

‘The Right to Be Named’: Russians in Amsterdam Remember Victims of Political Repression

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AMSTERDAM — On a dark October evening in Amsterdam’s Frederiksplein square, around 50 people quietly wait their turn to read out the names of strangers into a microphone.

“Nikolai Khristoforovich Bashlykov. 26 years old. Timber receiver, serviceman. Executed on Dec. 2, 1937.”

“Sabina Savelyevna Bogusevich. 42 years old. Polish. Cook at a sugar factory in the Krasnodar region. Executed on Dec. 14, 1937.”

One by one, participants take a card from a volunteer, read the names into a microphone and step aside. Acquaintances greet each other in hushed voices. Others move quietly around the gathering, photographing the crowd and the flickering candles.

Organizers repeatedly remind them to only photograph people who had given their consent. Many people are afraid of being seen at a public commemoration, even abroad, due to the ongoing threat of repression in Russia, they say.

The gathering was part of Returning the Names, an annual initiative commemorating victims of political repression held every year on Oct. 29.

Established nearly two decades ago to remember people killed during Stalin's Great Terror, it has since become an occasion to reflect on the relationship between Soviet violence and political repression in present-day Russia.

For years, its main gathering took place at the Solovetsky Stone on Moscow's Lubyanka Square, just steps from the headquarters used by the Soviet security services and now occupied by the Federal Security Service (FSB).

The event was organized by Memorial, the human rights organization founded to document Soviet political repression. With Memorial now designated an "extremist" organization in Russia, Returning the Names is no longer formally affiliated with it.

Despite this, activists continue to gather to read the victims' names every Oct. 29. Events took place in more than 100 cities worldwide this year, from Russia's Irkutsk and Kirov to Melbourne, San Jose and Miami.

In Amsterdam, the commemoration has been organized by writer and historical memory researcher Nikolai Eppe since 2022.

"After the Russian experience, it's surprising," he told The Moscow Times. "This year, the Dutch police called me just to ask how they could help. It's very strange and sweet."

But he lamented the challenges of persuading people to turn out to the event.

"We're holding it for the fifth time in the Netherlands. Around 50 people always turn up, which feels strange when the diaspora here is so large, around 11,000 people," Eppe said. "I think Russians are still afraid of taking part in any public event. The willingness to do so was systematically stamped out of people over the years."

Some local Russian-language Telegram channels declined to share announcements for the event, including those aimed at Russians who left after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he said.

"They told us: 'We're about culture, not politics'," he said.

He said he believes this reluctance reflects Russians' tendency to avoid politics as much as a fear of personal consequences.

For the non-Russian participants who regularly attend Returning the Names, organizers make announcements in English and prepare the name cards in several languages so that people who do not speak Russian can participate.

"Maria Georgiyevna Babek. 41 years old. Slovak. Head of the council of Kazan's Catholic

community. Executed on July 7, 1938,” says a man with a Dutch accent, stumbling slightly over the place names and dates. Those who had already taken their turn stood nearby and listened.

“People here have a strong culture of participating in events like this. Showing solidarity matters to them,” Epple said. “And not just over things happening in their own country. When Navalny was killed, a lot of Dutch people came to the rally that day.”

The gathering took place beside the memorial to Walraven van Hall, a leading figure in the Dutch resistance during World War II. Nearby, candles and photographs formed a memorial to the late Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny beneath a large tree.

“Our history and Dutch history are linked,” he said.

Toward the end of the gathering, Navalny’s name was read aloud.

“Alexei Anatolyevich Navalny. Killed on Feb. 16, 2024, in a penal colony in the settlement of Kharp.”

Returning the Names was traditionally understood in Russia as a memorial event rather than a political protest, Epple said.

“But the fact that it was held right on Lubyanka, of course, gave it immense political significance — an event in memory of victims right in front of the building of the organization responsible for that terror,” he said.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, that meaning has become more pronounced.

Last year, the event took place in 150 cities worldwide. The initiative’s decentralized structure means that organizers in each city can choose what they would like to emphasize. Some read only the names of Soviet victims, while others include current political prisoners.

“For us, the crucial thing is to make that direct connection [between past and present] explicit,” Epple said. “Because Soviet terror was never properly examined, reckoned with and condemned, it continues to block any movement toward democracy. Today’s war and today’s terror are a direct consequence of those historical lessons going unlearned.”

Among those waiting to read out the names was Polina, a 37-year-old psychologist who left Russia in 2022 and has lived in Amsterdam for several years.

“Justice is my most important value,” she said, asking to withhold her last name for safety reasons. “Hundreds of thousands of people were executed in Soviet times, and more than 1.5 million died in the camps.”

She said that behind every name was a life, a family, a job and plans that were cut short.

“When I read a name, I give that person back something that was taken from them: the right to be named, rather than remain a number in a case file,” Polina said. “It’s my way of showing that I do not accept this injustice and that we will not forget.”

She agreed with Eppler's belief that remembering the past is inseparable from Russia's present.

"Unfortunately, those lessons haven't been learned. Today, Russia once again has thousands of political prisoners, and the sentences keep getting longer," she said. "We will do everything we can to ensure that the lives swallowed up by the regime are not forgotten."

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