

Stalin's Shadow: How a Gulag Historian Fell Victim to Russia's Dark Past

Eighty years on from the Great Purge, Stalin is striking back and historians are the victims

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A Karelian activist and historian Yuri Dmitriev is being accused of a shocking crime — using his adopted daughter to produce pornographic materials. **Sofia Pankevich**

“The condemned were brought by car to a forest. There, deep pits were dug and the prisoners were told to lay down face down. After that they were shot”.

So read the notes of the interrogation of NKVD executioner Mikhail Matveyev, who personally executed 1111 prisoners from the notorious Solovki island camp in Karelia in the Russian Far North. It took him four days to execute the whole group.

The time was November, 1937, when Russia had been plunged into the Great Purge, the climax of Stalin’s terror. Approximately 750,000 Soviet citizens were killed in 15 months.

Ordered to maintain silence and conspiracy, Matveyev developed his own system for mass killings. Prisoners were first stripped of their clothes in one room, then tied in another, and then knocked out with a wooden bludgeon, so that they would keep silent. The victims were stockpiled in groups of 40-50 in a truck, and next taken to the place of execution.

The mass graves of Matveyev's execution were only discovered in 1997 in the woods of Sandarmokh, Karelia. And twenty years on, this horrific story from a distant past is triggering new repression.

A shocking accusation

Talking to reporters in the office of Memorial, an independent watchdog which focuses on researching Soviet political repression and human rights, Yekaterina can't fight her tears. "They took Natasha," Yekaterina says. "She keeps asking: 'Where's papa? When will he take me home?'"

The father, Yuri Dmitriev, 61, is head of Karelia Memorial branch and was arrested last December. He is now standing trial in a local court in the regional capital of Petrozavodsk.

Dmitriev is being accused of a shocking crime — using his adopted daughter, Natasha, 11, to produce pornographic materials. The case against him consists of several photos of Natasha, naked. They were discovered on Dmitriev's computer in December, and later classified as pornographic by the Center of Socio-Cultural Expertise, acting on the request of law enforcement agencies. This institution also provided legal expertise in the Pussy Riot and Jehovah's Witnesses "extremism" trials.

Those who know Dmitriev dismiss the accusation completely. "It's totally absurd. Makes no sense", says Yekaterina, Dmitriev's other daughter. Colleagues at Memorial and elsewhere say they are certain the photos have nothing to do with pornography, and that the activist has been framed because of his professional activity.

"The charge against him is void, and everyone knows it," Sergey Krivenko, Member of Memorial board and of the president's Human Rights Council, told The Moscow Times. "It's been brought about because of his work commemorating victims of Stalin's terror."

The photos of Natasha that were discovered on Dmitriev's computer amount to no more than nudity: a naked child, photographed from all sides. Taken over several years, the photos were stored in a special file and never distributed. But that did not stop an anonymous tip-off from setting a criminal trial in motion.

Dmitriev's lawyer, Victor Anufriev, says that the photographs have an entirely innocent explanation. After adopting a little girl from an orphanage, Dmitriev, who was institutionalized as a child himself, was constantly worried that child protection services would take the girl from him.

When Natasha was 3 or 4 years old, nursery carers found what they thought were bruises (in fact, they were later identified as traces of mustard plaster). Since then, Dmitriev kept record of the girl's physical appearance, the lawyer says.

Last January, Russian television turned Dmitriev's case into a critical report about Memorial, which has long been targeted by the Russian government and pro-Kremlin vigilantes. This time, Memorial was portrayed not only as political opposition and an internal enemy, but also as a hotbed for pedophilia.

"We know that the charges against him are bullshit. We don't know who framed him. But after this television report he became a political prisoner", said Irina Fliege, director of Memorial's Research and Information Center, who is also Dmitriev's longtime collaborator.

If found guilty, Dmitriev faces up to 15 years in prison.

Bones of terror

Stalin's regime turned on its own executioners, who often shared the same fate as their victims. In 1938, a year after Matveyev killed his prisoners, he was arrested — on charges of misuse of power and breaking the Soviet legal order. He was accused of unlawfully executing a pregnant woman and beating prisoners prior to execution in what, ironically, the regime described as the "dehumanized treatment of prisoners".

Half a century later in the late 1980s, Gorbachev's Perestroika was underway. It was as much about the past as it was about the future. The nation wanted to lift the veil from its dreadful history. Newspapers and magazines — sold in their millions — were full of stories about Stalin's terror. Information spread across the country, and relatives of the NKVD's victims started looking for their graves.

Matveyev's interrogation was declassified in 1989. The bloody fate of the 1111 Solovki prisoners who vanished without trace in 1937 finally saw the light of day. But it was only in 1997, 60 years after the execution, that local Karelian activist Yuri Dmitriev, together with Irina Fliege and Veniamin Iofe from St Petersburg, discovered the location of the mass grave. They found it in the Sandarmokh forest, 19 kilometers from the town of Medvezhyegorsk, "the capital" of notorious Belbaltlag (the White Sea Gulag).

These victims were far from ordinary: prominent elite figures from all corners of Soviet empire. The group included as many as 200 well known Ukrainian intellectuals.

"For Ukraine, Sandarmokh is their Buchenwald", says Krivenko.

The bones of Stalin's terror line the Russian North and Karelia is no exception. In total, more than 9500 Gulag prisoners were executed in the Sandarmokh area. Dmitriev devoted his entire career to identifying them to ensure their memory lives on.

August 5, 1937, marks the official start of Stalin's Great Purge. Every year since 1997, Sandarmokh has hosted a memorial service on this day which has become a big international event. Several hundred pilgrims and delegations from Ukraine, Poland, Germany, Finland and the Baltic travel to the forest to pay their respects to the victims.

Initially, local authorities supported the initiative. The governor's office built a road to the site, helped erect monuments and provided transportation. Yuri Dmitriev, one of the event's main organizers, received a certificate of merit from the Karelian government. Everyone,

including officials, stuck to a simple formula, Fliege says: “We are different, but we have our common memory”.

That formula started breaking apart in Summer 2014, when the Ukrainian delegation, always the largest, snubbed the event. Conflict between Moscow and Kiev had by that point broken into deadly battles in eastern Ukraine. In 2015, as political heat kept rising, the local administration refused to provide the speaker system. Neither Dmitriev or Fliege, nor any foreign representative were allowed to speak. “They just didn’t know what we were going to say,” says Fliege.

“Local government is not against commemorating the victims of Stalin’s terror. But it is wary of the surrounding context,” says Yan Rachinsky, Memorial’s co-chairman. As Russia’s leadership becomes increasingly revisionist in its memory politics, history has become a political instrument.

De-Stalinization Meets Re-Stalinization

When Russians were given access to their history and discovered the scale of Stalin’s terror, the newly re-emerged Russian state always found itself trapped. Even Boris Yeltsin and his democratic government, who were keen to destalinize the country, were afraid to go the whole way.

“The Russian state has never officially avowed itself guilty of persecuting its own citizens”, — says Rachinsky.

In Russia, Stalin is a myth, a symbol of law and order and logo of a powerful, non-accountable, sacred state. The more authoritarian Russia becomes, the more important Stalin is. The freer it gets, the less significant he becomes.

In the end of the 2000s, then-president Dmitry Medvedev attempted to kickstart a new wave of de-Stalinization. There was a plan to open still classified NKVD-KGB archives, develop the rehabilitation process, establish commemoration sites, and, most importantly, revise Stalin’s heritage and image in the public space. It was decided that Moscow would have its own monument to the victims of Stalin’s terror. That monument is due to be opened this year, marking the 80th anniversary of the Great Purge, and Vladimir Putin is expected to attend. But, ironically, it will appear only after [new monuments to Stalin himself](#) have popped up in different Russian regions.

Medvedev’s de-Stalinization plan effectively died when Putin came back to the Kremlin in 2012. Two years later, Russia annexed Crimea and began a new confrontation with the West. Russian propaganda presented the war in Ukraine as a sequel to the Great Patriotic War, with the West as the heir of the Nazis. Another page was turned in Russia’s relationship with Stalin.

In 2009, Putin and Medvedev condemned the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a Soviet neutrality agreement with Nazi Germany, as a “criminal collusion” of two dictators. But in 2015, Putin stressed the pact was an important step to secure Russia’s safety.

“Of course, Russian leaders are not great supporters of mass repressions. But for them to condemn Stalin means to admit the guilt,” says Rachinsky.

By 2017, re-Stalinization had found its way to mostly every part of Russian life. Stalin’s popularity across Russia [reached a 16-year high](#). Historical narratives that explore the criminal nature of Stalin’s rule are viewed as a falsification of history, designed to undermine Russia’s greatness.

The arrest of Yuri Dmitriev, a historian who made it his mission to collect the names of Stalin’s victims in Karelia, falls into the same category. “We can see now historians being targeted by the state,” says Nikolay Svanidze, a well-known TV anchor and popularizer of Russian history. “We can see they are now being treated as the political opposition.”

Last August, for the first time in 20 years, the Karelian government declined from taking part in [commemorations in Sandarmokh](#). The Russian Orthodox Church also declined to participate — again for the first time. Starting from 2016, Days of memory in Sandarmokh no longer enjoy official support. In October 2016, Memorial was labeled a “foreign agent” by the Russian government. And in December, Dmitriev was arrested.

Dmitriev’s colleagues say they do not understand what exactly triggered his arrest. Some believe it might be a political decision made on a local level. Others say it could even be the outcome of some personal conflict: Dmitriev is a hard-hitting person, he could have enemies. He might, perhaps, have been targeted from Moscow (though activists doubt it.) What everyone agrees on is that it is the general sense of re-Stalinization, spreading across the country, that has made the case possible.

“I told Natasha,” Yekaterina continues, in a scene that could be a deja-vu from the 1930s, “that our father will come to take her back soon, and if not him, then I will.”

Almost miraculously, Mikhail Matveyev, the executioner of 1111 Solovki prisoners in Sandarmokh, survived the purge. He was released from prison two years after his arrest in late 1938, dying peacefully, of old age, in 1971. And his shadow continues to haunt Russia.

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