

Less to prove it.”
robert norris, senior
analyst



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Less than a year after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a group of Russia's top atomic-weapons scientists agreed to sell to the United States a massive, secret study of Soviet nuclear-weapon testing, providing firsthand information about Cold War events stretching over more than four decades, according to documents and interviews with key Russian participants. The history project, which was led by Alexander Tchernyshev, a theoretical physicist at Russia's first nuclear-weapons laboratory, remains shrouded in secrecy both in Russia and the United States. But the scope of the project — a detailed, 2,000-page history of 715 Soviet nuclear tests over 41 years — is unprecedented, and appears to have given the United States valuable insights into Soviet military and scientific procedures.

It could also help U. S. specialists better prepare to monitor any future nuclear explosions by rogue states that defy a new ban on nuclear tests. Starting in December 1992, Tchernyshev and about 200 other scientists wrote the history under contract to the U.

S. Defense Special Weapons Agency for a fee of \$288,501. At the time, the scientists were suffering economically and the United States was trying to prevent them from taking their nuclear-weapons know-how elsewhere. The information the scientists provided was the objective of a long and costly detection and monitoring effort by the United States during the Cold War.

By filling in the gaps, the history will help the Pentagon better understand Russian procedures, and adjust its systems to allow better monitoring of tests in the future. According to a 10-page outline of the report, much of the work of the Russian scientists appears to have been on scientific themes,

such as measurements of radioactivity and the impact of nuclear tests on the environment and people. The history did not directly delve into the design or deployment of the Soviet — and now Russian — nuclear arsenal, and would probably not affect nuclear strategy or arms control. Tchernyshev said the Russian scientists did not divulge state secrets.

However, he acknowledged that the information was “ sensitive.” He said all the material was screened by a Russian declassification process, “ and we have the documents to prove it.” Robert Norris, senior analyst with the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington, has tracked Soviet and U.

S. nuclear testing for a decade. He described the Russian project as a potential “ intelligence gold mine” for U. S.

policy-makers. The 200 authors each received about \$500, Tchernyshev said, with the rest going to taxes and expenses. At the time, the average monthly wage in Russia was \$38.