

*Story**Cumbersome heritage
of the forbidden territories*

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The lives of millions are endangered by the massive level of environmental contamination in Russia.

The US-based Blacksmith Institute periodically delivers reports about the most polluted territories in the world. According to this, out of the ten most contaminated cities five are situated within the territory of the former USSR, and out of these five cities three can be found in today's Russia. The settlements indicated in the report were previously closed cities.

The notion of “closed city”, with Russian acronym called ZATO, means closed administrative territory. During the existence of the Soviet Union, centres where significant activities of military or nuclear industry were carried out, border regions and cities enclosed for security reasons were referred to as “closed cities”. In the late ‘80s approximately fifty of such settlements or establishments existed. Russians wanted to keep the cities in secret to such an extent that they even attempted to rename them (for instance the city of Molodyozhny in the territory of Moscow became Naro-Fominsk-5.) In several cases in this way entire cities disappeared from the newly printed maps. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many of these vanished territories “could be detected” again on the maps.

In October 2001 Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov in a declaration marked out six further territories as “closed cities”. One of the most famous ones is Norilsk – situated over the Arctic Circle – where some one hundred and thirty thousand people are affected by the contamination deployed from the dangerous materials. In the air strontium-90, caesium-137,

sulphur dioxide as well as non-ferrous - and heavy metals: nickel, copper, cobalt, lead and selenium can be found. In Norilsk the average life expectancy is less than the national average with 10 years. The air usually smells like sulphate and black snowfall is also a common phenomenon.

Dalnegorsk and Rudnaya Pristan are situated in the derelict far-eastern corner of Russia. These cities earned their ambiguous reputation for the extreme lead-content of their soil, which is said to be the highest in the world. The local furnace emits eighty-five tons of heavy metal to the atmosphere on a yearly scale. The water used up in the furnaces in which a hundred kilograms of lead and twenty kilograms of arson are dissolved further contaminates the environment every day.

Though, the greatest threat is coming from the chemical centre of Dzerzhinsk. According to some estimation, one and a half million people are endangered by such harmful materials as arson trioxide, mustard-gas, hydrocyanic acid, lead and mercury. In the biggest Soviet chemical-weapon production centre of the Cold War in the last seventy years nearly two hundred types of chemicals were dissolved in subsurface waters. Thus, here toxin level is seventeen million times higher than the safety limit. In the city no official data is released concerning the average life expectancy. Nevertheless, according to unofficial sources this number is 42 in case of men while in case of women it is 47. The number of patients with cancer is the highest in this territory within Russia. The local hospital has a separate department, which deals solely with illnesses connected to the workplace of people. In the cemetery of the city considerable number of tombs can be seen which belong to people who passed away under the age of forty. The previously mentioned report of the Blacksmith Institute enlists further twenty-five settlements including five Russian cities, where some three million people are endangered because of the pollutant materials deployed from various chemical and nuclear substances. Two decades ago even Soviet citizens were allowed to enter these “closed cities” only with a special permission. Nowadays, mainly foreigner visitors are not permitted to enter the ZATO cities.

Accordingly, the question is rightful: why do myriads of workers chose to live closed lives? Why do those who worked in such cities until now prefer staying there and why do not these territories become desolate? The answer is simple: in Russia, where economy has been in recession in the last decade, the industrial companies of the “closed cities” offer attractive

opportunity to those who are looking forward to making a steady living standard. These people are willing to pay with their lives in exchange for relative wellbeing.

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