

# Happy families in Stalin's hellhole

by Mark Franchetti, first British journalist to enter the 'hidden city' of Arzamas-16, powerhouse of the Soviet nuclear programme

THE parallel lines of electrified barbed-wire fencing, patrolled by armed soldiers with dogs, are the first signs of Sarov's isolation from the outside world. The town is missing from most Russian maps. The main road into it is signposted Dead End.

To enter Sarov is to step back into the Soviet era. The western advertisement hoardings that colour the streets of modern Russian cities are absent and there are few cars; the bleak, potholed roads are virtually empty.

Sarov — better known by its code name of Arzamas-16 — was for decades one of the Soviet Union's most closely guarded secrets. It was built on the orders of Josef Stalin to make lethal weapons of mass destruction. Here, the first Soviet atomic bomb was created in 1949 under Yuli Khariton, its chief designer; here, in 1953, Andrei Sakharov developed the first Soviet hydrogen bomb.

Nearly half a century later the inhabitants are still not permitted visits from friends outside. Their telephone calls are monitored by the security service. Their passports are checked every time they come and go.

Yet proposals by liberal deputies in the duma, the lower house of parliament, to end the restrictions imposed by the communists and introduce Arzamas-16 to the freedoms of democratic Russia have been greeted with horror by the town's 80,000 people.

Appalled by the prospect of outsiders being allowed in, fearful of the crime that has brought terror to many cities, 90% want the barbed-wire fences to stay.

"Life in a closed city is much better," Gennady Karatayev, the mayor, said last week. "It's nice and quiet and we all know each other. We don't need to install metal doors in our homes as they do elsewhere. We have some crime but it's all local. We know exactly who is committing it."

"Why open up? The situation out there is far too dangerous at the moment. No thank you — it would be asking for trouble. We're all against it."

This view is widely shared. "When I was younger I craved freedom," said Viktoria Yeltsova, 21, a waitress in the town's only formal restaurant. "But I want my children to grow up here and I am completely against the idea of opening up the town. It's safe and quiet. We have no criminals, no gypsies and no people from the Caucasus. I don't miss anything from the outside world."

The construction of Arzamas-16 — "our barbed-wire home" as some affectionately call it — began in 1946. Convicts laboured for more than eight years to complete the town on the site of a second world war ammunition factory and penal colony.

When they had finished, they were permanently exiled to the remote region of Magadan on the northeast Pacific coast, almost 5,000 miles east of Moscow, to prevent them from revealing its whereabouts.

Lavrenti Beria, Stalin's secret police chief who assumed responsibility for the Soviet nuclear programme in 1942, is said to have chosen the site, deep inside a thick birch forest, because, though isolated, it is only 300 miles from Moscow. Like nine other "closed cities" in the programme, it was known to the Soviet elite by its postcode. The suffix 16 distinguished it from the nearby town of Arzamas.

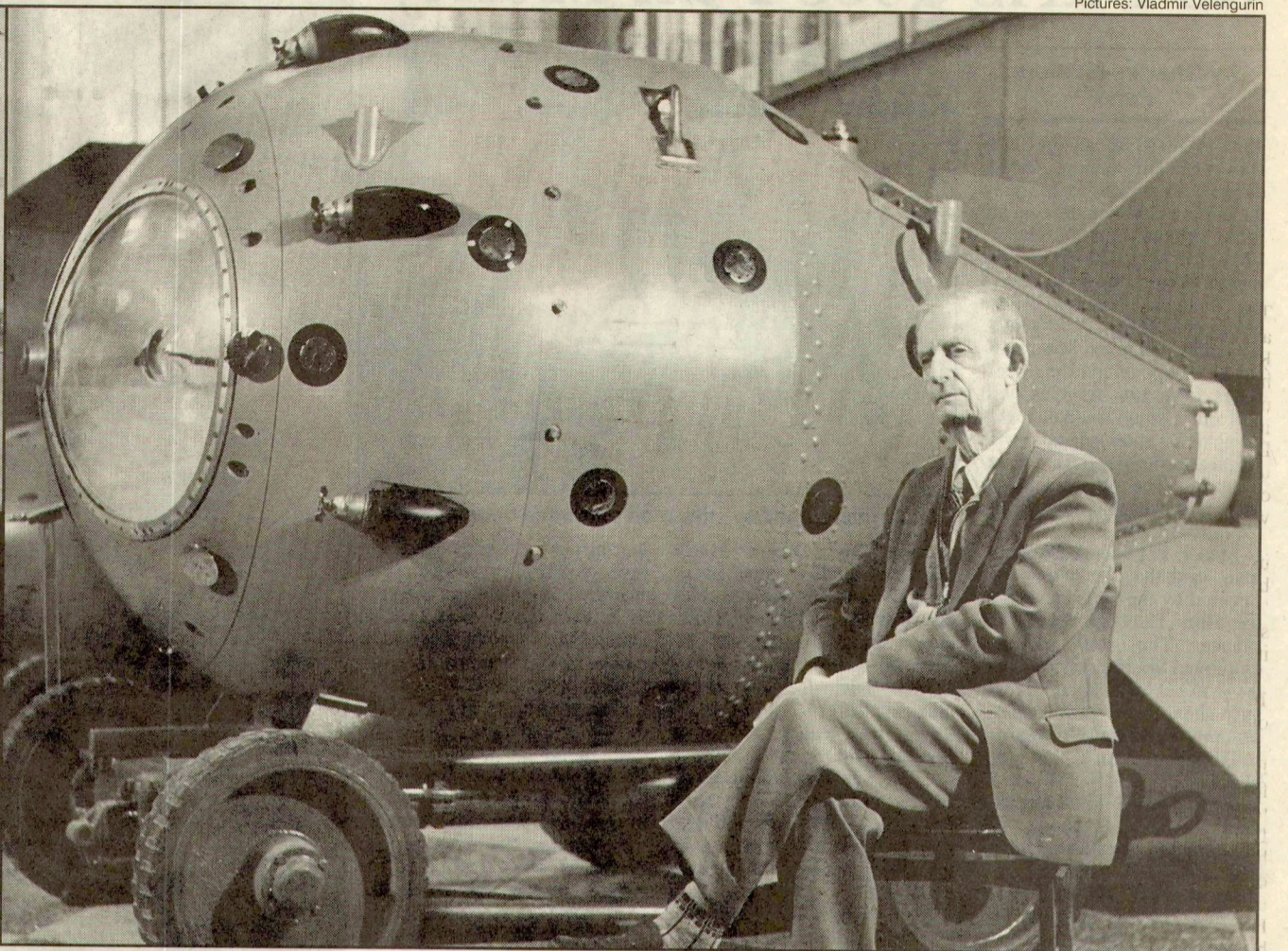
The scientists who moved in — often with their families — to embark on an arms race with the Americans were the cream of the Soviet intellectual elite. They were sworn to secrecy. "All I was told was that I was being transferred to central Russia. I was not to ask further questions," said Yuri Trutnev, 70, who was summoned to Arzamas-16 in 1951. "I received strict instructions to go to the airport and board a plane with five other scientists. We had no idea where we were being taken."

They were more than willing to go, however. "We had all lived through the war and felt very patriotic. We felt that what we were doing was incredibly important for Russia," said Trutnev. "We felt under great pressure to catch up with America. We felt under threat from the West and we worked around the clock in an intense atmosphere of comradeship."

Until the late 1980s when Mikhail Gorbachev, the former Soviet leader, ushered in glasnost (open government) and perestroika (economic and political reform), the inhabitants of Arzamas-16 were taught from a



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Pictures: Vladimir Velengurin

The fenced-in city nobody wants to leave: soldiers with dogs patrol Arzamas-16 as a nuclear worker disposes of bomb equipment. Right: Khariton, designer of the Soviet atomic bomb, with its prototype

young age never to say where they came from.

After the town acquired a small airport, even the duration of their flights to and from Moscow was secret information. Only in the 1970s did it become possible for residents to telephone out.

The town's existence was treated as a state secret until the late 1980s. In his memoirs,

entists who still work there are barred from taking holidays abroad for fear they may betray secrets to a foreign power.

The only outsiders allowed to visit are close relatives, and special permission must be obtained from the Russian atomic energy ministry to buy a train ticket to Arzamas-16.

"I didn't find out that my wife came from Arzamas-16 until we had been married for six years," said Dmitri Slatkov.

When I visited last week the first British journalist to be permitted access — I watched day and night by officers from the Federal Security Bureau (FSB), the successor to the KGB, who met off the train. I was warned that somebody would be listening to any telephone calls I made.

With the classic financial cuts that have followed the collapse of communism, however Arzamas-16 feels more like a forgotten provincial town than the cradle of Soviet nuclear power. Scientists at the nuclear centre where Sakharov works have not received their salaries for three months. Morale, inevitably, is low and there have been attempts by civilians to smuggle out low-grade uranium.

Since the existence of Arzamas-16 was officially confirmed, scientists have called repeatedly for emergency funding, warning of the danger of a nuclear disaster at the city's reactors. They have even threatened to take industrial action.

The barbed-wire perimeter fence, which stretches for 35 miles around the town, complete with watchtowers and 2,000 Russian interior ministry troops, does keep out criminals. Despite a recent increase in offences, including the occasional contract killing, the crime rate is eight times lower

than that of Nizhny Novgorod, the closest city, 125 miles to the north.

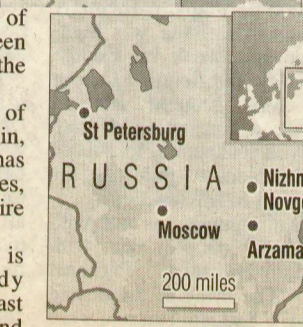
However, Arzamas-16's isolation has also prevented the investment that has transformed other Russian cities. Many of the Soviet-era buildings are crumbling and opportunities for entertainment are scarce. There is only one cinema and last week's cultural highlight was a visit from the Circus Europe, featuring a female dwarf and a man with four hands.

Nevertheless, many of the inhabitants, even the young, remain enthusiastic about living on what they regard as an island, a world away from the frantic pace of the new Russia.

"Most of our kids come back less than two years after they have been on the outside. They just can't adapt," said Yuri Sherbak, director of the town's physics and technology institute which supplies the nuclear centre with most of its young scientists.

"The people who grow up in a closed city are like fragile, sensitive plants. They feel uncomfortable in cities like Moscow. Last year there was an exchange programme which gave our students a chance to study in America or in Germany for six months. We could find only two who were prepared to go."

Valentin Tarasov, a young journalist born in Arzamas-16, agreed. "We don't want to mix," he said. "We are like islanders used to our lonely life. I am like a parrot in a cage. But I am a happy parrot."



published in 1988, Sakharov, the nuclear physicist who became a Nobel peace prize-winning critic of the Soviet regime, referred to Arzamas-16, where he had lived and worked for 19 years, merely as "the installation". To compensate for the restrictions, the Kremlin always ensured that Arzamas-16 was better off than towns in other parts of Russia.

During the communist years its people had better health care, shorter queues and more choice in the shops. The leading scientists were paid huge salaries and supplied with personal bodyguards.

Although the town's existence is openly acknowledged now, the restrictions that remain in force are numerous.

Aircraft are not allowed to fly over. Children under 16 may not leave unless accompanied by their parents. The sci-

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