

Kremlin declares Memorial an “extremist” organization, shuts down data base of victims of the Great Terror

Clara Weiss
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On April 9, the Russian Supreme Court declared “Memorial,” for decades the most important institution for uncovering biographical and other information about the Stalinist Great Terror, an extremist organization. The Kremlin also appears to have shut down the organization’s vast database of over three million victims of the Great Terror. As of this writing, it is no longer available online.

The assault on Memorial is a blow against the ability of workers and youth the world over to come to grips with the crimes of Stalinism, which, for generations, have undermined the struggle for socialism.

Memorial’s website included not only the vast database of terror victims but also reproductions of archival documents. Among them were many of the infamous “shooting lists” which Stalin and other members of the Politburo signed in 1937-1938 to personally sanction the execution of tens of thousands of individuals.

Over one million people were murdered during the Great Terror. Among them were thousands of Old Bolsheviks and socialist opponents of Stalinism from the Trotskyist Left Opposition, scientists, writers and intellectuals. The mass slaughter culminated in the 1940 assassination of Leon Trotsky in Mexico by a Stalinist agent. Termed a “political genocide” by Soviet historian Vadim Rogovin, the Terror was aimed at politically decapitating the Soviet and international working class and wiping out the living memory of the 1917 Revolution.

The Supreme Court’s ruling was reached in a closed session and came into effect immediately. Several diplomats from European countries who tried to attend the session were refused entry. Memorial is expected to appeal the ruling.

The organization was already outlawed in December

2021, on the eve of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. At the time, the Supreme Court ordered the liquidation of Memorial and all of its subdivisions.

However, despite the ban, Memorial, now run largely from outside of Russia, de facto continued operation. Its website remained accessible and staff answered queries about victims of the terror and their descendants. The organization also continued to issue a bulletin with articles centered on the Terror. Now, anyone who is involved with the organization may be subject to criminal persecution in Russia.

In its ruling, the court argued that Memorial was “aimed at the destruction of the basic foundations of Russian statehood, the violation of its territorial integrity, and the relativization of historical, cultural, spiritual and moral values.” As evidence, the court cited that fact that six individuals affiliated with the organization have been previously sentenced for calls for terrorist activities and the discrediting of the Russian armed forces, likely in connection with the war in Ukraine.

The history of Memorial reflects the problems bound up with the struggle for the historical truth about Stalinism and the October Revolution in the former Soviet Union. The organization was founded in the last years of the Soviet Union when newly released documents about the Terror and the inner-party struggle of the 1920s shook Soviet society. Many victims of the Terror, especially Trotskyists, were only now being rehabilitated. Trotsky was never fully rehabilitated.

Although heterogeneous, historically, Memorial has been close to the liberal and anti-Communist sections of the intelligentsia. Along with victims of the Terror, its co-founders included several prominent dissidents whose orientation became increasingly anti-communist and right wing. The most prominent liberal dissident Andrei

Sakharov became the organization's first head. Many of its staff and supporters, while committed to historical truth, had drawn the most pessimistic conclusions about the crimes of Stalinism.

When the Putin regime invaded Ukraine in February 2022 after years of provocations by NATO, Memorial condemned the invasion not from the left, but rather from the right. Yet no matter how reactionary this orientation toward anti-communist and pro-imperialist forces, the historical work that Memorial and its staff have accomplished over the past decades has been invaluable and must be defended.

Memorial has been an indispensable resource for researchers in Russia and internationally who have been seeking to establish the historical truth about the terror, identify its victims and connect with their descendants. In addition to its online database with its millions of entries and the online publication of historical documents, Memorial also has an archive with the personal records of 60,000 victims of the terror and materials from members of the dissident movement. Its library encompasses over 40,000 volumes, including many rare editions.

Memorial was one of very few organizations who made any effort to retain connections to survivors of the Great Terror. These included Tatiana Ivarovna Smilga, who was deeply involved in the organization in its early years, and Zorya Serebryakova. The two were the daughters of Ivar Smilga and Leonid Serebriakov, respectively, who were among the central leaders of the 1917 Revolution and the Left Opposition.

Memorial also helped uncover several of the shooting sites of the NKVD from the Terror and establish museums and memorial plaques for the victims. One of their collaborators, Yuri Dmitriev, played a central role in uncovering the shooting site of Sandarmokh in North Karelia where thousands of political prisoners were executed in 1937-1938. Among them were Old Bolsheviks and members of the Left Opposition, intellectuals and artists from Ukraine, as well as workers from Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), the city of the 1917 Revolution. Because of his work, Dmitriev was subjected to a years-long state vendetta and eventually sentenced to 15 years in prison. It remains unclear whether memorials and plaques at sites like Sandarmokh that were established by Memorial will now be removed.

The attempt to completely destroy Memorial and make its work inaccessible is a central component of intensified attacks on democratic rights and the rehabilitation of the worst crimes of Joseph Stalin, in the words of Trotsky,

“the gravedigger of the revolution.” Over the past year, the Kremlin has dramatically limited access to vast documentation of the terror in Russian state archives. Thus, the holdings of the Communist International, housed at the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, have been effectively closed off to researchers.

The main museum dedicated to the history of the GULAG and Stalinist repressions in Moscow was shut down and replaced with a museum dedicated to World War II and the “genocide of the Soviet people.” The Kremlin is also about to launch a new textbook on history for school children which has been reported to promote Russian chauvinism and minimize the crimes of Stalin. Across the country, monuments have been built in honor of Stalin.

Behind the systematic assault on the historical consciousness of the crimes of Stalinism lies a deliberate class policy.

Having emerged from the Stalinist bureaucracy, which consolidated its rule through the destruction of generations of revolutionaries in the Terror, the Putin regime is highly sensitive to any signs of a left-ward shift within the working class and a resurgence of the class struggle. The oligarchy's principal fear is that, amidst the escalation of a global conflict and intensifying class tensions, a growing layer of workers, intellectuals and youth will turn again toward the revolutionary and internationalist traditions of the October Revolution. With the aggressive promotion of Russian nationalism and ever more violent suppression of historical truth about the crimes of Stalinism, it seeks to deal a preemptive blow against the resurgence of internationalist Marxism within the Russian and international working class.



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