

Modernizing Russia's Tragic History

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In the Svirstroi village in the Leningrad region, there is a large bronze statue of a strong, stocky man in a long coat and cap on a high red granite pedestal, located behind brightly colored tents where the locals do a brisk business selling souvenirs at the Vepskoi market. The inscription reveals that this is a monument to Sergei Kirov, the leader of the Leningrad Communists who was killed under mysterious circumstances in 1934. It was his murder that gave Josef Stalin an excuse to unleash the Great Terror during the second half of the 1930s.

Higher up, beyond the statue of Kirov, stands the Svirskoi hydroelectric plant, built during Stalin's reign by gulag prisoners, at least half of whom were imprisoned for political crimes. Estimates indicate that no fewer than 480,000 people in the northwestern region of the Soviet Union suffered during those horrendous years of repression, and tens of thousands of those — including a part of the workers who built the hydroelectric plant — were shot and killed. But the Leningrad region has only a few memorial cemeteries and monuments to those victims, while there are hundreds of monuments and streets dedicated to Lenin, Kirov, Bolshevik leader Moisei Uritsky and other Communist leaders.

The Svirskoi hydroelectric plant — and the entire town built around it — was built on bones

and blood of political prisoners of the Soviet regime. And although at the nearby Alexander-Svirsky Monastery, founded in the late 15th century, visitors are occasionally told that during the Soviet period the monastery was closed and handed over to the local forced labor camps and was almost certainly the site of mass shootings, any mention or memory of the victims of state terror is barely discernible through the countless references to Soviet geographical names and pictures of the Soviet past.

Anatoly Razumov is a bibliographer and historian of the Leningrad region who pursues his task with almost religious devotion. Day after day, he has worked since 1991 to recover the names of the people shot and killed in the camps and prisons of northwest Russia. He and his colleagues have already assembled nine of the 15 volumes that will contain a list of the people shot in the Leningrad region. The Levashenskoye Cemetery near St. Petersburg alone holds the bodies of about 50,000 people who were shot by the NKVD between 1937 and 1954 and secretly buried there.

Razumov's story about the bloody repression that affected every strata of the population and every city and town in the region without exception — and the attempt to “build socialism” at the cost of the lives and health of hundreds of thousands of people — served as an eerie backdrop for the annual Valdai Club meeting of Russia experts. At one of the Valdai functions, participants gathered on the Kronstadt ship and sailed down the waters of the Neva, Svir, Ladoga and Onega, passing by numerous gulags along the way, although few were aware of this fact.

Is modernization of Russia possible without revealing the whole truth about the Soviet period of Russian history, and without erecting monuments and memorial plaques to the victims of repression in every city and village? Most of the Valdai Club experts are convinced that it would be impossible.

Russia has not fully examined this tragic period of its history, so it continues to block even basic progress, not to mention any hope of modernization. The legacy of government oppression continues in today's Russia. The authorities continue to be unaccountable to the public, and law enforcement agencies continue to abuse basic human rights.

The pessimists among the Valdai Club members believe that the roots of state-sponsored terror and curtailment of freedoms go back way beyond the Soviet period, and that Stalin only brought terror to new levels. They believe that Russia's leaders will never move beyond a mindset of control and violence and a disregard for human rights, checks and balances and democracy. At the same time, the Valdai optimists believe that there are precedents in Russian history when the country managed to carry out large-scale and successful liberal reforms, such as those of the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. They also point to numerous examples of successful modernization programs in autocratic countries, such as China, Singapore and South Korea.

At the same time, neither group takes a serious view of President Dmitry Medvedev's attempts to impose modernization from above. The government has no real modernization plan or strategy. Neither are there plans for serious institutional reforms, in contrast to those implemented under the rule of Tsars Alexander II and Nicholas II. Leaders have expressed no willingness to change the basic relationship between the government and the people. The

president himself does not clarify the situation, having refused to meet with the Valdai Club. As for Putin, he has always preferred to avoid the topic of modernization, thus showing his clear preference for status quo power vertical and state capitalism models.

During a session on modernization, the condition of the country was best described by one of the participants, who said: “Many write about Russia’s growing power — its military power, economic power and political power. But even with all that power, for some reason it can’t take a single step forward.”

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