

Russian court rejects appeal by historian Yuri Dmitriev, upholds 15-year prison sentence

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Amidst the war in Ukraine, the Putin regime is continuing its crackdown on all efforts to research the history of the crimes of Stalinism.

On March 15, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Karelia in Russia rejected an appeal by Yuri Dmitriev, a historian of the Stalinist Great Terror, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison in a massive state frame-up. The Russian Supreme Court has also excluded all attempts to overturn the sentence. Having exhausted all legal paths in Russia, Dmitriev's lawyer will now bring the case before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

Yuri Dmitriev was centrally involved in the excavations of mass graves in the Sandarmokh forest in Karelia, a region bordering Finland, and the establishment of the names of those who were murdered there by the Stalinist secret police, the NKVD, during the Great Terror in 1937-38. Over a million people were killed during the Great Terror, among them tens of thousands of revolutionaries from Russia, Germany, Poland and many other countries. It was a political genocide, targeting above all the supporters of Leon Trotsky, who opposed the Stalinist, nationalist reaction against the October revolution of 1917. It also targeted all those who remembered and played an active part in the revolution.

As of this writing, the whereabouts of Yuri Dmitriev in Russia's prison system are unclear, but it appears that he has now been sent to a penal colony. Dmitriev is 66 years old, and the rejection of his appeal is tantamount to a death sentence.

The case against Dmitriev, which is based on allegations of sexual assault of a minor, was a politically motivated state frame-up from its start in 2016. The charges have never been substantiated. The trial proceeded behind closed doors for years until he

was sentenced to 13 years in prison in September 2020; the sentence was extended to 15 years last December.

The character of the charges not only served to create a basis for his persecution but also to discredit and defame him personally and, by extension, his work.

Thanks in no small part to Dmitriev's efforts, the Sandarmokh shooting site, along with the Kommunarka and Butovo shooting sites in Moscow, is today one of only a few mass burial locations from the Great Terror that have been uncovered and whose victims are known by name; many more such shooting sites remain undiscovered to this day.

For decades, the Soviet bureaucracy kept the location of mass graves at Sandarmokh and elsewhere a "state secret." The site was not uncovered until the crisis of Stalinism in the late 1980s created conditions for the partial revelations of the historical truth about the scale of the Great Purges. Expeditions headed by Dmitriev discovered 236 burial pits in the 1990s; he helped compile the list of names of those who were shot in the forest, as well as the names of their executioners; authored several works on the Great Terror in Karelia and became the head of the regional branch of Memorial.

The so called "Solovki" operation, in which 1,111 political prisoners were murdered, gives a sense of the political scale of the crimes committed by Stalinism in Sandarmokh alone.

In a sinister mockery of the ideals and leaders of the October Revolution, the bureaucracy organized its single biggest mass shooting here for the week of the 20th anniversary of the October 1917 seizure of power by the working class. As one historian of the Sandarmokh shootings noted, about "half of those who were shot were simple workers from Petersburg [Leningrad]," the city of the 1917 revolution.

Among those shot on October 27 and November 1-4, 1937 were also several Old Bolsheviks and members of the Left Opposition, including Nadezhda Smilga-Poluyan, an Old Bolshevik and the wife of Ivar Smilga, who had been a close collaborator of Lenin in 1917 and 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; Revekka Shumskaya and Noi Vol'fson, party members since the first years of the Soviet Union who had been arrested for support of the Opposition; and Martin Yakobson and Aleksandr Blaufel'd, two Old Bolsheviks who had fought for socialism in Estonia since the revolution of 1905.

In total, over 9,500 people from 60 different nationalities are believed to have been killed at Sandarmokh. A large number of them fell victim to the “national operations” by the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, which targeted national minorities such as the Ukrainians, the Finns and the Poles.

Although Dmitriev, a deeply religious man, has always approached the crimes of Stalinism from the standpoint of anti-Communism, his work constituted an important contribution to reestablishing the historical truth about the Great Terror. As such, he was an intolerable thorn in the eye of the Russian state. The merciless crackdown on him is aimed at intimidating all those who are seeking to learn the truth about the crimes of Stalinism—be it professional historians or ordinary people.

The persecution of Dmitriev was also accompanied by a campaign, spearheaded by Russia's Ministry of Culture and backed by neo-Stalinist forces in Russia's pseudo-left, to propagandize the lie that the mass graves in Sandarmokh were the result not of the Great Terror, but rather of Finnish executions of Soviet soldiers during World War II.

The state vendetta against Dmitriev has been a central component of the years-long, systematic efforts of the Putin regime to rehabilitate Joseph Stalin, the “gravedigger” of the October revolution, and justify his crimes. This campaign has involved the production of a viciously anti-Semitic series smearing Leon Trotsky in 2017 (the series was then distributed by Netflix); the systematic destruction of archival material about the Great Terror; and, mostly recently, the liquidation of the Memorial research center, the single most important

research institution on the history of the Great Terror.

Motivating this extraordinary campaign of state repression and historical falsification is a profound fear by the Russian oligarchy of the political consequences of the establishment of the historical truth about the October revolution, and the internationalist-socialist opposition to Stalinism, which was led by Leon Trotsky and his Left Opposition.

The Putin regime is the direct heir of the Stalinist reaction against the socialist October revolution of 1917, which culminated in the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union by the bureaucracy. Thirty years later, the Putin regime and the oligarchy as a whole are in a profound crisis. While its reactionary invasion in Ukraine is above all a bankrupt and criminal response to the systematic encirclement of Russia by imperialism since 1991, the Putin regime also seeks thereby to divert from immense class tensions and escalate the promotion of Great Russian nationalism. Tellingly, Putin began his speech justifying the war by attacking the October revolution and Vladimir Lenin in particular.

As the war drags on, developing ever more directly into an open confrontation with NATO, the economic sanctions are creating conditions for a socioeconomic disaster unseen in the country since the Second World War. After over a million people died because of the oligarchy's criminal response to the COVID-19 pandemic, now, entire branches of industry are being devastated and millions of workers face the prospect of losing their employment.

The attacks of the Putin regime on historical truth and its rehabilitation of Stalinism are aimed, above all, at suppressing the historical truth about the October revolution and the socialist opposition to Stalinism in anticipation of major social and political unrest in the working class. Workers must oppose this campaign as part of their struggle to build a socialist anti-war movement whose revolutionary program is based on the entire historical legacy of the struggle of Trotskyism against Stalinism.



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