were the periphery and not enough people here in our land. They didn’t care that people could suffer.” There is a clear distinction in the way how participants refer to the Soviet Union. The former participant uses “we” while the latter says “they.” The use of “we” indicates a possible internalized Soviet identity. Moreover, the participant’s position on the nuclear weapons testing aligns with the Soviet narrative that justifies the country’s actions during the Cold War as necessary for national security and power restoration. The use of “they” suggests an external perspective on the Soviet Union, demonstrating a separation from the country. This also shows criticism and recognition

of the Soviet Union's oppressive actions toward its people. Other participants did not get involved in the dialogue of these two participants, and mostly joking to lessen the growing tension between them. One of them said that:

> "Our parents used to say how good the Union was, I don't know actually, and I don't care, maybe it was good or maybe it was bad. I guess it doesn't matter as we live in Kazakhstan now. I don't want to justify the Union but I think we were one country with them, they could decide where to put weapons, so I think you are right [referring to the participant who used "we"]. We have a big land at the end of the day. I know they had such testing in Kamchatka too. I don't think they intentionally wanted to make us sick, it was only because our land was big and unpopulated. I also think nobody knew how radiation can impact people. I mean after watching Chernobyl, I have something in mind about the effects of radiation."

This participant tried to lessen the tension by simplifying the arguments used in the debate and focusing on the current time Kazakhstan. Yet, the participant's acknowledgement of the Soviet Union's power to decide the location of the Polygon somehow aligns with the position of the participant who uses "we." The general debate over the Soviet Union reveals conflicting perceptions of Kazakhstan's Soviet legacy among the population. Regarding the Soviet Union, the other participant who were not involved previously said:

> "I am sure we all grow up listening to the life during the Soviet times. According to my parents, it was an amazing life. I didn't really know why then it collapsed if everything was fine, but now I think they [parents] just didn't think beyond. Interestingly, I also have a bit nostalgia about the Soviet times, especially after watching *The Irony of Fate* [Soviet movie about New Year] every New Year. I mean we still watch the WW2 movies with parents, right, and the feeling of good old Soviet is there. When I was in Bishkek for the New Year, me and my Kyrgyz friends all watched *The Irony of Fate.*"

The participants agreed with this response, discussing the movie further. This shows how people can have nostalgia for things they do not experience by themselves. Although the participants are critical of the Soviet Union, they still have an attachment to the practices left of it. As such, the discussion demonstrates the influence of rituals and practices on collective memory and sense of belonging (Assman, 2011; Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). Participants recontextualize and reinterpret the narratives around the Soviet times in ways that resonate with their contemporary lives, thus keeping the memory alive and dynamic.

5.2.3. Nursultan Nazarbayev and Nevada-Semipalatinsk

After the discussion of the Soviet Union, I showed a picture of the monument, "Stronger than Death" to ask their opinion on it (See Appendix 4). The participants started to talk about the Hiroshima memorial as one of them went there, and following that, they addressed the Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement. They agreed that the movement is "very influential and makes you feel sick." They referred to the tragedy of the events again, while mentioning the unity of people who work together to close the testing site. They shared that they may lack knowledge about the movement, but they acknowledge that Nazarbayev played a crucial role in the closure of the Polygon. Nazarbayev's figure came up naturally to the discussion. For example, one of the participants said that:

> "Don't get me wrong, I know it is not cool to support Nazarbayev anymore, but we should agree that it could have been way worse. We should admit that he got us independence and helped to close Polygon, without him we couldn't reach the Moscow people right. Yes, he is terrible, but he still did something right."

Another participant agreed and said that, "Of course, he [Nazarbayev] should have closed it because it was the main problem of our nation at that time. He needed to get people's attention somehow." The participants did not question his contribution to the closure of the testing site. It is also seen that the participants have a conflicting perception of the figure of Nazarbayev. For example, "Yes, he is terrible, but he still did something right" shows controversary around Nazarbayev today. By saying "he is terrible," the participant refers to Nazarbayev's authoritarian rule. Yet, "he still did something right" suggests that the participant acknowledges the leadership of Nazarbayev. One of the participants shared that:

> "Nevada-Semipalatinsk, I heard of it, but I never questioned why Nevada. My mom was in demonstrations, but I don't think that these helped to be honest, I think protests do not work, and everything is decided already. But protests are good for raising awareness and Nevada-Semipalatinsk did that. I remember during high school, poems of Olzhas Suleimenov were so influential and sentimental. I felt that. I also think Nevada-Semipalatinsk is one of the main protest movements in our history as it showed how people can act together to fight for human lives."

Although the participant had a personal connection with the movement through their mother's participation, they showed skepticism toward the effectiveness of protests in general. Such skepticism can signal a broader sentiment, particularly in the context where the decision-making is perceived as being controlled by the elites. The participants also discussed the January events of 2022 (known also as *bloody January*), in which peaceful protests turned into an attempted *coup d'état* that lasted for two weeks. The January events resulted in creation of the "New Kazakhstan" agenda, aiming to lessen the Nazarbayev's legacy in the country. For example, one of them argued that:

> "Maybe in an ideal case protests can lead to something good, but for now, in Kazakhstan, protests always end bad. January events, for example. You tell me how it is in Europe where French people often protest, that is in their culture [question for me]. Protesting is something cool, but I don't think it can change something. Protesting is European or Kyrgyz thing; it is not for us [laughs]."

The participants shared a consensus on the ineffectiveness of protests in making political changes. The laughter at the end of the response may indicate a dismissive or resigned attitude towards the concept of protests being effective in Kazakhstan. It also seems that the January events left a negative perception of protesting among people.

5.2.4. Nuclear Weapons Today

At the end of the discussion, I asked the participants what they think of nuclear weapons today. There was a disagreement over the need for such weapons. One of them started the discussion by saying that, "I think we need nuclear weapons as security means. What if the Third World War started and we had nothing? Do you think Russia would help us?" For which, another participant agreed "Yes, but you know how things here, I am afraid of how our people are going to build the bomb, they are too corrupted to do so." However, three other participants disagreed with them. One of them stated that "Why do you need nuclear weapons? If we use it, everything is gone. Look at Semey. Imagine the whole cities are gone in seconds." Such conflicting views suggest the complex nature of public perception of nuclear weapons steaming

from domestic and international factors. For example, one of the participants who agreed on the need for nuclear weapons claimed that:

> "I know world should be free from military, but we don't live in an ideal world. We need to protect ourselves, especially if you have Russia and China as neighbors. We don't know maybe Putin would go for us after Ukraine and listen to me, our military capacity is so bad. I really believe Kazakhstan should stop being nice and have weapons as we have uranium to make the weapons."

The response shows the participant's perception of nuclear weapons as a means of national security, particularly in the context of a hypothetical Third Word War. This also demonstrates nuclear anxiety and distrust of the current world order the participant and broader population may have. It can be assumed that the Russian invasion of Ukraine influenced people's perception of Russia-Kazakhstan relations. The participant's "Do you think Russia would help us" and many more jokes suggests about growing negative sentiment toward Russia in general. The participants who were against are driven by devastating humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons. This can be an example of how different meaning systems surrounding weapons and world politics may shape public perception. One of the participants shared that they are "afraid how our people are going to build the bomb," illustrating criticism toward the government and raising concern regarding corruption in the country. Despite the reasons, there is a clear debate over the use of nuclear weapons among the participants.

6. Discussion

This section incorporates the findings from the analyses of the TV-series and the group discussion.

First, it is evident that the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing is perceived as a tragedy of the nation both by the state and people. Based on Ritchie's (2022) categorization of the worldviews on nuclear weapons, Kazakhstan takes a side of a subaltern anti-nuclearism view, in which disarmament policies are promoted. By constantly highlighting the devastating consequences of the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing on human health and the environment, the state legitimizes its international agenda as the promoter of nuclear weapons disarmament worldwide. Moreover, the emphasis on "mothers losing their children" and "land being poisoned" in national narratives and commemoration practices shows an attempt to nationalize the Semipalatinsk's tragedy. This resonates with Andersson's (2004) cultural trauma theory. However, the responses given by participants, such as "do not feel like we still think about it" and "only people who are affected care" suggest that the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing does not become "a trauma for all."

Second, the story of the closure of the testing site is one of the narratives supporting Nursultan Nazarbayev's role as the "founding father of the nation." The closure of the Semipalatinsk test site was a pivotal moment for Nazarbayev's political career, demonstrating him as strategic and thoughtful leader who is concerned about well-being of the nation. The TV-series highlights more the contribution of Nazarbayev rather than other political activists, so that his figure would appear in a positive light. This supports Coakley's (2004) argument that powerful institutions may selectively emphasize certain aspects of history while ignoring or suppressing others to serve their own purposes. In authoritarian regimes, national narratives are surrounded around an authoritarian leader to legitimize the power (Fauve, 2019; Polese &

Horák, 2015, Isaacs, 2010). Although the participants were critical of Nazarbayev's figure, there was a general belief that he was successful in obtaining independence and closing the testing site. This perception of the participants aligns with the state's narrative.

Third, people's views on the Soviet Union can significantly influence their perceptions of the history of the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing. Those who view the Soviet Union positively might downplay or justify the nuclear testing as a necessary measure for national security and scientific advancement. They may address the technological achievements and geopolitical context, illustrating the testing as a response to the Cold War tensions. On the other hand, people with a negative or critical view of the Soviet Union are more likely to address the human and environmental impact of the testing on the local population. However, it should be noted that no matter of people's views on the Soviet Union, they perceive the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing as a tragedy. Here, so-called a struggle between national and post-Soviet identity can be observed as, on one hand, some participants justified actions of the Soviet Union, on the other hand, they were empathetic toward victims of the Polygon. Such a complicated perception of the Soviet Union among individuals suggests external factors that may shape their perception.

According to Halbwachs' (1992) instrumental approach to collective memory, the participants' nostalgia and sense of belonging to the Soviet Union can be attributed to their social interactions, where narratives about the Soviet Union are continually circulated .Based on the participants responses, older generations have an attachment to the "good old Soviet days" that influence the perception of younger generations as they still do certain practices/traditions and celebrations.

It can be concluded from the TV-series that the state promotes the idea that the Soviet system was not effective in managing the testing site, highlighting only the cruelty of fictional

Soviet military characters. The involvement of historical figures like Gorbachev in the functioning of the Semipalatinsk testing site was silenced and the Soviet higher leadership depicted as neutral to the situation. This may demonstrate that the state of Kazakhstan is careful in a way it presents the Soviet Union which can be explained by its geopolitics. People, as was noted from group discussion, view the Soviet Union as a whole, not distinguishing between certain politicians or military.

Fourth, the TV-series does not develop the storyline of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk anti-nuclear movement to avoid emphasizing political activism of people. This omission suggests that the state may not want to encourage political activity, preferring instead to focus on narratives that emphasize state-led initiatives and control. The series shows that it was Nazarbayev and other Kazakh politicians who initiated the closure of the testing site. The group discussion reveals that people's negative experiences with any kind of social movements influence their perception of political activism. The participants' shared beliefs that "protesting is not in our culture" and that "protesting ends badly" aligns with the state's perception of activism. As Assman (2008) notes, authoritarian states construct collective memory in ways that legitimize their actions, thereby discouraging opposition and preventing the emergence of multilayered perspectives. This top-down approach to shaping collective memory ensures that the state's narrative remains dominant.

Overall, there are not substantial disparities between the state's interpretation of the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing and people's perception of the events. Existing disparities were mainly related to the actors involved in the closure of the Polygon. Although the state systematically emphasizes the contributions of Nazarbayev, people acknowledge the influence of other actors, for example, Olzhas Suleimenov. This can be attributed to Suleymenov's activities as a poet, writer, and the leader of the anti-nuclear movement that potentially shape people's attitudes toward the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing.

7. Conclusion and Limitations

This research aimed to understand how the state's narratives around the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing were perceived by ordinary people. It is evident that the testing story was used for nation-building purposes while highlighting the role of Nazarbayev as a leader of the nation. However, it was not clear how people receive and interpret these efforts. The research revealed that people's perceptions do align with the state's although there are disparities regarding the recognition of various actors involved in the closure of the testing site, such as Olzhas Suleimenov.

It is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this research. The scope of the research was confined to a specific demographic group and geographical region, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings to the broader population. In addition, the reliance on a state-sponsored TV-series and a single group discussion may not capture the full spectrum of perspectives on the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing. Moreover, my biases during the interpretation of the series may influence the analysis as I am from the region and have personal experiences that shape my perspective. Furthermore, some of the artistic choices of the series could be interpreted differently than what the director initially intended to convey.

Regarding the group discussion, one major issue was that the dominant personalities overshadowed quieter participants, leading to an imbalance in contributions and possibly stifling valuable insights. Since the group consisted of friends, they were inclined to maintain existing dynamics and prioritize harmony and conformity, potentially limiting the critical analysis. Additionally, as a moderator, keeping the friend group focused on the discussion around the topic was specifically challenging.

Future research can be strengthened by expanding the demographic and geographical scope of participants and using multiple data sources. Diverse methods, such as interviews,

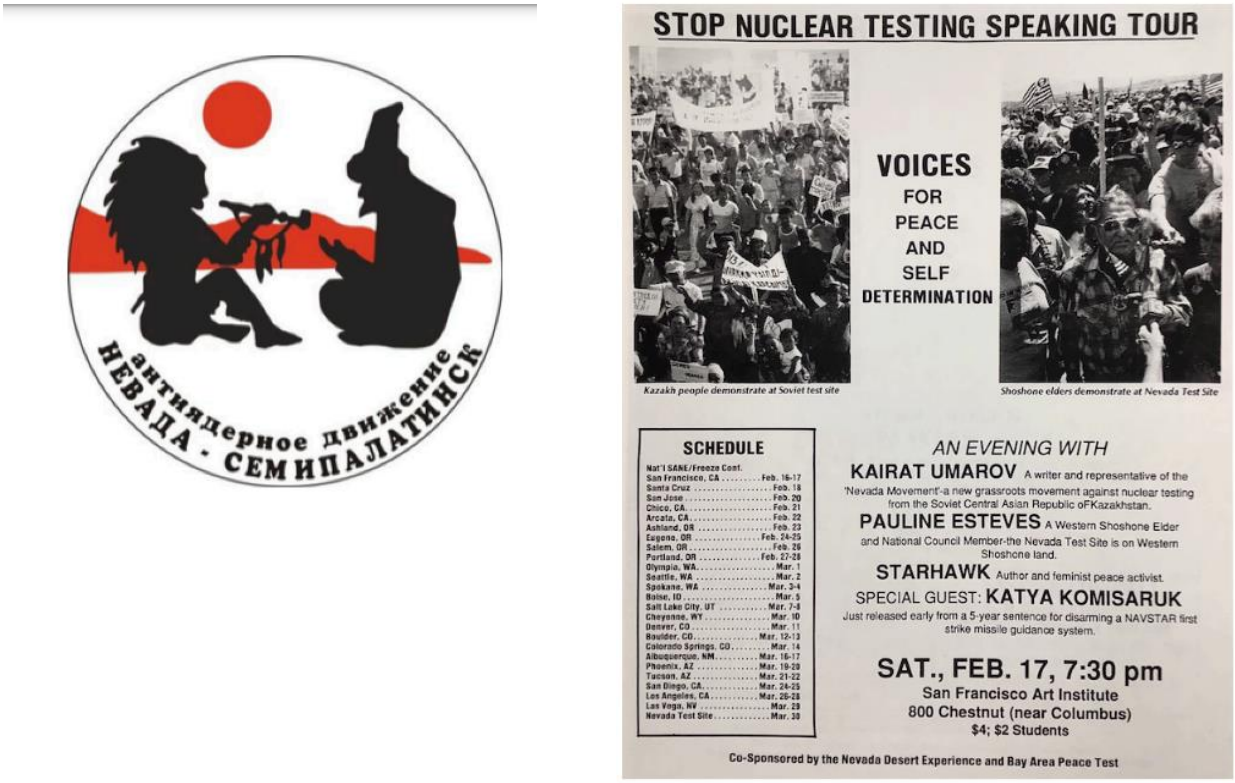
surveys, and archival work can provide more in-depth analysis of the history of the Semipalatinsk nuclear weapons testing and people's perception and memory of it.

Beyond this research, future works may examine the extent to which the experience of nuclear weapons testing created an internal division within society. This is because the group discussion showed that people who are not from the affected regions have certain biases toward people from the region. Moreover, scholars may look at the extent people from Semey deal with trauma left by nuclear weapons testing.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Location of the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Weapons Testing Site

Appendix 2. the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Anti-Nuclear Movement: Logo and Poster

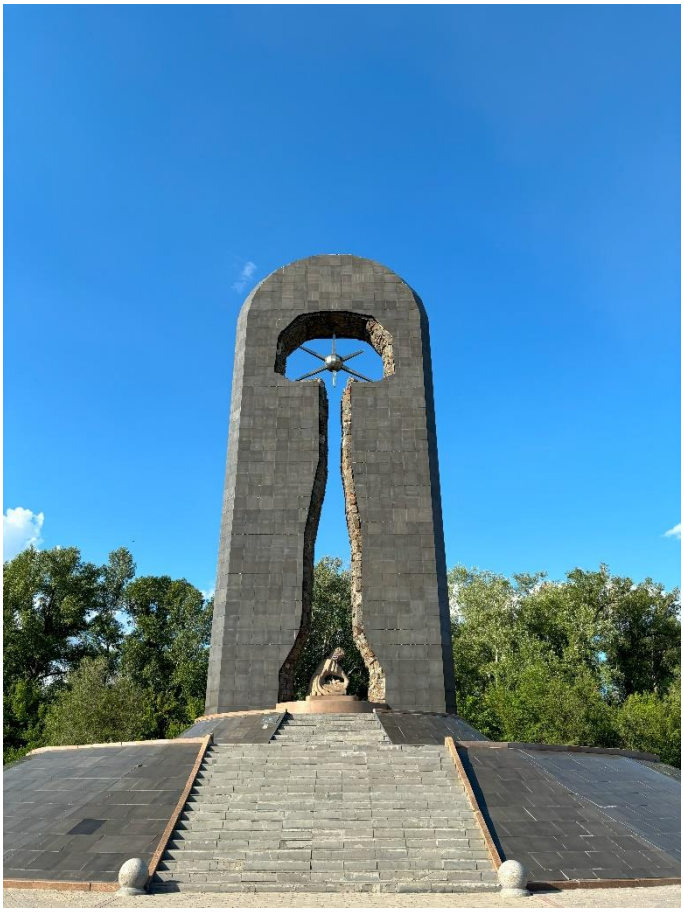


Source: Rozsa, G. G. (2020). The Nevada movement: a model of trans-Indigenous antinuclear solidarity. *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, *11*(2). https://doi.org/10.5070/T8112049586

Appendix 3. List of Characters Mentioned

Character	**Description**
Nursultan Nazarbayev	Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR, and later, became the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan
Olzhas Suleimenov	A poet, leader of the anti-nuclear movement
Keshirim Boztaev	First Secretary of Semipalatinsk Regional Communist party
Fyodor Kulakov	A Soviet statesman during the Cold War
Gennady Kolbin	the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, later would lose his position to Nazarbayev
Mikhail Gorbachev	the last leader of the Soviet Union
Sabyrzhan	A doctor from the local village

Appendix 4. “Stronger than Death” monument (photos made by me)



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