

Four Minutes of Nuclear Danger. The fears of the Taimyr residents were not, it appears, without foundation. On November 11, 1988, an error by the chief physicist aboard the nuclear powered icebreaker "Rossiya" while docked in the port of Murmansk resulted in a serious breach of reactor operational safety standards which might have led to a nuclear accident. The nuclear threat lasted four minutes.

The principal cause was human error. In the atomic fleet the human factor is extremely important. At the same time, poor working and living conditions, pay and social services result in a high turnover in skilled personnel. In June 1990 this led to a two-hour warning strike within the nuclear fleet. The ship-board strike committees were not dismissed. On September 6, 1990, the nuclear powered icebreakers again came to a halt on the Northern Sea Route. This time the seamen, who had long demanded adjustments in the pay system (the issuing of cheques in hard currency), declared a day-long work stoppage and threatened to shut down the reactors the next day if the government did not meet their demands. Only then was an order signed satisfying the seamen's demands.

Willy-nilly, ice reconnaissance helicopter crews from Murmansk who operate from nuclear powered ships were also among the strikers.

While it is acknowledged that further exploitation of the Northern Sea Route is unthinkable without nuclear powered icebreakers, the design and construction of these ships fall short of modern engineering standards. The Ministry of the Maritime Fleet has acknowledged that nuclear ships are being placed in service which are obsolescent even before construction is complete.

X-rays of the Enisei. 'Glasnost' has enabled the residents of Krasnoyarsk to suddenly discover that construction was underway nearby on a subterranean storage site for liquid radioactive wastes (in the form of a tunnel beneath the Enisei) and on a chemical isotope plant for reprocessing spent nuclear reactor slugs. In response to stormy public protests construction was halted, and then cancelled in 1989.