

Russian authorities ordered destruction of documents on Stalin's terror

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On Thursday, June 7, the Russian Museum of the History of the GULAG reported that archival material about people who were kept in the Soviet forced labor camp system and were subsequently released has been systematically destroyed, on the basis of a secret decree from February 2014. The extent of the destruction of archival material is not yet clear.

It is estimated that up to 12 million people fell victim to the Great Terror, unleashed by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the second half of the 1930s: they were either shot, or sent to prison and forced labor camps (GULAGs), where many died or were disabled for life. Up to 7 million people were imprisoned in the Soviet GULAG system. In 1937-1938 alone, 1.7 million people were arrested on political grounds. The vast majority of them were accused of being part of the “Trotskyist-Zinovievite center” or other presumably “terrorist” organizations, allegedly inspired by Leon Trotsky, the leader of the Russian Revolution and anti-Stalinist Left Opposition.

The Great Terror, which the Soviet historian and sociologist Vadim Rogovin described as a “political genocide”, resulted in the physical destruction of the Soviet Left Opposition, which had up to 30,000 members, as well as tens of thousands of dedicated Communist workers and intellectuals, both from the Soviet Communist Party and international sections of the Third International (Comintern). Stunning in its scope, the terror also swept away millions of people who were not actively engaged in politics, let alone the opposition, at all.

As the Soviet writer and sympathizer of the Left Opposition Varlam Shalamov observed, the Stalinist terror was directed against “all those who remembered the wrong part of Russian history” – that is, the historical truth about the Russian Revolution, its

leaders, and the inner-party struggle of the 1920s. It was aimed, in other words, at wiping out, not just politically but also physically, the historical consciousness and memory of the Soviet and international working class.

In many cases, archival material, especially the “personal files” or even only minor biographical archival cards, remain the only testimony left of the very existence of a victim of the terror. As Roman Romanov, the head of the GULAG Museum, explained to the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* :

“When someone died in prison or perished in a camp, his personal file was sent to be kept indefinitely in an archive. But when someone was released, his [personal] file was destroyed. However, there remained an archival card, which included information such as the name, date and place of birth, the camps in which this person had been, as well as the date of his or her release”.

Precisely these cards have been systematically destroyed since 2014 on the basis of a decree issued by several Russian state agencies.

The very existence of this decree, criminal by all measures, has only been revealed more or less by accident due to the work of a Russian historian, Sergei Prudovsky, who collaborates with the GULAG Museum. When requesting information about a peasant, Fedor Chasov, who was repressed during the Great Purges of 1937-1938 and sent to a notorious Magadan camp in Russia's North East, he found out that the archival card about Fedor Chasov had been destroyed.

Prudovsky told the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*: “I issued a request to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Magadan' Oblast'. They responded that the personal file of the arrested had already been destroyed

in 1955 according to a decree from this period. It also became clear that the archival card was destroyed as well”.

When Prudovsky asked why the latter had been destroyed, Mikhail Seregin, the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs responsible for the Magadan’ oblast’ told him that the legal basis had been a decree “for purposes” from February 12, 2014. This decree was signed by virtually all significant Russian state institutions: The Interior Ministry, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry for Extraordinary Situations, the Defense Ministry, the FSB, a number of other federal secret services, as well as the Main Prosecutor’s office and the State Courier Service .

The head of the GULAG Museum, Roman Romanov, has since written a letter to Mikhail Fedotov, an advisor to the Russian President and the head of the Council of the President for human rights. In this letter, Romanov indicated that the GULAG Museum had received information from the Interior Ministry that confirmed that these cards of convicted victims of the terror had been destroyed.

This is not the first time that the destruction of this kind of archival material has come to public attention. According to the *Kommersant* report, in 2014, a resident of the Moscow oblast’ tried to find information about her relative who was convicted and sent to Magadan in 1939, only to learn that his archival card had been destroyed. The woman appealed to the Higher Court of the Russian Federation and eventually the Constitutional Court, but lost the case both times.

Fedotov told *Kommersant* that he was “looking into” the issue and stated, in glaring contradiction to what is going on in reality: “We [the Russian government] will always defend the preservation of archival material, it contains very important historical information... When there is a document, it is virtually impossible to falsify it. But when there is no document, anything can be made up.”

But this is precisely the purpose of this decree which, in this sense, is in line with the aims of the Stalinist Great Terror itself.

While important archival material has been made available since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, access to Russian archival material often remains notoriously difficult, especially when it comes to the Soviet period.

Over the past 25 years, collections have been opened and closed at the behest of the government, with countless files still being withheld from public view, often without clear reasoning provided. The access to “personal files”, in particular, is difficult. Many of them are accessible only through the FSB archives, and work on them always requires the approval of blood relatives, who in some cases may not even exist.

With all these restrictions, and despite a climate of extreme reaction and political confusion that has prevailed in Russia since 1991, important historical documentary collections have come out that shed new light on important aspects of Soviet society and history, and not least of all the struggle of the Left Opposition.

This kind of work is directly threatened by the secret workings of the Russian state to withhold and destroy archival material, as well as the ongoing political and financial pressure exerted on all those working on this history. The 2014 decree is a clear warning of the dangers posed to serious historical research into the crimes of Stalinism by the control of the Russian state over the archives. Much like state operations such as last year’s major television series to slander Trotsky, this decree is a sign of an ongoing state conspiracy and determination of the Russian oligarchy to falsify history and cover up the crimes of Stalinism.



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