The National Security Archive: The “Liquidation” of Memorial

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Russian authorities falsify history and suppress legendary human rights group

Memorial’s databases and publications live on, monuments to victims, indictments of perpetrators, dissections of the gulag and state terror

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Washington, D.C., March 3, 2022 - While Russian troops invaded Ukraine this week, the Russian Supreme Court turned down the appeal by the legendary human rights group Memorial against the “liquidation” orders intended by the authorities in December 2021 to put the society out of business, after more than 30 years’ work documenting the victims and the previously secret history of Soviet repression.

The European Court of Human Rights on December 29, 2021, had halted the implementation of the “liquidation” orders against the Memorial Society and the Memorial Human Rights Centre, pending arguments over whether Russia’s “foreign agents” law violates the European Convention to which Russia is a signatory. However, the Russian Supreme Court appeal ruling this week, and even more so, the Russian assault on Ukraine, demonstrates that Russia will not comply with the European Court on this case, nor likely on the many forthcoming cases about Russian war crimes against Ukraine.

The National Security Archive today pays tribute to Memorial’s indomitable spirit and everlasting legacy by publishing documents and photographs that resulted from the Archive’s long-standing partnership with Memorial. Leading the posting are three reports from the Memorial archives written by then-ombudsman for human rights Sergei Kovalev in 1994 and 1995, describing the Russian war in Chechnya in terms directly parallel to what the world is seeing in Ukraine today: Indiscriminate targeting of civilians, ill-informed and badly supplied Russian conscript soldiers, and a Russian leadership more like a “mafia organization” than a government.

Also included in today’s tribute to Memorial are examples of its extraordinary encyclopedias tracking every single prison camp in the Soviet Gulag, and the careers of every single NKVD and KGB officer who served Stalin. Photographs include the late chairman of Memorial, Arseny Roginsky, walking Archive staff and Russian specialists through the actual barracks of the Perm-36 prison camp that had been preserved by Memorial, during the last Pilorama festival at that camp in 2012 before the authorities shut down the site.

The Memorial archives contain thousands of records on Soviet and Russian dissent, ranging from the underground publication of critical literature despite censorship, to the KGB’s persecution of the Moscow Helsinki Group. The courage and independent spirit evident in that decades-long dissident history, as well as state repression and cruelty, emerged again in the past week, as thousands of protesters were beaten and arrested on the streets of Moscow and 100 other Russian cities, saying...
“No to war.”