

Excavation completed at mass shooting site from Stalin's Great Terror

Clara Weiss
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On May 20, the GULAG History Museum in Moscow opened an informational center at “Kommunarka,” an infamous mass execution site of the Stalinist Great Terror outside of Russia’s capital city. Visitors can go on expeditions and get an overview of the site’s history and the efforts to excavate the graves.

Archeologists and historians only recently completed the work of locating and unearthing the remains of the 6,609 people who were executed there between 1937 and 1941. Most of them were victims of the Great Terror of 1936-1938, during which the Stalinist bureaucracy murdered virtually the entire cadre of the Bolshevik Party that had carried out the 1917 October Revolution. Substantial sections of the Third Communist International (Comintern), founded in 1919 under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, were also killed.

The bureaucracy that carried out these crimes was a privileged caste within the workers’ state that arose under conditions of the country’s international isolation and relative economic backwardness. Led by Joseph Stalin, this parasitic elite came into ever more direct conflict with the internationalist and egalitarian program of the October 1917 revolution and the socialist aspirations of the Soviet working class. Based on the nationalist program of “socialism in one country,” the party faction around Stalin betrayed one workers’ revolution after another, above all, in Germany and in China.

The nationalist betrayal of the world revolution by Stalinism was opposed by Leon Trotsky, who had co-led the revolution with Lenin. In 1923, he formed the Left Opposition. In 1938, following the devastating defeat of the German working class and the coming to power of Nazism in 1933—a direct result of the disastrous policies of the Stalinized Comintern—Trotsky founded the Fourth International.

In the three Moscow Trials of 1936-1938, prominent leaders of the revolution were framed up in monstrous show trials, in which they were forced, after intense torture, to make false public confessions about their alleged “counterrevolutionary” activities.

The history of the “Kommunarka”

The “Kommunarka” shooting site became the grave for some of the most famous victims of the trials. It gives a glimpse into the scale of the terror that claimed the lives of at least 700,000 people. Among those who were shot and buried here are:

- Nikolai Bukharin (1888-1938) and Alexei Rykov (1881-1938), both of whom had been leading members of the Bolshevik Party since before 1917, and later formed part of the short-lived “Right opposition” to the Stalin faction in 1928-29. They were sentenced to death as defendants of the Third Moscow Trial of 1938.

- Lev Levin (1870-1938), a Kremlin doctor who had treated prominent

Soviet political and cultural figures, including Vladimir Lenin, Felix Dzerzhinsky and the writer Maxim Gorky. He too was a defendant in the Third Moscow Trial.

- Nikolai Krestinsky (1883-1938), a member of the Bolshevik Central Committee in 1917 and one of the party’s first secretaries of the Central Committee after the revolution. Krestinsky was a supporter of the Left Opposition from 1923 to 1928. He was also a defendant in the Third Moscow Trial.

- Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko (1883-1938), who led the storming of the Winter Palace in October 1917. Like Krestinsky, Antonov-Ovseenko was a prominent member of the Left Opposition in the 1920s and one of the signatories of its founding document, the Declaration of the Forty-Six. He capitulated to Stalinism shortly after his expulsion from the Bolshevik Party in December 1927. He later played an ignominious role as an executor of Stalinist policies in the Spanish Civil War in 1936-37, before being summoned back to Moscow and killed on February 10, 1938.

- Valerian Osinskii-Obolensky (1887-1938), a Bolshevik since 1907 and a trained economist who became the first head of the VSNKh, the High Council of the National Economy of the Soviet Union after the 1917 seizure of power. A “democratic centralist,” he supported the Left Opposition in 1923-24 but soon broke with it and went on to play leading roles in various economic state institutions. Before his execution, he worked as the director of the Institute of the History of Sciences and Technology at the Academy of Sciences.

- Boris Malkin (1891-1938), a former leader of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries who joined the Bolsheviks in 1918. He was involved in producing the first audio recordings of Lenin’s speeches and later became a major figure in Soviet cultural life. He worked together with the poet Sergei Esenin, was friends with the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, edited various journals, and helped direct the theater of Vsevolod Meyerhold in the 1920s.

- Turar Ryskulov (1894-1937) and Kaikhisiz Sardarovich Atabayev (1887-1938), both leading Communists in Turkmenistan.

- Hryhoriy Hrynko (1890-1938), a Communist from Ukraine who had previously been a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Borotbist movement. He was the Soviet Union’s finance minister from 1930 to 1937.

- Pavel Tsvetkov (1906-1938), a Bulgarian communist who helped lead the Comintern’s youth movement, the Komsomol, in Bulgaria, and then emigrated to the Soviet Union where he worked in a Moscow factory.

Other victims include members of the Chinese and the Korean Communist Parties, students from Moscow universities, workers from various factories in Moscow and the surrounding area, scientists, economists and literary figures. “Kommunarka” also became a major burial ground for those killed during the purge of the Red Army, including dozens of executed high-ranking commanders. Many of them had been trained by Trotsky during the civil war. The beheading of the Red Army was to have devastating consequences when the Nazis invaded the Soviet

Union just a few years later, in 1941, and launched a war that claimed the lives of at least 27 million Soviet citizens.

The “Kommunarka” shooting site was located on the territory of the luxury residence of Genrikh Yagoda, the longtime head of the NKVD (Soviet secret service). He played a sinister and leading role in the Great Terror before he himself and his subordinates were purged in 1938. He too is buried at “Kommunarka.” The site itself was completely secret until the fall of 1991, just months before the Stalinist bureaucracy finally liquidated the Soviet Union.

For decades, its exact location, as that of many other mass execution sites from the Great Terror, remained unknown. The NKVD order “On Anti-Soviet Elements,” which initiated the most large-scale operation of the Great Terror, had stressed that the executions should proceed “while maintaining complete secrecy about the time and location.” The location of this and other mass shooting sites was a “state secret,” and documentary evidence about them was systematically destroyed.

While volunteers and historians conducted fieldwork in the vicinity from 2012 onwards, the exact location of the burial sites remained unknown for many years. Professional research, involving archeologists and historians, only began in 2018 at the initiative of the GULAG History Museum. The eventual identification of the mass graves became possible when historians discovered aerial reconnaissance photographs that had been made by the German Luftwaffe on August 26, 1942 in the US national archive.

This research has been conducted in a political and cultural climate that is dominated by the Russian state’s efforts to falsify the history of the October Revolution, glorify Stalinism and engage in the vilest anti-Semitic slanders against its leaders, above all, Leon Trotsky. The government has also secretly destroyed archival documents related to the victims of the purges.

The opening of the museum comes as the case against Yuri Dmitriev, who uncovered a shooting site in Sandarmokh, Karelia, is now in its third trial. The 65-year-old Dmitriev has been sentenced to 13 years in prison on trumped-up charges of sexual abuse of a minor. The aim of the state vendetta against him is to intimidate everyone who seeks to uncover the truth about the crimes of Stalinism.

Like Dmitriev’s, the GULAG museum’s political orientation is anticommunist. The institution’s permanent exhibit makes almost no mention of the Left Opposition and tends to obscure the political nature of the Stalinist suppression of all opposition within the Soviet Union. Instead, it portrays the terror as a natural outcome of the October Revolution. On the website of the new informational center at Kommunarka, the names of those who were murdered are accompanied by an extremely brief biography that ignores their participation (or non-participation) in the October Revolution and the Left Opposition.

The origins of the Great Terror

Such an approach obscures the real historical origins and significance of the Great Terror. Far from representing a continuity of the October Revolution, the terror was the apex of the Stalinist and nationalist reaction against it. While the sweep of the purges went well beyond tens of thousands of Trotskyists, it was fundamentally, in the words of Soviet historian Vadim Rogovin, a “political genocide.” The chief defendant in the Moscow Trials was Leon Trotsky, who like no other represented the socialist opposition to Stalinism and the program of world socialist revolution. The accusation of “counterrevolutionary Trotskyist activity” was at the center of the murderous purges.

In his closing speech to the Dewey Commission in 1937, which cleared

him and his son, Leon Sedov, from all the charges of the Stalinist bureaucracy and found the trials to have been frame-ups, Trotsky explained the underlying reasons for the terror and the monstrous frame-ups, in which leaders of the October Revolution were forced to denounce themselves as “saboteurs” and “counterrevolutionaries”:

The position of a privileged bureaucracy in a society which that bureaucracy itself calls Socialist is not only contradictory, but also false. The more precipitate the jump from the October overturn—which laid bare all social falsehood—to the present situation, in which a caste of upstarts is forced to cover up its social ulcers, the cruder the Thermidorian lies. It is, consequently, a question not simply of the individual depravity of this or that person, but of the corruption lodged in the position of a whole social group for whom lying has become a vital political necessity. In the struggle for its newly gained positions, this caste has re-educated itself and simultaneously re-educated—or rather, demoralized—its leaders. It raised upon its shoulders the man who best, most resolutely and most ruthlessly expresses its interests. Thus, Stalin, who was once a revolutionist, became the leader of the Thermidorian caste.

The formulas of Marxism, expressing the interests of the masses, more and more inconvenienced the bureaucracy, in so far as they were inevitably directed against its interests. From the time that I entered into opposition to the bureaucracy, its courtier-theoreticians began to call the revolutionary essence of *Marxism* — “*Trotskyism*.” ... The incessant Party purges [in the 1920s] were directed above all toward the uprooting of “Trotskyism,” and during these purges not only discontented workers were called “Trotskyites,” but also all writers who honestly presented historical facts or citations which contradicted the latest official standardization. Novelists and artists were subject to the same regime. The spiritual atmosphere of the country became completely impregnated with the poison of conventionalities, lies and direct frame-ups.

All the possibilities along this road were soon exhausted. The theoretical and historical falsifications no longer attained their aims—people grew too accustomed to them. It was necessary to give to bureaucratic repression a more massive foundation. To bolster up the literary falsifications, accusations of a criminal character were brought in. ... To justify the repressions, it was necessary to have framed accusations. To give weight to the false accusations, it was necessary to reinforce them with more brutal repressions. Thus the logic of the struggle drove Stalin along the road of gigantic judicial amalgams.

With the purges, the bureaucracy consolidated itself as a caste and proved to imperialism that it was opposed to socialist revolution and any prospect of another October anywhere in the world. Moreover, by dragging the leaders of the revolution through the mud before murdering them, the bureaucracy sought to discredit the October Revolution in the eyes of millions worldwide and destroy the historical and socialist consciousness of the working class in the USSR and internationally. The Stalinist liquidation of the Soviet Union three decades ago in 1991, out of which the Putin regime emerged, cannot be understood outside this broader context.

Against this backdrop, the recent efforts to locate these mass graves and establish basic biographical information about those who were murdered are an important and indispensable contribution to the historical record. However, the full historical truth and an understanding of this critical

experience in the history of the internationalist working class requires a coming to terms with the struggle waged by Trotsky and the Left Opposition, from a socialist and internationalist standpoint, against Stalinism.

For more on the Moscow Trials and the history of the Left Opposition, explore the topic pages on the WSWs:

The Moscow Trials and the political genocide in the Soviet Union

The Left Opposition's fight against Stalinism (1923-1933)



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