

Hands off Memorial!

Russian state prosecutors try to shut down the leading institution for research into the Great Terror

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15 November 2021

Last Thursday, the Russian organization Memorial, which is both a human rights organization and a research institution, received a letter from the state prosecution announcing a legal procedure aimed at liquidating it on the basis of its alleged activities as a “foreign agent.” Memorial insists that there is no legal basis for its liquidation. Court hearings are scheduled for November 23 and November 25.

The assault on Memorial is an assault on the historical consciousness not just of the people in the former Soviet Union but of the entire international working class. The Stalinist Great Terror of 1936-1938 took the lives of over one million people, with millions more exiled and imprisoned in camps for years, sometimes decades.

The campaign of mass murder, carried out by the Stalinist bureaucracy, was aimed at wiping out the historical consciousness of the working class of the October Revolution. Among the victims were almost the entire cadre of the Bolshevik Party that had led the socialist revolution of 1917; thousands of Left Oppositionists, the socialist opponents of Stalinism; members of the Communist movement in Germany, Greece, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Poland, China and many other countries; as well as tens of thousands of intellectuals, workers and peasants from throughout the Soviet Union.

Memorial has established and published online the single most comprehensive database of victims of the Great Terror. This database is indispensable for research into the history of the crimes of Stalinism, as well as the history of the Russian Revolution and the international socialist movement in the 1920s and 1930s.

Also Memorial provides assistance to relatives of victims and to researchers in gaining access to the archival records of victims of the Great Terror. Many of these records are still in the hands of the FSB, the successor of the NKVD, the Soviet secret service, and access to them is highly restricted.

The attempt by the Russian state to shut down Memorial has provoked an outcry in Russia, where not a single family was untouched by the Great Terror.

Lev Oborin, a literary critic and poet, told the media outlet Meduza that Memorial helped him find out the fate of his great grandfather, Vasily Pavlovich Oborin, and his wife, both members of the Left Opposition. “My great-grandfather was shot, but we did not know either when exactly or where exactly he died and had been buried. We also did not know any details about his earlier biography.” He added, “There is a huge number of people whom Memorial has helped learn about their repressed relatives, of people to whom it is important to not forget the victims of the terror.”

The composer Ksenia Kazantseva told Meduza that Memorial helped her establish what had happened to her great-grandfather, Mikhail Nikolaevich Malama, who was arrested in 1937. The organization’s database not only included information about him, but Memorial also helped her access archival holdings on Malama. She said, “Without Memorial we would not have learned anything. When I learned about the attempt to liquidate it, I felt like this is stifling me personally—after all, this is an attempt to wipe out my memory.”

Liudmila Petrushevskaya, a prominent writer, announced that she would return her state prize to protest the attempt to liquidate Memorial.

Memorial was founded in 1989, in the midst of the terminal crisis of Stalinism, by a number of prominent Soviet dissidents, including physicist Andrei Sakharov. In 1985, the general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party Mikhail Gorbachev had initiated the *perestroika* policy with the aim of fully restoring capitalist economy in the USSR. It was the response by the Stalinist bureaucracy to both an economic crisis and the looming threat of a working-class movement against its rule, which soon materialized with a

massive union-wide miners strike.

The political and cultural climate at that time was very contradictory. While the bureaucracy moved full speed ahead in the attempt to restore capitalism, it was also forced to acknowledge many crimes of Stalinism. In the mid to late 1980s, countless historical documents and literary works that had earlier been suppressed by the Stalinist bureaucracy were widely published in the Soviet press and discussed by millions of people. These documents would form a central basis for important new research, most notably the seven-volume history of the Left Opposition by the Soviet historian Vadim Rogovin.

The crisis of the bureaucracy allowed the International Committee of the Fourth International to intervene in the Soviet Union for the first time since the Great Terror. The decades-long suppression of historical truth and the Trotskyist movement, the betrayals of Stalinism, and the relentless historical falsifications had undermined the socialist consciousness of the working class not just in the Soviet Union but internationally. Moreover, a significant layer of the intelligentsia moved sharply to the right and began to openly support capitalist restoration. Under these conditions, the bureaucracy could eventually dissolve the Soviet Union in 1991 and transform itself into a new ruling class.

This is the political atmosphere in which Memorial was founded. Many of those who created the society falsely equated Stalinism with socialism and thus saw in the Great Terror an indictment of Marxism. The organization has also traditionally been close to Russia's liberal opposition. Recently, it issued a statement supporting Alexei Navalny, an open racist and right-wing opponent of Putin, as a political prisoner. However, this does in no way minimize its significance as a research institution.

Memorial upheld critically important historical work on the Great Terror—an event that, in its political, economic and intellectual consequences, must be counted among the most consequential of the 20th century—in a climate of anti-Marxist and anti-socialist reaction that has prevailed in the decades following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The assault by the Russian state on Memorial now comes at a time when this climate is breaking up. The resurgence of the class struggle and the social climate and political disaster created by capitalism—most devastatingly in the pandemic—have created conditions for growing interest in the history of the Russian Revolution and the struggle waged by the Left Opposition and Trotsky against Stalinism, including in Russia itself.

The 2018 discovery of previously unknown documents of the Soviet Left Opposition from the early 1930s, which testified to the enormous political strength and activities of

the Opposition up until the Great Terror, likewise provoked great interest. Last month, Russia's main cultural TV channel, Kultura, aired a serious, one-hour discussion on of the work of Alexander Voronsky, the pre-eminent Soviet literary critic of the 1920s and a prominent member of the Left Opposition, whose writings shaped several generations of Soviet poets and writers.

The Russian oligarchy which has emerged out of the counterrevolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy is highly sensitive to such shifts and developments. It is highly conscious that a renewed upsurge of the international working class will create the basis for the restoration of historical truth about the October Revolution and the Trotskyist movement's struggle against Stalinism. This is exactly what it seeks to preempt through a combination of neo-Stalinist falsifications and state repression.

In 2017, on the centenary of the October Revolution, the Russian state sponsored a major TV series filled with anti-Semitic slander and historical falsifications of Leon Trotsky. The Russian oligarchy is also engaging in a systematic promotion of Stalin and his crimes. At the same time, figures and institutions that are involved in researching the Great Terror are increasingly facing direct state repression. Memorial has been subject to large fines for years after it was declared a "foreign agent" organization in 2013.

Yuri Dmitriev, who has worked on excavations at the mass shooting site at Sandarmokh and was the head of the regional division of Memorial in Karelia, has already been locked up in prison on the basis of fabricated charges in a blatant state frame-up.

The assault on Memorial, should it be successful, would have chilling consequences. If Memorial can be liquidated, anyone doing historical research into the crimes of Stalinism and the history of the socialist movement will have to fear immediate state reprisals. Workers around the world must unconditionally denounce and oppose this attack.



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