

Tales of the Unexplained...

DID UFO BLAST A HOLE IN RUSSIA?

AFTER two hours' hard work in his fields, farmer Sergei Semenov was glad to rest for a few minutes in the sunshine.

It was just after 7 a.m. on June 30, 1908, and the short, warm Northern Siberian summer was the busiest time on the farm.

Semenov, sitting in his porch, was thinking of the day ahead when, at exactly 7.17 a.m., the early-morning peace was shattered by a massive explosion and a blinding light that filled the sky.

He was thrown from the porch and knocked unconscious. When he came to he heard a mighty thundering noise that "shook the whole house and nearly moved it from its foundations."

Recalling the blast later he said: "There was a great flash, and so much heat my shirt was almost burned off my back."

"I saw a huge ball of fire that covered an enormous part of the sky. Afterwards it was very dark, as though the sun had set."

Semenov was one of thousands of eye-witnesses of perhaps the greatest and most mysterious explosion the world has ever known, in the Tunguska River Valley.

Massive

As far away as London — some nine hours behind — it was possible to read the small print in a newspaper at 11 p.m.

Golfers in Kent wrote to The Times that they could have played a round at 2 a.m.

In Stockholm, sharp, scenic photographs were taken in the middle of the brief northern night.

Bright shining clouds persisted until morning over Germany, and in Holland astronomers were unable to see the stars because of the brightness of the night sky.

Scientific instruments in London and around the world recorded a massive shock wave, and in Russia the bright nights went on well into July.

Today, nearly 80 years later, whatever came hurtling from space to explode with such terrifying force remains a mystery.

That it happened in such a remote region was a stroke of good fortune. It devastated an area the size of Eeningrad or Birmingham, but there were no reported human casualties.

For the wildlife there was no escape, and whole herds of reindeer were incinerated.

Fire

Nearly all the trees in an area more than 40 miles across were ripped from the earth and thrown outwards to lie like the spokes of a giant wheel.

Nomad tribesmen 45 miles from the explosion were hurled to the ground, their tents ripped away by a wind so hot it scorched the skin.

Investigations into the holocaust were delayed by the revolutionary upheavals in Russia, and World War I.

By **ROBIN CORRY**

Finally, in 1921, Professor Leonid A. Kulik, of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, embarked on a 20-year quest to seek out the cause.

But when he died, killed by the Nazis in the Second World War, he had still not come to any clear conclusion.

In a series of expeditions, Kulik and a small team of fellow scientists and local guides hacked their way through marshy forest to reach the scene of the blast.

They found a massive bowl, nearly a mile across, and uprooted, rotted tree trunks over an area of 2,000 square miles.

And they questioned eye-witnesses, who spoke

of a vivid ball of fire "so bright it made even the sun seem dark" sweeping across the sky.

People more than 50 miles from the blast, like farmer Semenov, spoke of "violent vibrations" followed by "a fiery body trailing a wide band of light across the sky."

Several observers reported a fireball followed by a mushroom-shaped pillar of smoke many miles high.

The local newspaper of Irkutsk reported that in a village 200 miles from the blast "the peasants saw a body shining too brightly for the naked eye with a bluish-white light."

"It moved vertically downward for about ten minutes. When it approached the ground it seemed to disintegrate and in its place a huge cloud of black smoke was formed. "A loud crash like gun-

fire was heard. All the buildings shook and a forked tongue of flame broke through the cloud."

Not until 1945, as the atomic dust mushroomed above Hiroshima and Nagasaki, did scientists realise many of the witnesses could have been describing a nuclear explosion.

Some experts believe the blast was a spaceship from another planet that

overheated in the earth's atmosphere, making the nuclear fuel unstable and setting off an explosion equivalent to a 30-megaton bomb.

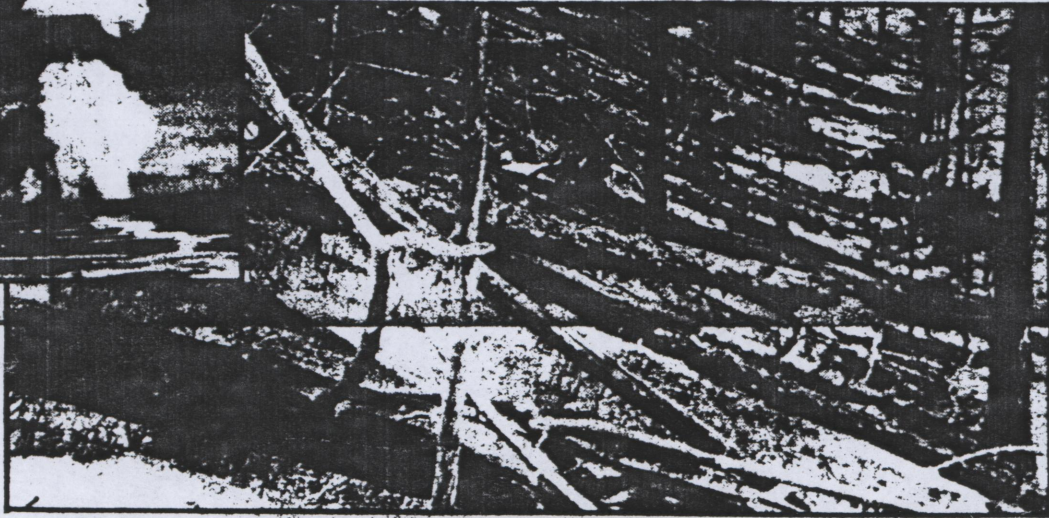
There is plenty of evidence on their side:

- Piecing together witnesses' accounts, the object appears to have changed course. Only a controlled vehicle could have done that.
- It seems to have been travelling relatively slowly — just over 2,000 m.p.h. That is not a lot faster than some modern military planes.
- The earth's magnetic field is disturbed by a nuclear explosion. The Siberian blast had a similar effect.
- There is no sign that anything actually hit the earth. Scientists calculate that the blast was five miles above the earth's surface.
- The pattern of destruction tallied with that of a nuclear bomb.
- Blisters were found on reindeer that survived similar to radiation

Other theories suggest the explosion was caused by: A comet. Comets are thought to be masses of frozen gases and space debris. If one entered the earth's atmosphere it could become hot enough to explode. Some scientists think this is the most likely explanation.

Anti-matter, which is like normal matter, but made up of positive particles, instead of the negative particles we call electrons. If it came into contact with ordinary matter there would be a massive explosion.

A meteorite falling to earth. Most of them burn up in the atmosphere before reaching the ground, but one that fell on Arizona in pre-historic times left a crater three-quarters of a mile across. It seems unlikely, as all the evidence points to an explosion in the air.



• (TOP LEFT) A nuclear explosion mushrooms upwards. This was how eye-witnesses described the pillar of smoke after the Siberian Fireball. (ABOVE) In 1953, nearly half a century after the blast, the region was still devastated, leaving only flattened and charred tree trunks.

burns on cattle in New Mexico after the dust cloud from America's first nuclear test hit them.

• There were plant mutations, similar to those in Japan after the 1945 atomic bombs.

• Tiny green globules of melted dust, called trinitites, produced by nuclear blasts, were found.

Witnesses reported a large, bluish, cylindrical object racing through the sky with a roaring sound, leaving a vapour trail, just before the blast.



Professor Kulik ... sought truth

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'It lit up the sky all night'