



Secrecy and Nuclear Accidents in the Southern Urals

Vyacheslav B. Sharov, MD

For more than 30 years, the former Soviet Union (now Russian) Ministry of Defense has hidden the facts on the human loss and environmental damage produced by the production and testing of nuclear weapons in the southern Urals. The region had already been contaminated by nuclear accidents, the result of inadequate funding, and an arms-race mentality that demanded haste and ignored safety requirements. Then, in the early 1950s, the Soviet military conducted a series of nuclear explosions whose primary purpose was to determine the effects of radioactive fallout on soldiers and their capacity to fight a nuclear war.

One of these took place on September 14, 1954, near the small town of Totsk in the Orenburg region. An A-bomb was dropped from a plane and exploded some 300 meters above the ground. Within 15 to 20 minutes, motorized troops were ordered into the area around the hypocenter. Some of these troops and other soldiers stayed in the affected area for substantial periods while a variety of maneuvers and investigations were conducted. Many subsequently developed symptoms consistent with reactions to radiation.

But all of this remained secret for the next 35 years, and most of the information pertinent to health and the environment is still secret today. In 1989, an official publication appeared in *Izvestia*, headlined "September 1954: Maneuvers Under A Nuclear Mushroom"[1], with some details of

the test. Almost immediately, soldiers and officers involved in the test started writing to our former leaders to report damage to their health and seek treatment and social support. One even wrote to Mikhail Gorbachev [2]. There was no response.

There was no systematic study of health effects, no medical examinations or follow-up of the exposed troops, no epidemiological study of increased risks of leukemia and cancer, no measurement of environmental contamination, no examination of health effects on civilian populations living in presumably contaminated areas, and no scientific or medical publication on any aspect of these. The government maintains that exposure doses were low -- but no data have been released.

Reporters applied to the Ministry of Defense to study the records of these tests and maneuvers. They were refused. At the Ministry's headquarters, General-Colonel V. Denisov responded that "taking into consideration the low-radiation levels, the short time period of maneuvers, and the strictly prescribed instructions, one can conclude that all measures were taken to prevent the irradiation of soldiers and officers." There would be nothing more; he said reports on the nuclear tests could not be published.

And so that highest priority -- secrecy -- will be preserved. I think it is time to start to count the price of secrecy -- it is expected to be huge -- and to bring the bill to the army and the government.

At the time of publication VBS was Associate Professor, Chair of Diagnostic Imaging, Ural Institute for Advanced Education of Physicians, Chelyabinsk, Russia.

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Reference

1. *Izvestia*, No. 288, 1989.
2. "He was under 'the atomic snow' too." *Izvestia*, No. 5, January 5, 1990, p. 6.