

The Dmitriev Affair: A confused and confusing film about the historian of Stalin's Great Terror

Clara Weiss
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Last year, Dutch filmmaker Jessica Gorter released her documentary feature film about the persecution of Yuri Dmitriev, a Russian historian of the Stalinist Great Terror. The work, *The Dmitriev Affair*, has been showing at film festivals in the Netherlands, where it received favorable reviews, and is now also touring universities and festivals in the US.

Dmitriev began working on the history of the Great Terror in Karelia, a region near Russia's border with Finland, during *perestroika* (in the late 1980s), when the Stalinist bureaucracy moved toward the restoration of capitalism. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, he and his team have uncovered Sandarmokh, one of the largest execution sites of the terror, where thousands of people, including Old Bolsheviks and members of Leon Trotsky's Left Opposition, were murdered in 1937-1938.

Dmitriev has also worked on multiple volumes documenting the names and biographical data of Stalin's victims. Since 2016, he has been the victim of a vicious Russian state vendetta, aimed at intimidating not only him, but anyone seeking to do serious historical work on the crimes of Stalinism. Now 68 years old and in ill health, he is serving a 15-year prison sentence in a penal colony. To his credit, Dmitriev still continues the work of documenting these crimes from prison, together with one of his closest collaborators.

Dmitriev's case is important from a political and historical standpoint. Unfortunately, however, Gorter's film is confused and superficial, and ends up serving to feed into the anti-Russian war propaganda of NATO in its war in Ukraine.

Gorter began shooting the film before Dmitriev's court cases began. At the time, the intended focus of the film was his work in Karelia as the regional head of Memorial. The latter was the main research institution dedicated to the preservation of historical records of the Great Terror. It was shut down in December 2021 by the Kremlin.

The footage from this time is focused on interviews with Dmitriev and footage from Sandarmokh. In a particularly disturbing scene, we see how Dmitriev and his team uncovered the burial ground in 1996, finding skeletons and skulls just two meters below the ground in a vast forest. The remains indicated that the victims had been executed with shots to the back of the head.

Dmitriev recounts how he spent months in the archives of the FSB, the successor of the NKVD, which carried out the terror and the shootings, to find documentary material about the victims.

The historian also recounts how confusing and shocking the revelations about the terror during the period of *perestroika* were to him (as they were to many others). Before that, he recalls, he had always believed that the Soviet government had fought for socialism. While it might have made certain mistakes, he would have never thought at the time that such crimes could have been committed against the population by the state. To this

day, he is clearly bewildered by the scale of the terror.

At one point, he expresses complete disbelief why the state under Stalin would murder, for instance, large numbers of carpenters. As he notes, with great emotion, not a single henchman from Sandarmokh—or the terror in general—was ever prosecuted for his or her crimes. If any NKVD officer was ever disciplined, it was not for murdering, but for stealing belongings from the murdered.

Dmitriev's statements reveal both his admirable determination to continue the work despite growing resistance from the state, and his own political and historical confusion. When asked about why the Putin regime would persecute him, Dmitriev asserts that the "people" want the truth about this history, but the government does not. He also observes, correctly, that the Putin regime sees itself as an heir of the Stalinist regime. Indeed, the Putin regime did arise out of the Stalinist bureaucracy's destruction of the Soviet Union. Putin, himself a trained KGB agent, has overseen a systematic rehabilitation of Stalin and a form of neo-Stalinism in foreign policy and key elements of the regime's ideology.

However, then Dmitriev goes on to say that he and others are being targeted because, in his view, Russia is returning in its domestic policy to the 1930s. This analogy is ahistorical and false, and betrays his own failure to understand the historical origins of both the Great Terror and the current Russian regime. The filmmaker does nothing to provide a greater understanding. There is no historical explanation or context given to either the terror or Dmitriev's own work since the late 1980s.

Scenes of memorial meetings at Sandarmokh show, for example, a man with a Ukrainian flag in close-up. Of course, every viewer will think of the war in Ukraine, but what exactly does this man with a Ukrainian flag tell us about the terror? The film explains nothing. It is difficult to see this as much more than a not-so-subtle bow to NATO's war propaganda.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has unconditionally defended Yuri Dmitriev from the attacks by the Russian state. We have done so despite the fact that his own historical and political views are fundamentally at odds with a Marxist understanding of the terror and opposition to the Putin regime. Dmitriev's views are clearly shaped by his religiosity. Moreover, in his view, the course of history is explained by the deeds and intentions of individuals. This subjective and even mystical approach accounts for his own inability to understand the terror and his political orientation toward the liberal opposition in Russia, which is backed by imperialism. This does not diminish the significance of his work or his courage. His political and historical disorientation can, to a large extent, be explained by the enormous confusion created by decades of Stalinism and the climate of wholesale reaction and anti-Marxism that then dominated following the destruction of the USSR in 1991 and the restoration of capitalism.

However, it does not absolve artists dealing with his case from grappling with this history on a more serious level. But this was clearly not the goal of the filmmakers. The film focuses, for the most part, on following Dmitriev and his family through the ordeal of multiple court trials. In 2016, authorities raided his home on an anonymous tip and they found nude images of his adopted daughter on his computer. The pictures formed the basis for charges of “child pornography” and “abuse.”

Dmitriev explained that when he had adopted the girl, she was malnourished and had other developmental problems and that he took the pictures to document her development, at the advice of experts. At the time, the charges were widely publicized on Russian state television, the photographs (largely blacked out) were released, along with the name of his adopted daughter. In two court proceedings, Dmitriev was cleared of these charges.

However, after an acquittal in 2019, the state prosecution, clearly displeased by the judge’s verdict, opened a new case, this time charging Dmitriev with sexual assault of a minor. His adopted daughter and her grandmother had, by then, abruptly broken contact with Dmitriev and his family and served as witnesses for the prosecution. Dmitriev and his family and friends suggest that the authorities had “worked on them” to find a basis for new charges. Dmitriev was convicted and sentenced to three years, much less than the actual charge usually carries, before the sentence was later extended to 15 years. Almost the entirety of the trial proceeded behind closed doors.

We see the tragic consequences of the state persecution for Dmitriev and his family, including his adopted daughter, who was forced to return to the grandmother who had given her up for adoption in the first place. Yet while this certainly gives a sense of the scale of the state vendetta and its cost for Dmitriev and his loved ones, both the political dimensions of the case and his work become completely lost.

Thus, while the film gives a sense of the hostility of the Russian state to the historical truth about the Great Terror, it offers no historical or political explanation or context for either the terror or the vendetta against Dmitriev. This is politically and historically dangerous. A clear understanding of the nature and historical implications of the crimes of Stalinism is central to the development of a genuine anti-war movement, independent of NATO and the Putin regime.

The Great Terror was, fundamentally, a political genocide. It was perpetrated by a bureaucracy that had arisen after the socialist October Revolution of 1917, under conditions of the international isolation of the first workers state, and enjoyed vast social privileges. The political and sociological function of the terror lay in the annihilation of the traditions and the revolutionaries that had made the 1917 revolution possible, whose goals of internationalism and social equality were incompatible with the program and very existence of the Soviet bureaucracy.

The terror involved a wholesale purge of the Soviet state and party. Almost the entire Bolshevik leadership of the period of 1917 and the subsequent civil war, along with generations of socialists and revolutionaries, were murdered. This included, especially at Sandarmokh, large numbers of workers from factories in St. Petersburg (Leningrad), the city of the revolution. (Dmitriev and other historians have restored many of their names.) It also encompassed national minorities, including Ukrainians and various Baltic peoples, of whom a significant number were also executed at Sandarmokh. This terror in the USSR was accompanied by a campaign of mass murder by the Soviet secret police abroad, which targeted above all Trotskyists, and culminated in the murder of Leon Trotsky himself in August 1940.

It was through vast terror that the Soviet bureaucracy solidified its parasitic position within the workers state. The oligarchy that rules Russia, Ukraine and other countries of the former Soviet Union today, arose out of a counterrevolution, which culminated in the restoration of capitalism and the destruction of the Soviet Union. To this day, ideologically, all of these

oligarchies, in one way or another, feed themselves off the legacy of Stalinism.

It is difficult to overstate the impact of the terror on the development of the revolution and generations of workers inside and outside the Soviet Union. As Trotsky wrote at the height of the terror in October 1937,

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 a “communist” passport, gave the name socialism to their police regime. Revolting profanation! The barracks of the G.P.U. are not the ideal for which the working class is struggling. Socialism signifies a pure and limpid social system which is accommodated to the self-government of the toilers. Stalin’s regime is based on a conspiracy of the rulers against the ruled. Socialism implies an uninterrupted growth of universal equality. Stalin has erected a system of revolting privileges. Socialism has as its goal the all-sided flowering of individual personality. When and where has man’s personality been so degraded as in the U.S.S.R.? Socialism would have no value apart from the unselfish, honest and humane relations between human beings. ...

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 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 grave-digger of the revolution but as the most sinister figure in the history of mankind. (“The Beginning of the End,” October, 1937. Accessed at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/10/begin.htm>)

This is precisely why Dmitriev’s work to restore the historical truth about the terror and its victims, whatever its serious limitations, is of tremendous significance. But it is also why workers, young people and intellectuals must have a clear understanding of its political and historical origins. Gorter’s film is yet another indication of a troubling trend among artists and intellectuals to approach the most fundamental historical and political questions with extraordinary superficiality, making them, consciously or not, convenient tools in the cogs of the imperialist propaganda machine. The film underscores, yet again, a basic fact: Dmitriev’s defense and historical truth will be advanced not by those layers, but in the fight to build a socialist anti-war movement in the international working class.



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