

Russian court extends prison sentence for historian of Stalinist terror to 13 years

Clara Weiss
23 October 2020

On September 29, the Supreme Court of Karelia, a region in the Russian Federation, overturned an earlier ruling against historian Yuri Dmitriev, extending his sentence from three and a half years to a total of thirteen years in penal colonies. The ruling is a travesty of justice and amounts to a death sentence for the 64-year-old, who is at heightened risk of dying from the coronavirus which is running rampant in Russia, and has been ripping through the prison population for months.

The sentence was handed down in the absence of Dmitriev's lawyer, who was ill. It was the culmination of a four-year-long vendetta by the Russian state against Dmitriev, in which he had been accused—and acquitted—multiple times of charges relating to child pornography and pedophilia.

The trial against Dmitriev has proceeded behind closed doors for years. It is a politically motivated attack not just on Dmitriev, but the right of free speech and historical truth more broadly. The state campaign of filthy denunciations of Dmitriev and his brutal sentence are meant to intimidate everyone who seeks to uncover the historical truth about the crimes of Stalinism.

The only “evidence” against Dmitriev are images that he took from his foster daughter while she was ill, which showed her intimate parts, as well as a “testimony” by the girl. According to one of Dmitriev's colleagues who saw the video testimony, it was pieced together from multiple sessions, all of which occurred after the initial acquittal of Dmitriev in April 2016. The girl, who is eight years old today, was crying and had to be brought home and back in multiple times. Dmitriev has consistently maintained his innocence, insisting that he took the pictures while the girl was ill to facilitate her medical treatment. All his testimonies were confirmed by the local hospital where she was treated.

In July, a court found Dmitriev “guilty” of sexually abusing a minor. However, his sentence of three and half years in prison amounted to a concession that the charge, which usually carries a minimum sentence of 12 years, was unsustainable. In a clear attempt to prepare public opinion for the verdict, three days before the new court verdict on September 29, the state television channel *Rossiya* aired a feature on Dmitriev, in which the images of his foster daughter were shown.

Dmitriev, himself a deeply religious man and anti-

Communist, has done important work in recovering the names of victims of mass shootings and deportations that took place in Karelia, a region bordering Finland, during the Stalinist Great Terror in the 1930s. He and his team have established the site of mass graves of thousands of victims of the terror, including dozens of Old Bolsheviks and supporters of the Left Opposition of Leon Trotsky, the socialist opponents of Stalinism.

While Dmitriev's political focus has been on the many victims of the so called “national operations” of the Stalinist secret police, NKVD, his work has proven immensely important for establishing the historical record about both the victims and the executioners of the Stalinist terror.

The Sandarmokh shooting site is now one of very few mass shooting sites from the Great Terror that are known and have public memorials. Historians estimate that dozens more such sites exist on the territory of the Russian Federation, with the remains of dozens of thousands of victims of the terror. However, their locations—which have been kept secret both by the Stalinist regime and the capitalist governments of Yeltsin and Putin that emerged out of the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy—remain unknown.

The vendetta against Dmitriev is above all motivated by the Russian state's fear of the growing interest in the historical truth about the October revolution and the Stalinist terror.

It has provoked widespread shock and anger. An open letter to the Supreme Court of Karelia from September 27, opposing the persecution of Dmitriev, was signed by 250 public intellectuals, artists, historians, journalists and residents of Karelia. Among them were Oleg Khlevniuk, a well-known historian, director Andrei Zvyagentsev, and writer Liudmila Ulitskaya.

On October 17, a film about Dmitriev by Kirill Safronov, a young documentary film maker, was released on Youtube. It was based on discussions with young historians and artists that had been influenced by Dmitriev's work and his commitment to holding on to it, no matter what.

Another Youtube documentary from July 23, entitled “What is behind the case of Dmitriev?,” discussed his work and the charges of sexual abuse of a minor against him. The film has been watched by over 1.2 million people as of this writing. In the documentary, a historian of the Gulag Museum in Moscow

points out that the number of visitors to the museum is growing every year. A neighbor interviewed for the documentary stressed that she and the majority of Dmitriev's neighbors were firmly convinced of his innocence and impressed with the tenacity with which he pursued his work even in the face of political persecution.

The interviews in these films starkly underline the fact that the Stalinist terror remains an open wound in society even as over 80 years have now passed since the height of the Great Terror in 1937-1938. While virtually every family has been affected by the campaign of mass murder, and the population of entire regions and cities is often composed, in large measure, of descendants of those who were deported, exiled and imprisoned in camps, there is often no understanding of both what happened and, most importantly, why it happened.

This historical lack of understanding is itself the product of the Stalinist counter-revolution against the October revolution of 1917. During late perestroika, while the Stalinist bureaucracy was already pushing ahead with the restoration of capitalism, a substantial number of documents were published that had previously been inaccessible. They provided, for the first time since the 1930s, an inkling of both the scope of the terror and its dynamics. The documents published at the time formed the basis for the study of the Left Opposition by Vadim Rogovin. It was also at this time that Dmitriev and others began their work on the terror in Karelia.

However, the impact of the crimes of Stalinism on the socialist and historical consciousness of the working class proved so profound that the bureaucracy was able to resolve its profound crisis in its own interests: it moved to destroy the Soviet Union in 1991 and fully restored capitalism.

The fact that the Stalinist bureaucracy was able to liquidate all the gains of the October revolution temporarily delayed a full historical and political reckoning with Stalinism.

Today, however, these historical issues are reemerging with full force: as world capitalism is engulfed in the greatest crisis since the 1930s, with social inequality reaching record levels and an ever-growing danger of war, the question of the October revolution—and the Stalinist counterrevolution against it—are on the order of the day. These objective processes are underlying both the growing interest in these historical issues, and the Russian oligarchy's hysterical response to Dmitriev's work, as politically limited as it has been, and the relentless promotion and justification of the crimes of Stalin in the media and by pseudo-historians. The pandemic, to which the Russian oligarchy—like the ruling classes internationally—has responded with the policy of “herd immunity,” has only further intensified and accelerated these dynamics.

The critical question for workers, intellectuals and youth is to understand that Stalinism did not represent the continuation, but the reaction against the October revolution. The continuity of 1917 and Marxism was represented not by Stalin, but by his main opponent Leon Trotsky, who founded the Left Opposition

in 1923 and the Fourth International in 1938, before he himself was assassinated by a Stalinist agent in 1940. The Great Terror was, above all, a political genocide of all those who had participated in and led the revolution, who remembered its leading figures—Lenin and Trotsky—and who had dedicated their lives to the fight for socialism. The assimilation of these historical experiences remains critical to the political orientation of the working class in Russia and internationally.

As Trotsky noted in 1937, writing on the Moscow Trials from his exile in Mexico:

No one, not excluding Hitler, has dealt socialism such deadly blows as Stalin. This is hardly astonishing since Hitler has attacked the working class organizations from without, while Stalin does it from within. Hitler assaults Marxism. Stalin not only assaults but prostitutes it. Not a single principle has remained unpolluted, not a single idea unsullied. The very names of socialism and communism have been cruelly compromised, from the day when uncontrolled policemen making their livelihood by “communist” passport, gave the name socialism to their police regime. ... The memory of mankind is magnanimous as regards the application of harsh measures in the service of great historical goals. But history will not pardon a single drop of blood shed in sacrifice to the new Moloch of self-will and privilege. Moral sensibility finds its highest satisfaction in the immutable conviction that historical retribution will correspond to the scope of the crime. Revolution will unlock all the secret compartments, review all the trials, rehabilitate all the slandered, raise memorials to the victims of wantonness and cover with eternal infamy the names of the executioners. Stalin will depart from the scene laden with all the crimes which he has committed—not only as the gravedigger of the revolution but as the most sinister figure in the history of mankind.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact