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Left Out in the Cold for Decades, Russia's 'Gulag Children' Battle to Return Home

Russians born in Stalin's camps are still fighting for compensation the law says they are entitled to.

By Felix Light

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Galina Yanchikova. **Felix Light / MT**

DUBOVKA — One of Galina Yanchikova's earliest memories is playing with her grandfather's feet as a three year old the last time she saw him before he left exile in Kazakhstan to try to return to Moscow.

Prominent Marxist activist and academic Friedrich Bauermeister had left Germany with his family for Stalin's U.S.S.R. in 1934, and been given a central Moscow apartment and a teaching job, before being deported to the Kazakh steppe along with the rest of Russia's German population seven years later when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union.

Yanchikova, 65, one of around 1,500 surviving children born in internal exile to Gulag inmates imprisoned under Stalin, has spent a decade fighting for the compensation Russian law guarantees to descendents of victims of Soviet-era repressions that would allow her to leave her isolated cottage.

Now, a legislative battle in Russia's parliament could make or break the hopes for restitution of the dwindling band of "Gulag Children."

"I can't live here much longer. I'm getting older and it's hard to cope out here alone in the winter," Yanchikova, who has lived alone in the village of Dubovka 230 kilometers south of Moscow since her husband died a year ago, told The Moscow Times.

Related article: Russians Demand Housing for 'Children of the Gulag'

Bauermeister had hoped to return to Moscow to resume his old life when Gulag inmates were freed and restrictions on deported peoples lifted after Stalin's death in 1953.

However, with returned prisoners barred from within 100 kilometers of the Soviet capital, his hopes were dashed and he took a job as the director of the local museum in a small town in Tver region, where he died in 1978, still a committed communist.

For the Germans who stayed in Kazakhstan — among them the rest of Galina's family — the end of the Soviet Union offered a shot at freedom as Germany promised citizenship to would-be returnees.

But to avoid discrimination, Galina's mother had given her nationality as Russian in official documents, disqualifying her and her family from receiving German citizenship, despite her German maiden name.

Instead, lured by the promise of jobs in the coal pits, Galina's family bought a derelict cottage in Dubovka, a depressed mining village near the city of Tula which had sharply depopulated after receiving a large dose of radiation after the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

"When we came here, we had to start our lives from scratch," said Galina, who spent her first years in Dubovka patching up her new home.

"Everything we have here, we built with our own hands."

In theory, Galina should have been able to return to Moscow.

In 1991, as the U.S.S.R. collapsed, the Soviet government passed a law acknowledging for the first time all victims of Stalin-era repressions and allowing them to claim compensation for their confiscated homes.

As Galina was born on a so-called "Special Settlement" in the final years of enforced exile and her family had carefully guarded Bauermeister's Moscow rent slips for 80 years, she was legally entitled to social housing in the Russian capital.

In 2010, she began a series of court cases against the Moscow authorities, spending several

thousand dollars on lawyers only to have her status as a Gulag victim recognized, but her claims for restitution rejected.

According to campaigners, material compensation has always been more legal fiction than financial reality.

“In the 1990s, state resources were so stretched that in practice virtually no one received the compensation they should have done,” said Grigory Vaypan, a lawyer and activist who represents Gulag survivors claiming compensation.

In 2004, a new law on compensation shifted the financial responsibility onto cash-strapped regional governments that had little real ability to provide restitution. In effect, it meant that financial compensation was indefinitely frozen.

Likewise, Gulag survivors’ compensation was deprioritized and victims instead added to Russia’s vastly overloaded social housing waiting lists.

Today, with around 51,000 people ahead of her in Moscow’s housing queue, Yanchikova can expect to wait between 25 and 30 years to receive a home.

To Olga Malinova, a professor at Moscow’s Higher School of Economics who researches historical memory in Russia, the authorities’ non-committal attitude to compensation is symptomatic of a wider policy that acknowledges the reality of repressions, while avoiding the issue wherever possible.

“The official attitude is ambiguous,” said Malinova.

“The state is naturally reluctant to discuss material compensation, as it could raise further claims.”

Surprise ruling

For over a decade, the state’s reluctance to touch the Gulag survivors issue remained unchallenged.

However, in 2019 Russia’s Constitutional Court found in favor of three “Gulag children,” in a surprise ruling that upheld their right to prioritized housing applications.

“This decision was unusual precisely because it touched on the topic of Soviet terror, which is something the government usually prefers not to talk about,” said Vaypan, the lawyer who fought the case.

The ruling sparked a rare legislative battle in Russia’s once-rowdy, now-docile parliament.

After the government put forward a bill that would make cosmetic changes while leaving the existing system largely unchanged, a group of cross-party deputies sponsored a set of amendments that would uphold the court ruling by fast-tracking Gulag children’s housing claims, to be paid for out of the federal budget.

“Our amendments are aimed at fully implementing the Constitutional Court’s ruling,” said

Galina Khovanskaya, a State Duma deputy from the Fair Russia party, who drafted the amendments.

“If the victims do not live to receive the housing they deserve ... that will be an irretrievable loss.”

According to Ekaterina Schulmann, a political scientist who studies the State Duma, the issue of the Gulag children bill is an example of the vestiges of competitive politics in the Russian parliament, even after it has been largely subordinated to the presidential administration under President Vladimir Putin.

“Issues of relatively low priority like this can still be negotiated within the legislative process. Not every bill passes by direct order of the Kremlin. Sometimes higher courts, NGOs and publicity have an impact,” she said.

“Always a chance”

However, with the ruling United Russia preoccupied with potentially difficult elections to the State Duma in September, it is possible that the compensation issue will be removed from the legislative timetable in favor of bigger, more eye-catching bills that could generate positive headlines for the ruling party.

“This issue doesn’t really fit into the sort of pre-election narrative the authorities want,” said Schulmann.

“The Kremlin would much rather be talking about big, popular social spending packages in these next few months than a niche and potentially controversial question like this.”

However, in Dubovka, Yanichkova remains stoic at the prospect that her decade-long legal battle could end in defeat.

“Struggling is one thing, actually believing you’ll win is another. It was always likely that we would lose,” she said.

“Then again, there’s always that chance that maybe I’ll get lucky.”

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