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Pro-Kremlin Cossacks Disrupt Event in Memory of Stalin Terror Victims

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A group of cossacks and other pro-government activists disrupted an annual event in the northwestern republic of Karelia commemorating the victims of Stalin's purges, the Memorial human rights group said Monday.

The Sandarmokh memorial, where at least 6,000 gulag prisoners were buried in mass graves, has for years attracted pilgrims and European delegations for an annual event known as the Day of Remembrance.

Memorial said this year's commemoration drew in diplomats from France, Sweden, Germany, Poland and Norway.

However, guests on Monday also included "busloads of Cossacks, representatives of [the Kremlin-loyal youth group] Molodaya Gvardiya and other activists close to the security forces," the rights group said.

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Photos shared online showed men, some in military uniforms and balaclavas, lining up in the Sandarmokh forest.

"Jews sponsored Hitler," Memorial quoted one of the pro-government activists as saying next to a Jewish memorial.

Local media reported that those activists blasted patriotic World War II-era songs from loudspeakers to "drown out" the traditional readings of the names of those killed by the Soviet secret police.

Memorial said law enforcement authorities detained several local activists ahead of the event on Monday. Security services also searched the offices of local media outlets a "few days" before the annual gathering, the rights group added.

Activists previously accused the Russian authorities of trying to cover up evidence of Stalin-era repressions in Sandarmokh by carrying out archaeological digs for the remains of Soviet soldiers killed when Karelia was occupied by Nazi-aligned Finland during World War II.

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