

Glimpse Into Underground Sect That Shocked Russia

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A sect member calling others to evening prayers at their residence, where 20 children were removed by police. **Nikolay Alexandrov**

KAZAN — Authorities spoke of a creepy cult living in an "eight-level ant house" dug deep into the ground, where children were kept in unheated cells and starved of daylight. A visit to the compound suggests a more ordinary reality.

A brief visit inside the compound, which provided shocking headlines around the world when police raided it and seized the children, revealed none of the elaborate underground design described by prosecutors. Nor does a police video showing rooms inside. The father of a cult member, who originally disapproved of his daughter joining the group, said he was able to visit freely and has no complaints about how members live or treat their children.

The conflicting portrayals raise questions about whether authorities may have exaggerated the eccentricity of the sect, perhaps in an effort to show they are cracking down on radical

Islamic groups. The spokeswoman for Kazan prosecutors did not answer repeated calls to her office and cell phones on Monday.

Police stumbled upon the bizarre sect in early August as they investigated what they described as a terrorist attack that killed a top cleric in oil-rich Tatarstan, where the population is about 60 percent Muslim. Officials blamed the attack on the radical Islamic groups proliferating in the region.

Police seized the 20 children living in the compound and put them in orphanages. Their parents were charged with child abuse, which prosecutors said could deprive them of custody for up to two years. Prosecutors allege that the children, who did not attend public schools, lived in conditions "unfit for humans," in small, dark and unventilated cells dug into the earth. Health officials said the children rarely saw the light of day.

Relatives of cult members disputed that. Madganur Ziganshin, whose daughter, Ralifa Ibragimova, joined the cult over his objections, said the room where she lived with her husband and four children was not underground and had normal windows.

He also disputed claims that the children rarely saw sunshine and were not allowed to leave the property, saying they had visited both sets of grandparents and gone to summer camp, and that he visited frequently for up to three days at a time.

"They pray. They are religious. But they are not junkies, drunks or bandits," Ziganshin said in his home in the village of Bailyangar, 200 kilometers away. "They never abuse the kids, never beat them."

Neighbors, however, said the children were raised to look upon others with disdain and would curse and throw stones from inside their compound.

"They consider themselves a higher race, while other people are garbage," said Ildar Khusainov, 42, who lives in a nearby wooden house.

It was not possible to determine from a short visit to the compound or from the video taken by police the day of the raid how much, if any, of the living space lies underground.

The compound's main, three-story house is built into the side of a steep hill. A covered passageway leads down the hill to another house, with doors on both sides. At street level, a wooden minaret topped by a tin crescent moon rises above a 2-meter fence. Power was cut off years ago when the sect stopped paying its utility bills. The sect now gets water from a well and uses wood and propane gas for heat.

The sect, whose members call themselves "Muammin" — Arabic for "believers" — had thousands of followers in the 1990s. But they began to drift away after the founder, Faizrakhman Satarov, declared himself the "messenger of God" and his sect to be the world's only true Muslims. When police raided about 60 people, including the children, were living in the compound.

Ibragimova's husband accused authorities of seizing the children and filing abuse charges as a pretext for closing down the sect. Police have not reported finding weapons or any other evidence that sect members were involved in violence.

"They want to frighten us so that we leave by ourselves, so that we disappear," said Shamil Ibragimov, a lean 30-year-old with a thin beard. "This is immoral. This is lawlessness."

Ibragimov was at the compound on Sunday packing his possessions. His wife suffered a miscarriage the day after the children were seized, and on Friday he sent her to her parents' home in Bailyangar. He was preparing to join her there and hoped they would soon regain custody of their children, aged 18 months to 9 years.

He said it took him five days to locate the children in an orphanage outside Kazan. They seemed happy but "did not realize they might lose their parents forever," their father said.

The fate of the sect's property remains unclear. Police, accompanied by social workers and construction experts, conducted a third search last week to further assess the living conditions and decide whether the haphazardly built structures should be demolished or allowed to stand.

In many ways, conditions at the compound are typical for rural Russia. Ziganshin's wooden house in Bailyangar, for example, has low ceilings and creaky floors, with a wood-burning stove in the kitchen for heat and cooking.

Sect leaders are enraged over the seizure of the children and the police action against their holy project, and they have vowed to triumph.

"Allah will punish you," Gumer Ganiyev, the sect leader's deputy, yelled at police officers. "You will all die tomorrow."

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