

# Russian pseudo-left provides neo-Stalinist justification for vendetta against historian Yuri Dmitriev

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Last week, a Russian court found the historian Yuri Dmitriev guilty of sexual abuse of a minor and sentenced him to three-and-a-half years in prison. Taking into account the time Dmitriev has already spent in jail, he could be freed in November of this year.

As the head of the organization Memorial in Karelia, a region bordering Finland, Dmitriev has played an important role in the recovery of the names of over 6,000 people who were shot at Sandarmokh during the Stalinist Great Terror of 1937-1938, and several thousand more who were executed at other sites in the region.

Among those murdered at Sandarmokh and other sites in Karelia were many revolutionaries who had been members of Leon Trotsky's Left Opposition in the 1920s. Karelia also has mass graves bearing the remains of victims of "nationality operations," in which minority nationals—above all Poles, Finns, Ukrainians and members of the Baltic nationalities—were rounded up and murdered by the NKVD, the Stalinist secret police.

The court's decision was an attempt to bolster the campaign of defamation of Dmitriev without provoking a public uproar. In recent months, several of Russia's best known intellectuals have spoken out in defense of Dmitriev, and representatives of the country's US-backed liberal opposition have openly sided with him.

In recent years, Dmitriev has been arrested and charged multiple times on the basis of a variety of allegations, and it is far from certain that his current prison term will mark the end of the state vendetta against him. Sixty-four years old and in poor health, he is at high risk of contracting COVID-19 in prison. His life is in danger.

With over 800,000 cases, Russia is among the countries worst affected by the pandemic. The virus has been ripping through the prison population for months.

Despite the fact that Dmitriev approaches the crimes of Stalinism as an anti-communist, his work in recovering the names of those murdered in Karelia is important. In a previous article, the WSWs emphasized: "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 counterrevolution against the October Revolution of 1917, to suppress all efforts to uncover the truth about the crimes of Stalinism."

The leading Russian pseudo-left website, *Rabkor.Ru*, whose editor-in-chief is Boris Kagarlitsky, has adopted the opposite standpoint, defending the Russian state vendetta against Dmitriev. Particularly in the run-up during the 1980s to the Stalinist bureaucracy's 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism, as well as in the ensuing decade of the 1990s, Kagarlitsky maintained close relations with the international Pabloite movement, which published many of his writings through its *Verso* publishing house.

Like the Pabloites, Kagarlitsky promoted illusions first in Mikhail

Gorbachev and then in Boris Yeltsin, subordinating workers who carried out mass strikes to the Stalinist bureaucracy and its drive to restore capitalism. To this day, he frequents conferences organized by the German Left Party and similar forces.

On July 25, Kagarlitsky's website published a piece by Alexander Stepanov, a member of the Stalinist formation ROT-Front in Petrozavodsk, Karelia. The article is aimed at justifying both the crimes of Stalinism and the persecution of Dmitriev by the Russian state. Toward this end, it employs the technique of Stalinist amalgams—a combination of personal attacks, half-truths, lies and the deliberate omission of critical facts.

In characteristic bad faith, Stepanov begins his piece with an attempt to discredit Dmitriev by legitimizing the state frame-up against him. Since the trial against Dmitriev has proceeded in secret, most of the evidence of both the prosecution and the defense is not accessible to the public, something that Stepanov considers "understandable."

The liberal newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, after extensive research, established that the basis for the charges of sexual abuse of a minor were pictures taken by Dmitriev of his adopted daughter when she was three, four and six years old. Dmitriev claimed that he had taken them for use in medical examinations because the girl was suffering from nocturnal bedwetting. His statements were corroborated by medical records from the hospital where the girl was treated. She did not suffer sexual or psychological trauma at the time of the alleged assaults. Moreover, experts concluded that statements she made against him came following pressure from the criminal investigators and a psychologist.

The fact that the court eventually sentenced Dmitriev to only a few additional months in prison is all but an admission that it had no evidence to substantiate the charges. The minimum sentence for the sexual abuse of a minor in Russia is 12 years.

Nevertheless, the court did find Dmitriev guilty, creating the pseudo-legal basis for character assassination, which Stepanov is all too happy to support.

In his article, Stepanov does not claim that there is any evidence to support the case against Dmitriev. "But every normal person," he writes, "will probably agree that the very fact that he possessed the pictures, which have been acknowledged as authentic by Dmitriev's defense, does not speak well of him from a moral standpoint."

Without referencing the *World Socialist Web Site*, Stepanov seeks to dismiss its arguments in defense of Dmitriev, insisting that the Stalinist crimes uncovered by him have no political significance. Rather, he writes, Sandarmokh has become the basis for "new political and historical myths" of an "anti-communist" character. He argues further that the prosecution of Dmitriev could not have been politically motivated because the historian has not played any role in organizing protests against the

Putin regime.

But it is not the politics of Dmitriev that the Kremlin fears. However limited, the revelations of the crimes of Stalinism by Dmitriev and other historians are perceived as an existential threat by the Russian oligarchy. Having emerged directly from the Stalinist counterrevolution against the October Revolution, leading to the destruction of the USSR, it critically relies on the confusion of Stalinism with socialism, and above all on ignorance of the role of Leon Trotsky and his Left Opposition, which opposed the nationalist betrayal of the revolution by Stalinism and defended the program of world socialist revolution.

It is for this reason that the Putin regime has promoted a form of neo-Stalinism and funded the publication of countless books by hack “historians” seeking to justify the crimes of Stalin, especially his Great Terror. By contrast, Dmitriev, whatever his own political views, has made a contribution to understanding the scale of these crimes.

Stepanov tries to discredit these efforts. “You will be surprised, but over 20 years have passed since Sandarmokh was discovered and there is still no precise number for those who were shot there,” he writes. The fact that the exact number of the victims of these massacres—as of many others of the Stalinist period—is not known to this day does not speak against Dmitriev’s work. Rather, it speaks to the horrendous scope of these massacres, which were covered up for half a century by the Stalinist bureaucracy and still remain to be fully researched.

Stepanov also tries to use the fact that Memorial recently concretized, on a geographic basis, the number of those who were shot at Sandarmokh and the immediately surrounding area, to allege that Dmitriev’s work is not only insignificant, but also misleading. He insinuates, without providing any sources or evidence, that no more than 2,500 people could possibly have been shot at Sandarmokh.

Memorial has indeed lowered to 6,067 the number of those who were shot in and around Sandarmokh who can be *identified by name*. However, the total number of those shot as part of the Great Terror in Karelia in 1937-1938 is still estimated to be at least 10,779. It is to his credit that Dmitriev, with several others, has identified thousands of these victims.

The discrediting of the terror’s victims is Stepanov’s next goal. He writes that “it is striking that [among those identified by name] are many people who opposed the Soviet government with arms in hand during the Civil War.” He notes that members of the right-wing Petliura regime in Ukraine and figures from the counterrevolutionary White movement in the 1918-1921 Civil War were among the victims, but he makes no mention of the leading revolutionaries and many workers who were killed there.

The Great Terror was, as the Soviet historian of the Left Opposition Vadim Rogovin explained, a “political genocide.” Its primary aim was to root out all opposition to the Stalinist regime from the left and undermine socialist consciousness within the Soviet and international working class.

Its main target was the Old Bolsheviks, the Trotskyist movement and Leon Trotsky himself, the co-leader of the October Revolution with Vladimir Lenin. Almost everyone who had known and fought with Lenin and Trotsky was killed by Stalin. This included many leading figures of the Fourth International, founded by Trotsky in 1938, who were murdered by Stalinist agents in Europe, as well as supporters of Trotsky in the Spanish Civil War. In 1940, Leon Trotsky himself was assassinated by a Stalinist agent in Mexico.

While former members of the White movement were among those killed in the Soviet Union, from a social and political standpoint far more significant was the integration of openly counter-revolutionary elements into the murderous apparatus of Stalin.

In a characteristic exchange quoted by Vadim Rogovin, a former White Guardist officer who found employment as a guard in a Stalinist camp told an Old Bolshevik: “What is happening now is the fulfillment of our slogan: All power to the Soviets, but without communists!... You can be certain: all (the Old Bolsheviks—V. R.) will end up in the camps.” (Quoted

in Rogovin, *Stalin’s Terror of 1937-1938, The Political Genocide in the USSR*, Mehring Books 2009, 238).

Everything in Stepanov’s piece is aimed at obscuring the counterrevolutionary character of the Great Terror. He writes: “In reality, based on documents, so far we know that 1,111 or 1,116 people were shot in Sandarmokh as part of the ‘Solovki stage.’ These were people who had already been sentenced in the early 1930s for counterrevolutionary activity and had been imprisoned in the Solovki camps. Perhaps a few other citizens of Karelia were shot there. That’s all.”

Stepanov clearly implies that these people were correctly sentenced for “counterrevolutionary activity,” since he does not use quotation marks here. In reality, of the different shootings at Sandarmokh, it was the “Solovki action” that most directly bore a counterrevolutionary character.

Many of those executed were major Old Bolsheviks and supporters of the Left Opposition. Among them were Nadezhda Smilga-Poluyan, an Old Bolshevik and the wife of Ivar Smilga, who had been a close collaborator of Lenin in 1917 and a 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. They also included 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 their support of the Opposition. Also included were Martin Jakobson and Aleksandr Blaifel’d, Old Bolsheviks who had fought for socialism in Estonia since the 1905 Revolution in Russia.

The website *Bessmertnyi Barak*, which has published the list with the names of those killed in the “Solovki stage,” notes that “approximately half of those shot were simple workers from Petersburg.” These mass executions on October 27 and November 1-4, 1937 were consciously timed by the Stalinist butchers to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917. Overall, the Great Terror claimed over 800,000 lives, the vast majority of them communists, including many from eastern and southeastern Europe and Germany.

The political and intellectual impact of the murder of thousands of workers and intellectuals who embodied the revolutionary experience and traditions of the October Revolution cannot be measured in numbers, as large as they were. The Stalinist terror played a central role in beheading the working class throughout the post-World War II period, not just in the USSR but throughout Europe and internationally. It profoundly disoriented generations of workers and intellectuals, who falsely equated socialism with Stalinism and who were cut off from the traditions of 1917 and Marxism.

Only the International Committee of the Fourth International, which was founded in 1953 to defend the principles of Trotsky’s Fourth International, embodied and defended these traditions under conditions where petty-bourgeois revisionist forces, most notably the Pabloite movement, sought to subordinate the working class to the existing bureaucracies and Stalinism.

The fact that *Rabkor* is now publishing such a neo-Stalinist hack piece to attack historical research on the Great Terror underscores, yet again, that a river of blood separates the Trotskyist movement from the Pabloite and ex-Pabloite forces. It should be noted that this is not just a “Russian” phenomenon. In 2018, the WWSW extensively commented on the alliance of the Partido Obrero in Argentina with the Russian Stalinist Daria Mitina, a figure with close ties to fascist forces and the Russian state.

The open defense of the crimes of Stalinism by these tendencies is rooted in nationalism and a militant hostility to the working class. It leaves no doubt as to the class interests they are defending.

The defense of Dmitriev cannot be left to the reactionary forces of the pro-imperialist “liberal” opposition around Alexei Navalny. They seek to exploit his case, and the crimes of Stalinism more broadly, to promote anti-communism and an alliance with US imperialism. Workers and youth must oppose the filthy historical lies of the Russian state and the Stalinists

from their own class standpoint.

The fight to reestablish the historical truth about the October Revolution and the crimes of Stalinism is essential for the struggle for socialism in the 21st century. We call upon our readers in Russia and throughout the former Soviet Union to take this struggle forward. The essential historical, political and methodological axis for this work was established in the book *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, by David North, which can be purchased from Mehring Books.



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