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Reviews
Half-Lives & Half-Truths: Confronting the Radioactive Legacies of the Cold War


Barbara Rose Johnson (Editor)

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Conventional wisdom holds that the twentieth century nuclear arms race effectively avoided global nuclear war and its consequences through the doctrine of mutual assured destruction. In reality, the cold war was not “cold” at all, but characterized by a series of conflicts and crises with political, economic and sociocultural legacies that continue to structure world politics into the 21st century. Possibly the most profound but often overlooked consequences of this period are the long-term effects of nuclear militarism on human and environmental health. In *Half-Lives & Half-Truths: Confronting the Radioactive Legacies of the Cold War*, edited by Barbara Rose Johnson, contributing anthropologists and advocates tackle issues relating to the production of scientific knowledge and the wide-ranging effects of nuclear weapons development, manufacture, testing, and proliferation.

Addressing the legacy of the nuclear arms race and the history of uranium production, policy and health research, contributors to this volume discuss the targeted and opportunistic use of indigenous or subaltern peoples as experimental subjects; how national security priorities, censorship, and politics affect researchers, and the dilemmas faced by scholars and researchers working in the modern national security state; the impact of uranium mining, enrichment facilities and waste dumping on host communities in terms of occupational health and safety as well as blatant environmental racism. Perhaps the most interesting contribution of *Half-Lives and Half-Truths* are the authors’ attempts to situate 20th century science and scientists in their social and cultural context, and descriptions of some of the dramatic transformations that were experienced by individual researchers and American anthropology as a whole. During the Cold War era, tensions between a nuclear-military agenda and a call for scientific research on the effects of nuclear weapons on humans and their environments generated censorship and bias that skewed scientific research and limited the flow of knowledge to the global public. Cold War ideology justified a heavy veil of secrecy about the short- and long-term effects of radiation exposure on human health. In a sense, priorities of national security for the United States and the Soviet Union were not pitted against ideas of human rights and social and environmental justice, but totally subsumed them.

Situated in a particularly contentious, violent, and transformative period of global history *Half-Lives and Half-Truths* offers significant contributions to the critical study of relationships among science, technology, and society; ecological and environmental anthropology; and the social construction of health and environment in the 20th century. Contributing authors approach the legacies of 20th century nuclear militarism from different perspectives with different research methods and theoretical approaches (ranging from historical and biographical analysis to political ecology and political economy), giving *Half-Lives and Half-Truths* the constitution of a multi-sited and multi-scalar examination of science, secrets, and the socio-politics of the national security state—delivering “lessons of the past” that are particularly relevant as nuclear proliferation and conflicts continue into the 21st century.

 Review by Amber Huff, Department of Anthropology at the University of Georgia