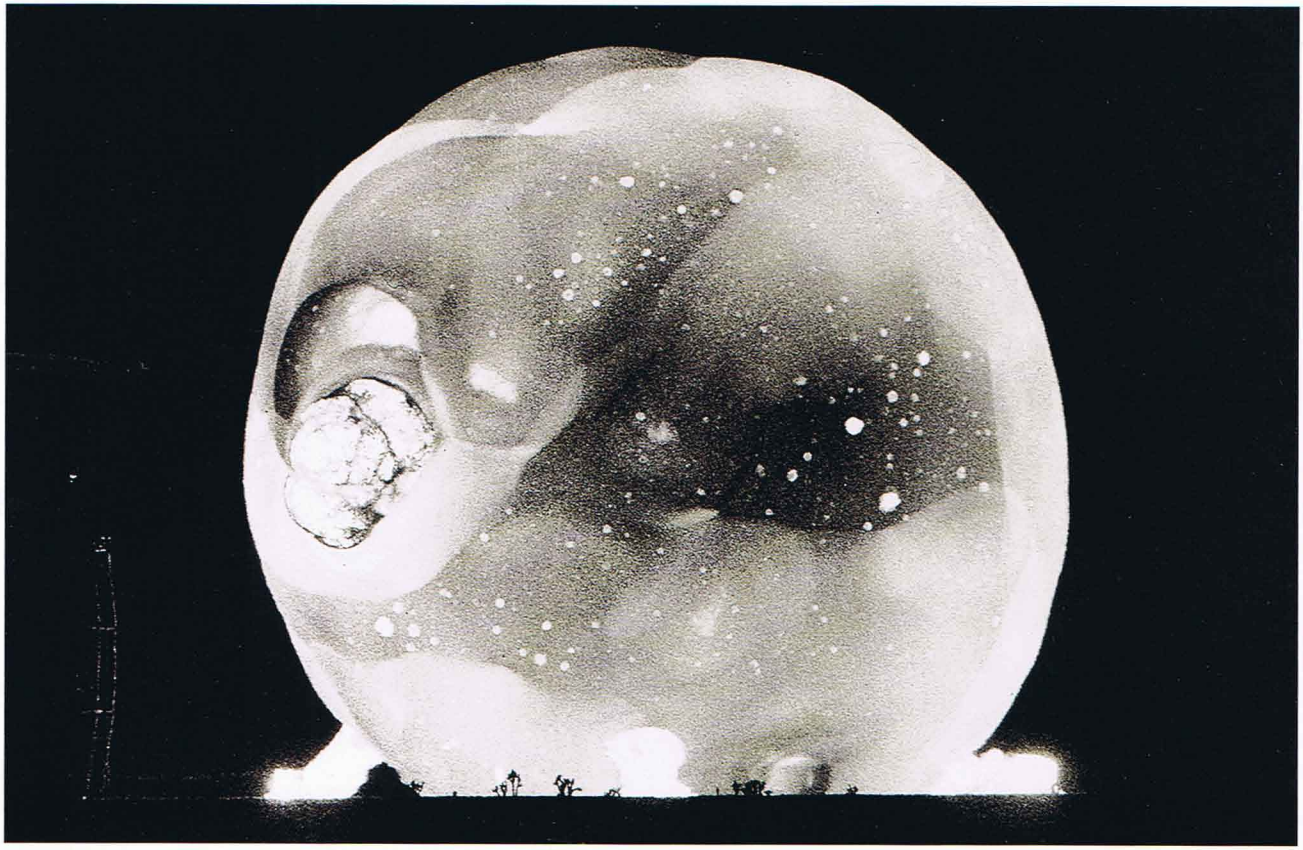
ISSUE 6 / 2007: US$10 CAN$12 £7.5 €10

Documentary Photography

Daylight magazine



Display until March 08

The Atomic Issue

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Simon Roberts

Murmansk, Russia's Nuclear Town

The Russian town of Murmansk is situated on the Kola Peninsula, a wide oval land formation in northwestern Russia that straddles the Arctic Circle. In the winter, temperatures average minus 30 degrees Celsius and the region remains in darkness for nearly twenty-four hours a day, with the sun remaining below the horizon, a phenomenon known as *polyarnye nochi*, or polar nights.

The Kola Peninsula's military significance can be traced back to World War II, when these northern waters became a lifeline for Russia and the Allies after Hitler launched attacks along the entire Soviet-Finnish border. As the world's largest town within the Arctic Circle, Murmansk's inception came about as a direct result of its strategic position, as the English and American navies shipped supplies across the Barents Sea to Russian forces behind their western-facing front line.

Today, the town is still home to a large concentration of Russia's military and nuclear arsenal. An astonishing one-fifth of the world's nuclear reactors and fuel is concentrated around the Kola Peninsula. The nearby military ports of Severomorsk, Severodvinsk, and Borisglebsk are closed not just to foreigners, but to "non-personnel" Russians as well.

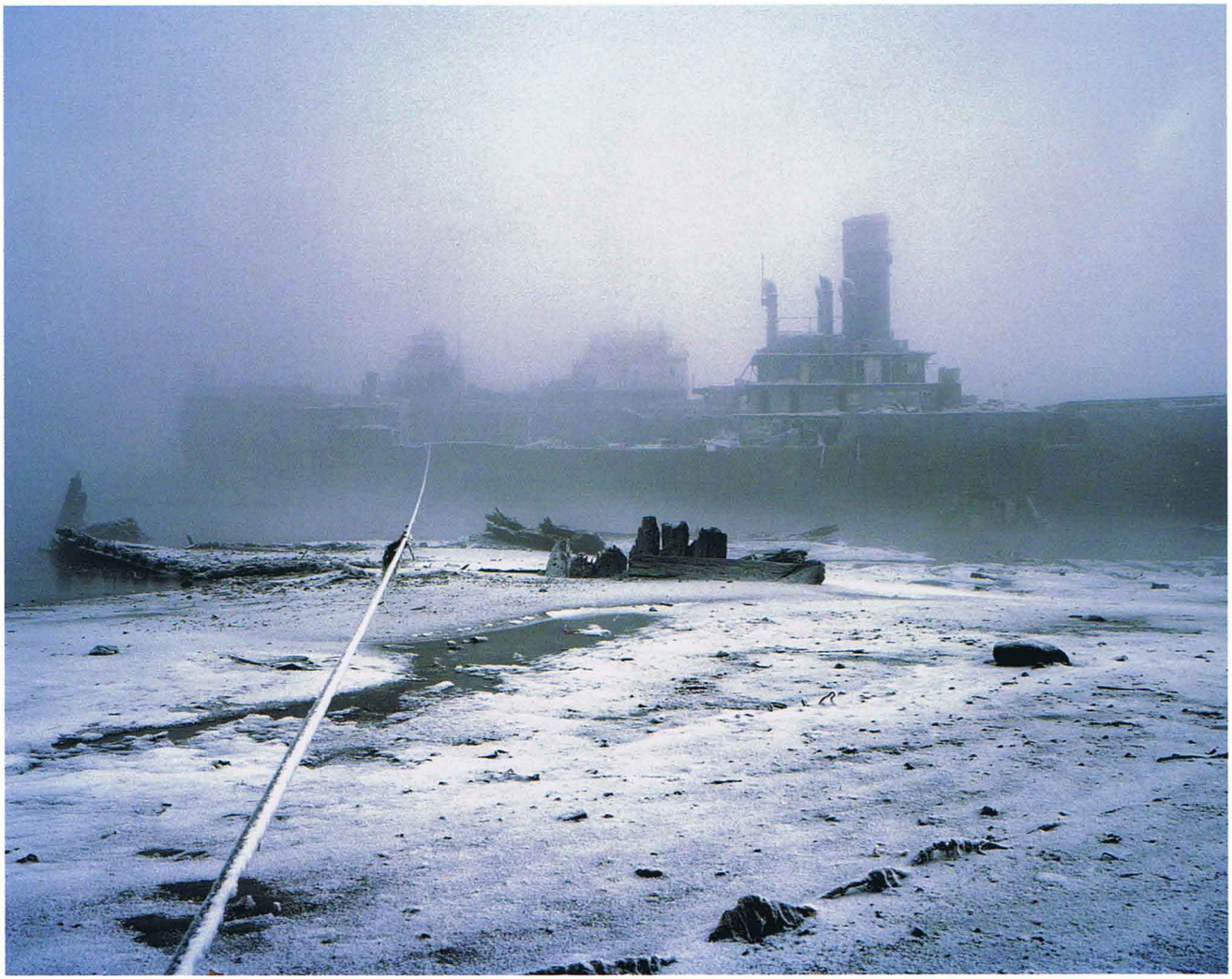
The other reason for Murmansk's veil of secrecy is the environmental crisis that threatens to break out at any moment. While statistics vary wildly, it is certain that at least one hundred nuclear-powered submarines, some equipped with warheads and nearly all loaded with radioactive material, are languishing in Murmansk's harbor. Each submarine releases its radioactive load into the sea and air as the metal deteriorates. Decommissioning the submarines would involve removing reactors, spent fuel, and radioactive waste products and shipping them to a processing facility. After reprocessing, these materials need to be contained and placed in long-term storage (where they will be safe, in theory, for tens of thousands of years). Russia estimates it will cost millions of dollars to scrap all the submarines in Murmansk, yet each year the government allocates only a fraction of its budget to improving nuclear safety.

Murmansk's negative press increased in 2000 when 118 men died in two unexplained explosions that ripped apart the 18,000 ton Kursk submarine's nose, which was packed with weaponry. On board were two nuclear reactors and about two-dozen cruise missiles.

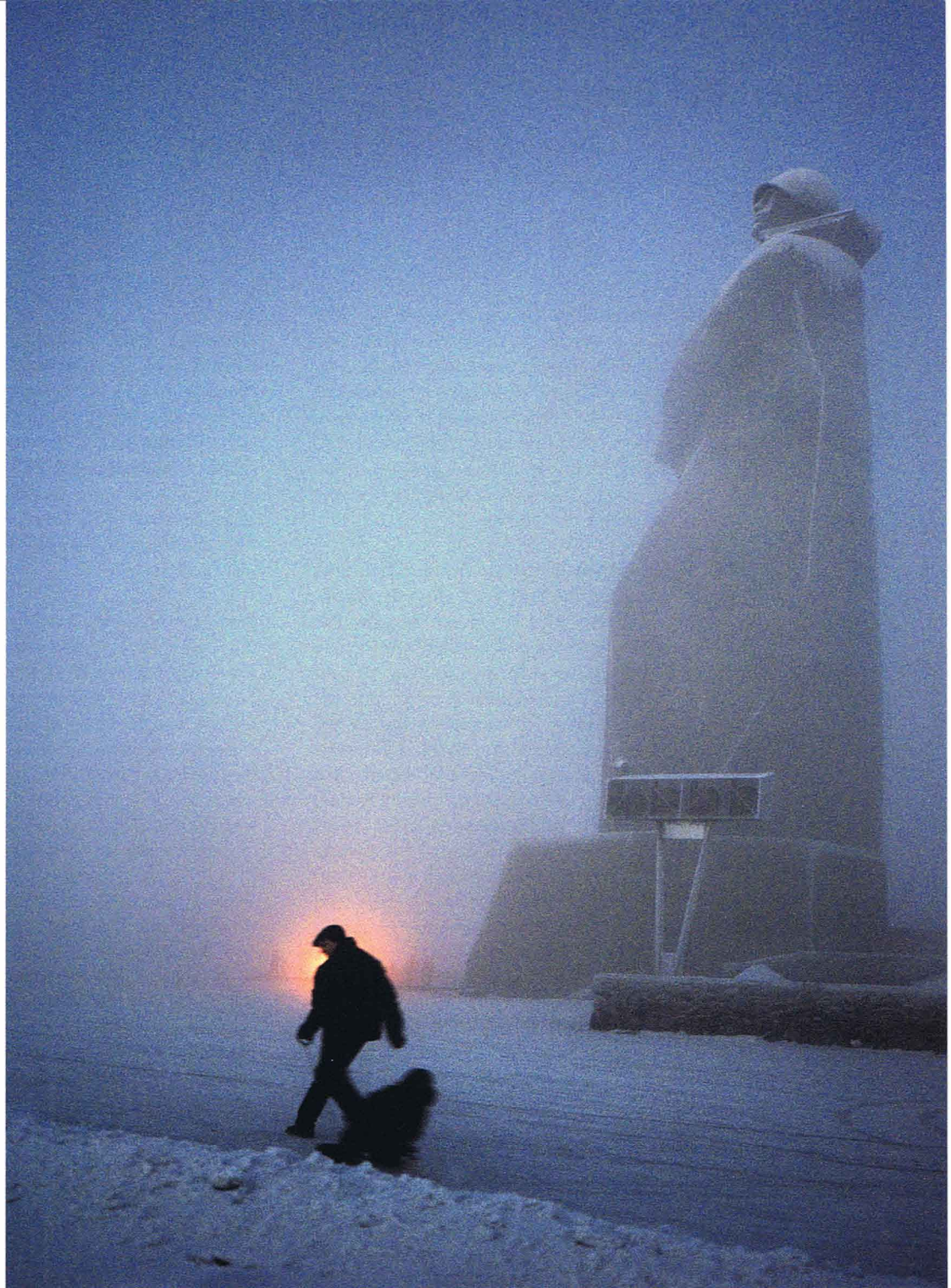
Some commentators have noted that Murmansk and its surroundings are a "nuclear dustbin" and "Chernobyl in slow motion." In fact it was only recently that Murmansk radio ceased broadcasting radiation levels along with the weather forecast.

An abandoned truck in a shipyard on the outskirts of Murmansk.

Pedestrian walkway over Murmansk's freight railyard.



The American warship, the Daniel Morgan, which was torpedoed by the Germans and sunk on May 7, 1942.
It now sits rusting in the Barents Sea north of Murmansk.



A man pulls a child on a sledge past the "Alyosha" statue built on a hill overlooking Murmansk.

Scrap metal yard at Murmansk Port.