

Russian court keeps historian of Stalinist massacres jailed amid COVID-19 outbreak

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On Thursday, May 7, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Karelia in northwest Russia rejected an appeal and ruled in a closed hearing that Yuri Dmitriev, a well-known historian of the Stalinist massacres in Sandarmokh, Karelia, will remain in detention until at least June 25.

The detention seriously endangers the health and life of the 64-year-old Dmitriev as COVID-19 cases have exploded in Russia in recent days. The first cases of the virus have already been confirmed in the prison in Petrozavodsk where he is detained.

Dmitriev is the victim of a blatant state frame-up, aimed at undermining and discrediting his work to uncover and locate the mass graves of Stalinist massacres in Karelia and identify their victims. In late 2016, he was charged with “child pornography,” a transparent attempt not only to frame him, but also to destroy him personally. The charges had to be dropped in 2018 for lack of evidence, but a court found him guilty of possessing parts of a firearm. Dmitriev was arrested again in mid-2018 for allegedly violating the rules of his release and then charged with sexual assault of a minor. He has been in prison since. The hearings in his case have proceeded with exclusion of the media.

Friends and family have warned that his life is in serious danger because of the coronavirus. Dmitriev is elderly, and his health has significantly deteriorated over the winter; he suffered a serious cold in February. A petition demanding his immediate release from jail has received over 11,000 signatures as of this writing. An open letter demanding his release, which was published on Wednesday, was signed by over 150 Russian intellectuals and artists, including director Alexander Sokurov, actress Chulpan Khamatova and writer Lyudmila Ulitskaya, as well as several members of the pro-US party Yabloko.

The director of the city museum in Medvezhyegorsk and head of the memorial at Sandarmokh, Sergey Koltyrin, who had closely worked with Dmitriev, was also charged with sexual assault of a minor and had been detained since 2018. Having been sentenced to nine years in prison, he died in early April in a prison hospital of an unspecified “serious illness.”

The state campaign against Dmitriev must be unequivocally rejected and his immediate release demanded. Behind the vicious campaign are the efforts of the Russian state and oligarchy, which originated in the Stalinist counter-revolution against the October revolution of 1917, to suppress all efforts to uncover the truth about the crimes of Stalinism.

Alongside the frame-up of Dmitriev, the former far-right minister of culture Vladimir Medinsky, has led a systematic effort to propagandize the historical lie that Sandarmokh is not the site of Stalinist crimes, but rather of Finnish executions of Soviet soldiers during World War II.

In reality, the shootings at Sandarmokh in 1937-1938 were among the largest massacres during the Great Terror, the Stalinist political genocide of hundreds of thousands of socialist workers, intellectuals and artists. In the Moscow Trials of 1936 and 1937, the most famous leaders of the October Revolution were put on trial and accused of sabotage and counter-revolutionary activities. The main defendant was Leon Trotsky, who had co-led the revolution with Vladimir Lenin. After Lenin’s death, Trotsky

had formed the Left Opposition to fight against the nationalist betrayal of the revolution by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Trotsky managed to form the Fourth International in 1938 before his assassination in Mexico by a Stalinist agent in August 1940.

Though they were hounded, suppressed and imprisoned, Trotsky still had many supporters in the Soviet Union throughout the 1930s. Virtually all of them were murdered in the Great Terror, together with the leaders of the October Revolution and the vast majority of the old Bolshevik party. In many cases, their families were killed as well. As the Soviet writer Varlam Shalamov put it, the terror was directed against all those who had remembered “the wrong parts of Russian history”—above all the history of the revolution and the struggle of the Left Opposition.

Sandarmokh, located north of Leningrad close to the Finnish border, was one of the biggest killing sites outside of Moscow. The largest single operation was the mass shooting of 1,111 political prisoners from the Solovki camp on the direct order of Nikolai Yezhov, the head of the Soviet secret police NKVD at the time. In the so-called “First Solovki stage,” the 1,111 prisoners were first deported to a prison that was designed for just 300 people in Medvezhyegorsk. Here, they were stripped naked and cruelly tortured.

Several died from the torture. The others were brought in groups to the Sandarmokh shooting sites 19 kilometers outside the village where pits had been dug for them. They were all executed in five days by firing squads that shot them from behind in the neck. In a macabre demonstration of the conscious counter-revolutionary character of the Stalinist terror, the killings were timed to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the October seizure of power by the Russian working class under Bolshevik leadership in 1917: they took place on October 27 and November 1-4, 1937.

Among those murdered in these massacres were hundreds of major intellectuals, scholars, politicians and artists, including hundreds of Ukraine’s leading intellectuals of the 1920s. According to one historian, “approximately half of those who were shot were simple workers from Petersburg [Leningrad].”

One of the largest groups shot in this operation were 248 political prisoners who had been sentenced to death for “counter-revolutionary Trotskyist terrorist activity, having retained their old counter-revolutionary positions, [and] seeking to resume counter-revolutionary work.”

Among them was Nadezhda Smilga-Poluyan, an Old Bolshevik and the wife of Ivar Smilga, who had been a close collaborator of Lenin in 1917 and leader of the Left Opposition in the 1920s; the Old Bolsheviks Grigory Shklovsky and Georgy Yakovenko, who had signed declarations of the Left Opposition in the 1920s; Revekka Shumskaya and Noi Vol’fson, party members since the first years of the Soviet Union who had earlier been expelled from the party and arrested for support of the opposition; and Martin Yakobson and Aleksandr Blaufel’d, Old Bolsheviks who had fought for socialism in Estonia since the revolution of

1905.

Other victims of the mass shootings in Sandarmokh included the famous Russian linguist Nikolay Durnovo, the pioneering Soviet meteorologist Alexei Vangengeim, Alexander Anissimov, a leading art historian and restorer, and many other writers, scholars, and scientists from various parts of the USSR and other countries. Overall, people from 60 different nationalities were shot at Sandarmokh. Several priests and former Tsarist officials were killed as well.

The NKVD documents about these mass shootings were not uncovered until the mid-1990s. A search expedition in 1997, in which Dmitriev participated, found 236 burial pits. Based on the documents, they established that between August 11, 1937, and December 24, 1938, well over 9,500 people must have been shot and buried there. The number has since been revised upward. Together with other historians, Dmitriev has published a list of names of those murdered in Sandarmokh and written several books on what happened there during the terror. Many memorials have since been set up at Sandarmokh.

Dmitriev and his co-researchers also established the names of the leaders of the shooting squads and of the members of the “troikas,” extra-judicial courts of three which were set up to sign death sentences on behalf of the bureaucracy. At the height of the terror, a “troika” could hand down up to 200 death sentences a day, sometimes even more.

The most notorious butcher of Sandarmokh was Mikhail Matveyev, who led the shooting squads in the “Solovki operation.” After a brief arrest in 1938, Matveyev was put in charge of the NKVD internal prison system during the Nazi siege of Leningrad during World War II. Among those who died in the Leningrad prison at the time was the major Soviet poet Daniil Kharms, who miserably starved to death. Matveyev was awarded “the Order of Lenin” after the war—the highest decoration in the Soviet Union—and lived on a state pension until his death in 1971.

Matveyev’s fate was not the exception, but the rule. In fact, not a single hangman of the purges was ever tried, not before and not after the end of the USSR. The shootings that occurred as part of the “mass operations” of the NKVD during the terror were treated as a “state secret” throughout the Soviet period. The relatives of those who were killed in Sandarmokh were never told what had happened. The official note they received upon requests, from 1939 onward, was that their loved ones had been “sentenced to 10 years of prison [*lishenie svobody*] without the right to correspond.”

This policy was reconfirmed in 1955 by a special order even as the bureaucracy began to partially rehabilitate some of the victims of the terror, and shortly before the general secretary of the party, Nikita Khrushchev, was forced to acknowledge some of the worst crimes of Stalin in 1956. This policy did not change until the very final stages of the crisis of Stalinism in the late 1980s when the bureaucracy moved toward a full-scale restoration of capitalism.

In June 1988, the Stalinist press acknowledged that Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, Karl Radek and Yuri Pyatakov—leaders of the October revolution who had been among the main defendants of the Moscow Trials—had, in fact, been the victims of frame-ups. That same year, the restrictions on information about the shooting victims of Sandarmokh and similar massacres were partially lifted for relatives, and the first human remains were discovered in Sandarmokh.

At the time, a vast amount of historical material about the terror was released in Soviet periodicals and newspapers. Much of this material would form a critical basis for the history of the Left Opposition by the Soviet sociologist Vadim Rogovin. However, decades of Stalinism had severely undermined the political consciousness of the Soviet and international working class, enabling the bureaucracy to resolve its staggering crisis in its own interests, destroying the Soviet Union and transforming itself into a new ruling oligarchy.

This counter-revolution has inevitably shaped and delayed the process

of establishing the historical truth about the crimes of Stalinism. To this day, the sites of the NKVD shootings have officially remained a “state secret” and lists of all the shooting sites of the NKVD have never been released. Some historians assume that any such lists may have been destroyed already.

Dmitriev carried on with the work in the 1990s. He worked directly for Ivan Chukhin, who had earlier headed the local Soviet interior ministry and in the 1990s became a parliamentary deputy in parliament for the party “The Choice of Russia,” which backed the “shock therapy” of Boris Yeltsin. Since Chukhin’s death in 1997, Dmitriev has worked with several other local historians and researchers. In 2014, Dmitriev and one of his closest co-workers endorsed the US-backed coup in Ukraine. In an interview in 2015, Dmitriev acknowledged that he was “a nationalist in the widest sense of the word.”

These political views, which reflect the substantial disorientation in sections of the intelligentsia, have no doubt influenced the focus of Dmitriev’s work. He has primarily worked on the victims of the so-called “national operations” of the NKVD. These operations targeted the Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Ukrainian, Finnish, German and other minorities, such as the local Karelian population. While thousands of communists from these countries were murdered as part of these operations, many thousands were also killed randomly, simply based on their surnames and baseless denunciations. In the wake of 1991, the revelation of the scale of these horrendous crimes by Stalinism could no doubt be exploited by right-wing nationalist and anti-Communist forces in the Baltics, Poland and Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the work to establish how many active and former Left Oppositionists and socialist opponents of Stalinism were murdered in Sandarmokh—which is central for a political understanding of the Great Terror—is still only in its early stages. The vast majority of the names and political biographies of the Left Oppositionists who were killed at Sandarmokh and elsewhere remain unknown. The same goes for many other leading revolutionaries who were killed in the terror.

The vicious vendetta by the Russian state against Dmitriev is driven by the fear that any revelation about the Stalinist counter-revolutionary terror, however limited in its political analysis, works to undercut the false equation of Stalinism with socialism, the major lie of the 20th century. The current pandemic, which has ruthlessly revealed the brutality of the capitalist system to billions of workers, acutely raising the specter of world socialist revolution, has only exacerbated this fear.

The oligarchy is keenly aware of the growing interest in the October Revolution and the Left Opposition, and regards the suppression of this historical truth as essential to the survival of its own rule and capitalism as a whole. For years, a state-funded campaign has been underway to glorify Stalin and justify the terror as a legitimate and necessary measure to defend “the country” against external and internal enemies.

In 2017, the centenary year of the October revolution, the Kremlin funded a vile anti-Semitic propaganda mini-series defaming Leon Trotsky. In 2018, the discovery of volumes of documents by Left Oppositionists in the Verkhne-Uralsk political prison generated significant public interest. That same year, it emerged that Russian authorities had ordered the destruction of archival files of victims of the Great Terror.

For workers internationally, the defense of Dmitriev is a matter of principle. In its struggle for socialism, the international working class needs to know and understand the full truth about the crimes of Stalinism—above all the brutal repression of its socialist and Trotskyist opponents.



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