Russian Supreme Court orders liquidation of Memorial, the leading research center on Great Terror

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29 December 2021

Thirty years after the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian state is trying to outlaw all research into the crimes of Stalinism. On December 28, the country's Supreme Court issued a verdict confirming a November 11 recommendation by the government that International Memorial, a human rights organization centrally involved in documenting and exposing the crimes of Stalinism, be shuttered for allegedly having violated Russia's legislation on "foreign agents."

Founded in the midst of the terminal crisis of Stalinism in 1987, Memorial has created several databases with the names and biographical information of over 3 million victims of the Stalinist Great Terror. Entries often also provide information about and links to related archival holdings and other source material. Memorial's own archive includes the personal records (*lichnye dela*) of 60,000 victims of the terror, as well as material from members of the Soviet dissident movement; its library has over 40,000 volumes, many of them rare editions. The organization runs a museum, which has organized many important exhibitions and events over the years. All of this would be liquidated, should the ruling stand.

Russia's Supreme Court ordered the shutdown of all of Memorial's many regional branches, which have been involved in helping survivors of the Terror, setting up local exhibitions, and excavation work at mass shooting sites. Memorial published a forceful statement opposing the ruling and announced that it will appeal the decision.

Just a day before Tuesday's verdict, another Russian court extended the prison sentence of historian Yuri Dmitriev, who worked with Memorial's branch in Karelia, to 15 years. Under conditions of a raging pandemic, the ruling against Dmitriev, who is 65 and in ill health, is tantamount to a death sentence.

There can be no doubt that the trial against Memorial was orchestrated at the highest levels of the Russian state. The prosecution's case was backed by Russia's Ministry of Justice and Roskomnadzor, the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media.

On December 9, Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose office had earlier feigned ignorance of the case against Memorial, publicly denounced the organization for allegedly supporting "terrorist and extremist" groups. Putin also accused Memorial of violating its "humanistic ideals" because the organization, which is heavily understaffed, had accidentally included the names of three Nazi collaborators on its website, an error that was quickly corrected.

In Tuesday's court session, the state prosecutor, Alexei Zhafyarov, made no attempt to hide the political motivations behind the persecution of Memorial. He accused Memorial of committing the crime of "criticizing state authorities" and stated: "It is obvious that Memorial distorts the historical memory about the Great Patriotic War [World War II] and creates a false image of the USSR as a terrorist state by engaging in *speculations* about repression in the 20th century; and is whitewashing and rehabilitating Nazi criminals who have the blood of Soviet citizens on their hands" (emphasis added).

These neo-Stalinist lies and slanders must be rejected! Workers must rally to prevent the liquidation of Memorial and its invaluable archives, and demand the immediate release of Yuri Dmitriev.

The political differences of the WSWS with Russia's liberal opposition, to which Memorial's leadership has ties, are well documented. But this is not what this case is about. With its work, Memorial has cut across the efforts of the Putin regime to rehabilitate and justify the crimes of Stalin. The defense of Memorial is the defense of access to the historical truth about the crimes of Stalinism.

The Great Terror of the 1930s resulted in the murder of more than a million people and the imprisonment of millions more in labor camps. In what amounted to political genocide, entire generations of revolutionaries were wiped

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out, first and foremost those who led the October Revolution and the struggle of the Left Opposition against Stalinism. Leon Trotsky, the co-leader of the revolution along with Lenin and the chief opponent of Joseph Stalin, was assassinated by a GPU agent in Mexico in August 1940.

The Russian oligarchy traces its roots back to this violent historical reaction against the world's first victorious socialist revolution. It fears that the resurgence of the class struggle internationally will reignite interest in the origins and fate of the 1917 Revolution and the struggle of Leon Trotsky against Stalinism. It seeks to block this by suppressing historical truth and perpetuating the Stalinist falsification of history.

At the 12th Plenum of the International Committee of the Fourth International in March 1992, David North stressed :

> "If one considers the impact of the crimes of Stalinism on the political development of the working class, one must say that no political force ever had such a devastating effect on the progressive development of humanity. Hitler was what he was. He was a fascist, imperialist politician. But Stalin and the Soviet bureaucracy, as well as the mass Stalinist parties all over the world, claimed to speak in the name of the October Revolution. … What was Stalin seeking to do? One cannot explain the mass killings except as an attempt to exterminate all traces of Marxist culture within the working class and within society. … The purpose of this mass murder was the extirpation of the individuals who embodied the revolutionary political, social and cultural environment that had produced October 1917. I don't think it's possible to understand what has happened in the last year [in 1991] if one doesn't grasp the enormity of this crime. … To answer the lie that Stalinism is Marxism requires that we expose the deeds of Stalinism. To know what Stalinism is one has to show whom Stalinism murdered. We have to answer the question: against what enemy did Stalinism strike its most terrible blows?"

Tens of thousands of revolutionaries, including thousands of Trotskyists who would not capitulate to Stalinism, have been erased from the historical memory of the working class. Their proud record of political struggle and their often outstanding and voluminous writings remain almost entirely unknown.

The information in Memorial's databases, as well as the organization's archives and library, are indispensable to research into the history of the Soviet Union and the international workers' movement in the 1920s and 1930s.

Excavation works at the most notorious mass shooting sites of the Great Terror—including the Kommunarka burial ground—have virtually always proceeded with assistance from Memorial. And the organization has helped families of the Terror's victims learn about their relatives' fates and win their rehabilitation.

The Putin regime believes that it can intimidate the working class and historians with this verdict. Further attacks on historical institutions and archives will be prepared.

It may well have miscalculated. The persecution of Memorial has generated outrage, including among high school and college students, artists and workers. One young woman described the liquidation of Memorial as an "attempt to erase my memory."

Despite the decades-long counterrevolution, Russia is still a highly politicized country; the October revolution, the 1920s and 1930s and World War II, while little understood, are the subject of TV series, books and discussions on a regular basis.

Moreover, three decades of social misery and reaction under capitalism, which have now culminated in the daily experience of mass death and disease, have left their mark on the consciousness of the working class. While there is still a great deal of confusion about the nature of Stalinism, the Soviet Union and the 1917 revolution, there is also a deep sense among many workers and intellectuals that the truth about this history is an essential precondition for social progress.

The historical record uncovered and preserved by Memorial is essential to awakening the consciousness of the working masses. The widespread opposition to the attack on Memorial must now be mobilized and rooted in the Russian and international working class, the only social constituency for the defense of historical truth and democratic rights.

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