

TARGET

NOVAYA ZEMLYA:

JOURNEY INTO THE SOVIET NUCLEAR TESTING ZONE

On September 20, the *MV Greenpeace* entered Soviet waters—destination: Novaya Zemlya, the remote pair of islands in the Barents Sea where the Soviet Union conducts nuclear tests. The ship and its international crew were determined to stop any future tests. Word had reached the West that testing would resume at Novaya Zemlya, despite the fierce opposition of the Russian Republic and the region's native populations, because protests by the

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citizens of Kazakhstan had all but closed the country's other nuclear test site. As the *Greenpeace* ship sailed from one Soviet port to another on its way to Novaya Zemlya, the crew was welcomed by local citizens. But before the trip was over, the ship and crew were fired upon, boarded, and put under tow by the KGB-directed Soviet border guard. They also infiltrated the test site, the first Westerners ever to see the heart of the Soviet Union's atomic testing zone.

Saturday, September 22, Murmansk: a grim gray city of half a million people on the north coast of the Kola Peninsula, renowned for its naval base and fish processing plants (one of every four fish eaten in the USSR is processed in Murmansk). At the center of town, a sign displays the level of background radiation in the city, but no one believes it—the levels are too close to normal, they say. The ship is met by a crowd of people waving, roses and carnations in hand.



For the people of Murmansk and other Ukrainian communities, the *MV Greenpeace* is welcomed as a symbol of hope.

Monday, September 24, Murmansk: Formal meeting today with officers from the Soviet Northern Fleet, Murmansk scientists, and municipal politicians. After Steve Shallhorn, our lead campaigner, announced our plan to enter the test site, a navy captain accused us of conspiring to break Soviet laws. The crowd hooted at him, and Steve declared that the world will judge the actions of a few people committed to bringing an end to nuclear weapons. The room filled with cautious smiles. Defying authority is obviously still a rare event in Murmansk.

People are starting to approach us with detailed allegations of environmental crimes, such as the dumping of liquid radioactive waste at sea. We have been given the names of old warships that were scuttled while loaded with nuclear waste. One group insisted that the reactor from the *Lenin*, the first Soviet nuclear-powered icebreaker, was dumped at sea in 1964 off the south island of Novaya Zemlya. A marine biologist who spent two weeks on Novaya Zemlya told us of deformed fish and a serious decline in the local fishing industry.

One military man told us a nuclear warhead has been in place on Novaya Zemlya and ready for detonation since December 1989, and that the blast has been scheduled—and canceled—on four separate occasions.

Tuesday, October 2, at sea: With permission to sail anywhere in Soviet territorial waters, backed up by Russian

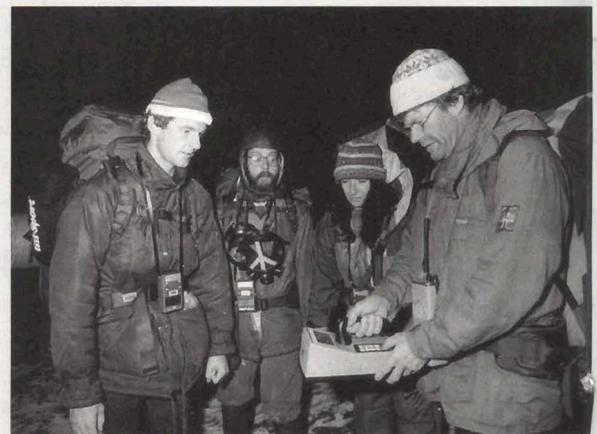
INTO THE BOMB: EYEWITNESSES IN NOVAYA ZEMLYA

We launched our inflatable from the *MV Greenpeace* at 8:45 pm, unnoticed by the approaching warship. We landed on shore in the dark. It was slightly below freezing, and the ground was covered in snow. We hiked southeast, skirting the Severny army base, keeping out of sight when trucks drove past.

We followed a cable leading from the base, watching the meters on our Geiger counters climb as we approached what appeared to be an abandoned nuclear-test shaft, a horizontal steel tunnel filled with coaxial cables. The reading on our Geiger counters went off the meter. Our dosimeters recorded 42 micro-Sieverts an hour at the hottest spot. We took dust samples from the tunnel walls, and from water running along the floor of the shaft, and left.

We surveyed the area around the shaft, locating several more radioactive hot spots and taking samples for further study. After we had been on the site for almost 11 hours, we were spotted by a helicopter. Fifteen unarmed officers leapt to the ground, surrounded us, and took us back to the base. We were questioned in the officers' mess. One officer asked us about our samples and monitoring equipment and made the curious comment that "we have the mountain under control now." Perhaps there was a nuclear accident here. We actually ate dinner with the admiral that night, who led us to believe that he is as fed up with nuclear testing as we are.

Once aboard the *26th Party Congress*, we were searched and photographed. All our equipment was taken: instruments, samples, cameras, gas masks, knife, and tape recorder. We were kept in separate cabins, and questioned extensively over the next five days. Armed sailors guarded us around the clock. Finally the decision was made to return us to the *MV Greenpeace*, minus our samples, film, videotape and masks.



Greenpeace takes measurements of radioactive contamination at Soviet nuclear test site.



Armed with semi-automatic rifles, the KGB storms the *MV Greenpeace* and takes control of the ship.

Republic President Boris Yeltsin, we are now heading through rough waters towards Arkhangel'sk, a city of 400,000 on the White Sea. We've picked up a shadow ship, following about two miles behind us on our port side. We learned today that the Semipalatinsk council declared a ban on nuclear tests at the other Soviet nuclear testing site in Kazakhstan—another nail in the coffin for testing there.

Thursday, October 4, at sea: We've left Arkhangel'sk, where the ship was overrun with schoolchildren. We're on our way to Naryan Mar, home to many of the Nenets people who were forcibly removed from Novaya Zemlya in the 1950s to make way for nuclear testing. We are still being followed, so we launched an inflatable with our photographer aboard to get a closer look. Photos of the shadow proved it is an armed icebreaker operated by the KGB.

Friday, October 5: We are just leaving Dresvyanika, a tiny village at the mouth of the Pechora River. Because the river is so shallow we were not able to bring the ship to Naryan Mar, so the delegation of Nenets came down here to see us. It is 18 years since a foreign ship has visited these parts, and our presence seemed to give these people hope that they are not completely ignored. We're now heading back to the Barents Sea and, finally, Novaya Zemlya.

Sunday, October 7, off the western coast of Novaya

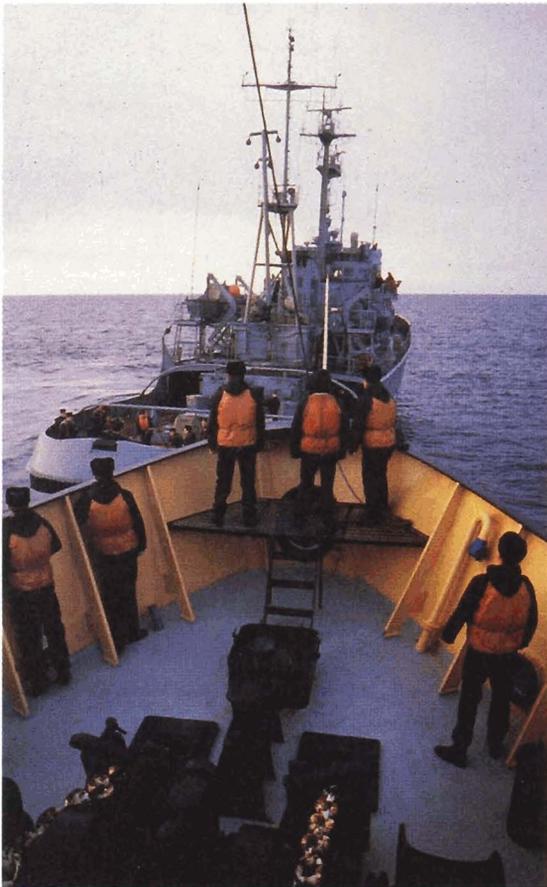
Zemlya: The captain of the icebreaker, now identified as the *26th Party Congress*, came on the radio demanding that we stop our engines. We launched two of our inflatables, and the Soviets fired flares directly at them. Another inflatable was launched with the four-person landing team, a driver, and our photographer, and took off in the direction of land, unseen by the Soviets.

Suddenly, the KGB ship aimed for our port side at full speed. Three blasts of gunfire shook the darkness. "Greenpeace, this is *26th Party Congress*. I begin firing at you if you don't stop. Now I open fire in front of you. If you don't stop I begin fire to you." We stopped our engines.

They demanded the right to board, and we agreed, as long as they left their guns behind. But the five-man boarding party was armed with Kalishnikov semi-automatic rifles. At this point, the inflatable returned with the news that the landing party was on the Soviet test site.

By midnight, 15 armed men were aboard, systematically taking control of the ship. The final stronghold was the radio room, where Steve was locked in, speaking with UPI on our satellite phone. When the sailors began to batter down the door with an ax, he called our London office to give our position, and to say that the landing team was ashore, presumably undetected.

Wednesday, October 10: Our captain was ordered to take the vessel to Murmansk. We then told the Soviets that four of our crew were on the test site at Novaya Zemlya. We refused to move the ship unless three conditions were met: that we knew the whereabouts of our shore party; that the guns were removed from the ship; and that we be allowed access to our communications equipment in the radio room. The Soviets refused, and the ship continued to drift. This morning a second KGB ship, the *Yenisey*, arrived to tow us to Murmansk.



▶ Greenpeace and KGB sign expulsion papers on *MV Greenpeace*.

Thursday, October 11: Still no word about the landing party, but one of the crew thinks he overheard that they are aboard the *26th Party Congress*. We have been out of contact, with them and everyone else, for four days. The weather is quite bad, rough seas and freezing temperatures.

Now that we are under tow we are catching up on some much-needed sleep. The boarding crew is disciplined. The Kalishnikovs have disappeared, replaced by pistols. The sailors live on a meager diet of chopped spaghetti, potatoes, pork fat, bread, and tins of fish. We have offered them food and showers, but their officer has declined. They sleep in the chairs in the mess and watch *Roger Rabbit* and videos of Greenpeace actions on the ship's VCR.

Saturday, October 13: We have regained control of our ship. Expulsion papers have just been completed; we are to leave Soviet waters as soon as possible. More

importantly, the landing party has returned with a full report (see sidebar). The Soviets who came with us were taken off the ship at Murmansk.

We found out this morning from London that Greenpeace offices all over the world were holding protests at Soviet embassies, demanding our release and an end to Soviet nuclear testing.



◀ *MV Greenpeace* under tow by a KGB ship, the *Yenisey*.

Sunday, October 14: We are steaming for Kirkenes, Norway. Trying to digest what has happened over the past two weeks is not easy. Certainly we arrived in the Soviet Union at a time of political and economic crisis. The people are in despair, and many welcomed us in the false hope that we would be able to undo past wrongs and lead them to a better life. Instead, what we were able to offer was a study in how to confront bureaucracy and old thinking.

Ten days later, high-ranking members of the Soviet military gave the order to conduct a nuclear test at Novaya Zemlya, the first in a year in the Soviet Union (the United States conducted at least seven nuclear tests in 1990). Our advance intelligence proved correct—the warhead had been in the shaft for several months, but political contingencies had delayed the explosion.

In the week that followed, it became clear that this particular explosion was a political provocation on the part of the military. At a parliamentary hearing on October 29, members of the Parliament of the Russian Republic as well as several members of the Supreme Soviet protested the decision to explode the bomb. A number of parliamentarians charged that President Gorbachev had not been informed, and that the test was designed to embarrass the Soviet leader.

“We demand to know from the Supreme Soviet who decides whether or not to go ahead with nuclear tests,” wrote 11 deputies. The Soviet Union’s Environment Minister, Nikolai Voronchov, called for international pressure to end nuclear testing, saying “If it was up to me I would stop the tests immediately.” Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Victor Karpov promised that the October test was “the only one this year and there will be no others.” □