

Dishonoring Stalin's Victims and Russian History

By [Peter Reddaway](#)

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Many Western observers believe that President Vladimir Putin's authoritarian regime has in effect banned a Russian edition of a widely acclaimed 2007 book by the British historian Orlando Figes, "The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia." A professor at London's Birkbeck College, Figes himself inspired this explanation. In a 2009 interview, he suggested that his first Russian publisher dropped the project due to "political pressure" because his study of Stalin-era terror "is inconvenient to the current regime." Three years later, his explanation continues to circulate.

We doubted Figes' explanation at the time — partly because excellent Russian historians are themselves publishing so many uncensored exposes of the horrors of Stalinism — but only now are we able to disprove it. (Since neither of us has ever had any contact with Figes, there was no personal animus in our investigation.) Our examination of transcripts of the Russian-language interviews that he used to write "The Whisperers," and of documents provided by Russians close to the project, tells a different story. A second Russian publisher, Corpus,

had no political qualms about soon contracting the book. In 2010, however, Corpus also canceled the project. The reasons had nothing to do with Putin's regime but with Figes himself.

In 2004, specialists at Memorial, a widely respected human rights organization founded in 1988 on behalf of victims and survivors of Stalin's terror, were contracted by Figes to conduct hundreds of interviews for "The Whisperers," now archived at Memorial. In preparing for the Russian edition, Corpus commissioned Memorial to provide the original Russian-language versions of Figes' quotations and to check his other English-language translations. What Memorial's researchers found was a startling number of minor and major errors. It was concluded that publication "as is" would cause a scandal in Russia.

This revelation did not entirely surprise us, though what we learned was shocking. Separately, we had been following Figes' academic and related abuses for some time. They began in 1997, with his book "A People's Tragedy," in which the Harvard historian Richard Pipes found scholarly shortcomings. In a 2002 Times literary supplement review of Figes' cultural history of Russia, "Natasha's Dance," Rachel Polonsky of Cambridge University pointed out Figes' careless borrowing of words and ideas of other writers without adequate acknowledgment. One of those writers, historian Priscilla Roosevelt, wrote to us: "Figes appropriated obscure memoirs I had used in my book 'Life on the Russian Country Estate,' but changed their content and messed up the references.'" Another leading scholar, T.J. Binyon, wrote of "Natasha's Dance": "Factual errors and mistaken assertions strew its pages more thickly than autumnal leaves in Vallombrosa."

In 2010, a different dimension of Figes' practices came to light. For some time, he had been writing anonymous derogatory reviews on Amazon of books by his colleagues in Russian history, notably Polonsky and Robert Service of Oxford University. Polonsky's "Molotov's Magic Lantern," for example, was "pretentious" and "the sort of book that makes you wonder why it was ever published." Meanwhile, Figes wrote on Amazon, also anonymously, a rave review of his own recent "The Whisperers." It was, Figes said, a "beautiful and necessary" account of Soviet history written by an author with "superb story-telling skills. I hope he writes forever."

When Service and Polonsky expressed their suspicion that Figes had written the reviews, his lawyer threatened Service with court action. Soon, however, Figes was compelled to admit that he had indeed written the anonymous reviews. Service summed up the affair: Figes had "lied through his teeth for a week and threatened to sue me for libel if I didn't say black was white. If there is one thing that should come out of this, it is the importance of giving people freedom to speak the truth without the menace of financial ruin."

At about the same time, the true story of the Russian edition of Figes' "The Whisperers" was unfolding behind the scenes in Moscow. In summer 2010, representatives of three Russian organizations involved — the publisher Corpus, Memorial and the Dynastia foundation, which owned the Russian rights and paid for the translation — met to consider what Memorial's researchers had uncovered. According to an account by one participant, the group tried to salvage the project, but the researchers had documented too many "anachronisms, incorrect interpretations, stupid mistakes and pure nonsense." All of "The Whisperers'" "facts, dates, names and terms, and the biographies of its central figures, need to be

checked," the participant added. It was too much. A decision was made against proceeding with the Russian edition, as Dynastia informed Figes in an April 6, 2011, letter to his London literary agency.

Indeed, after looking at only a few chapters of "The Whisperers," Memorial found so many misrepresentations of the life stories of Stalin's victims that its chief researcher said, "I simply wept as I read it and tried to make corrections." Here are just three examples, which we have also examined:

1. To begin with an example that blends mistakes with invention, consider Figes' treatment of Natalia Danilova (p. 253), whose father had been arrested. After misrepresenting her family history, Figes puts words in her mouth, evidently to help justify the title of his book: Except for an aunt, "the rest of us could only whisper in dissent." The "quotation" does not appear in Memorial's meticulous transcription of its recorded interview with Danilova.
2. Figes invents "facts" in other cases, apparently also for dramatic purpose. According to "The Whisperers" (pp. 215–17, 292–93), "it is inconceivable" that Mikhail Stroikov could have completed his dissertation while in prison "without the support of the political police. He had two uncles in the OGPU." But there is no evidence that Stroikov had any uncles, nor is there any reason to allege that he had the support of the secret police. Figes also claims that for helping Stroikov's family, a friend then in exile was "rearrested, imprisoned and later shot." In reality, this friend was not rearrested, imprisoned or executed, but lived almost to the age of 90.
3. Figes' distortion of the fate of Dina Ioelson–Grodzianskaya (pp. 361–62), who survived eight years in the gulag, is grievous in a different respect. After placing her in the wrong concentration camp, he alleges that she was "one of the many 'trusties'" whose collaboration earned them "those small advantages which ... could make the difference between life and death." There is no evidence in the interviews used by Figes that Ioelson–Grodzianskaya was ever a "trusty" or received any special privileges. As a leading Memorial researcher commented, Figes' account is "a direct insult to the memory of a prisoner."


"The Whisperers" may be consistent with Figes' other practices, but for us, longtime students (and friends) of victims of Stalinist and other Soviet-era repressions, the book's defects are especially grave. For many Russians, particularly surviving family members, Stalin's millions of victims are a "sacred memory." Figes has not, to say the least, been faithful to that memory — nor to the truth-telling mission of the often politically embattled Memorial, which, despite the effort expended, honorably agreed with the decision against publishing the Russian edition. Still more, a great many Russians have suffered, even died, for, as Service put it, the "freedom to speak the truth." Figes has not honored that martyrdom either.

Unfortunately, *The Whisperers* is still regarded by many Western readers, including scholars, as an exemplary study of Soviet history. These new revelations show, however, that Figes work cannot be read without considerable caution. Indeed, he cannot be fully trusted even with open sources. Thus, in *The Whisperers* Figes also maligns the memory of the late Soviet poet and longtime editor of *Novy Mir*, Alexander Tvardovsky, a bold forerunner of Mikhail Gorbachev's anti-Stalinist thinking, by stating that Tvardovsky betrayed his own father to the police during the terror (p. 134). Figes allegation has been convincingly refuted in the Russian

press.

In his latest book, "Just Send Me Word," the story of a deeply moving, secret, more than eight-year correspondence between an inmate in Stalin's remote gulag and a devoted woman in Moscow, who later became his wife, Figes gives the impression that he retains the full support of Memorial.

This, too, is untrue. In a letter, one of Memorial's leading figures recently wrote about Figes, "Many of us have formed an impression of him as being ... a very mediocre researcher and an incompetent handler of sources who is poorly oriented in his chosen topic, but an energetic and talented businessman." As a result, the writer continued, "In the future, we do not want to link his name with that of Memorial."

Peter Reddaway is professor emeritus of political science at George Washington University. Stephen F. Cohen is professor of Russian studies at New York University. This is a slightly abridged version of an article that appeared in The Nation. The full version, as well as a comment by Orlando Figes and an exchange of letters between him and the authors, can be found on thenation.com.

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