

Atomic History

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At the height of the Cold War and the nuclear arms race, Britain's then Prime Minister, Clement Atlee, approached Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies with a view to using Australia's north-western coastline for atomic bomb tests. Menzies agreed, without consulting cabinet or Parliament, and soon afterwards the Monte Bello Islands atomic tests took place. Two years later the next British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, requested permission to test, this time in the outback. Between 1953 and 1965 the arid rangelands of South Australia were subjected to the detonation of nine major nuclear bombs, and many smaller bomb trials.

The first mainland atomic test in Australia, 'Totem', which took place on 15 October 1953 at Emu Field, South Australia, was 10 kilotons (Hiroshima was around 15 kilotons, the equivalent of 15,000 tonnes of TNT). Emu Field was soon abandoned and from 1956 tests were conducted at Maralinga, where a service village housing up to 17,000 staff was established.

In order to carry out the tests, thousands of Maralinga, Pitjantjatjara and Kokatha people were forcibly removed from their land by 'Aboriginal Protectors'.

Nuclear weapons contain radioactive substances that are poisonous for up to 250,000 years and contaminate land and water systems. The radioactive exposure of the tests was extensive: dense radioactive clouds travelled far and caused much sickness and death across the deserts. Traditional owners speak of the 'black mist' that caused blindness and cancer.

However, before Australian citizenship was granted in the 1967 referendum, Indigenous people were neither counted in the Australian census nor accounted for in medical records kept. Thus there is a complete absence of records of the impact, health effects and deaths that occurred as a result of the tests.

During the mainland tests many army personnel were deliberately exposed to the blasts, to gauge the effect of radiation on troops. The testing range boundaries were not properly monitored, allowing people to walk in and out. Any signs were in English, which the local Indigenous population could not read. Fallout from the ground blasts led to massive contamination of the Australian interior; and the fallout from Maralinga even reached Adelaide and Melbourne. Some places are still heavily radioactive, due principally to the presence of 22 kilograms of plutonium, the most toxic element known to humans.

The test area remains unsafe for habitation for the next 250,000 years.