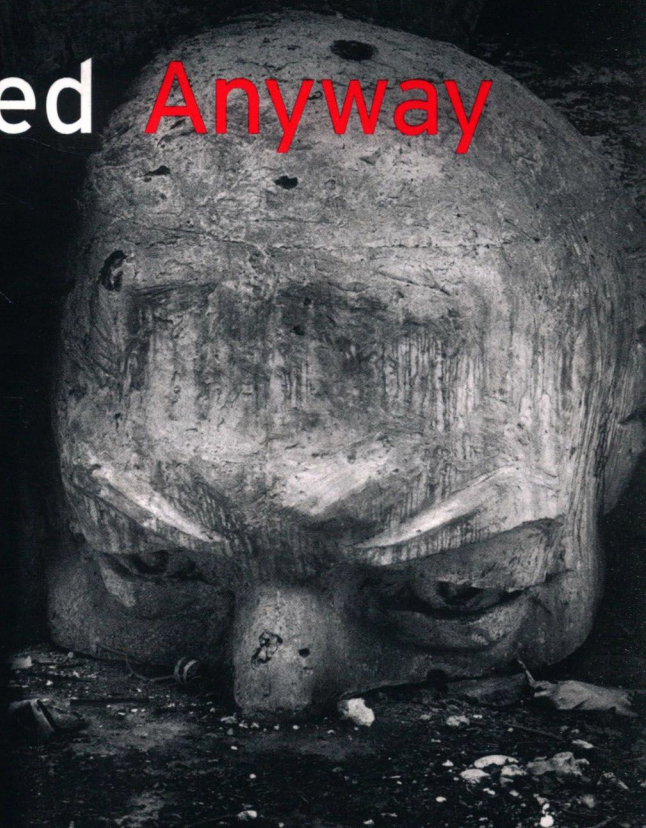


David Satter

It Was
a Long Time Ago,
and It Never
Happened **Anyway**

Russia and the
Communist Past



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David Satter



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IT WAS A LONG TIME AGO,
AND IT NEVER HAPPENED ANYWAY

For Raphael, Claire, and Mark

Хотелось бы всех поиммено назвать,
Да отняли список, и негде искать

— *Анна Ахматова, “Реквием”*

I would have wanted to recall them all
by name
But they took the list and there’s
nowhere to find it

— *Anna Akhmatova, “Requiem”*
(translation by the author)

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**ABBREVIATIONS AND
ADMINISTRATIVE DELINEATIONS**



Cheka	All Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter Revolution and Sabotage
FSB	Federal Security Service
GAI	State Automobile Inspection
GIBDD	State Inspectorate for the Security of Automobile Traffic, successor in 1988 to GAI
KGB	Committee for State Security
MChS	Ministry for Extraordinary Situations
MVD	Ministry of Internal Affairs
NKVD	People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs
OGPU	Joint State Political Directorate, successor to the Cheka
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the Russian "republic" of the Soviet Union
SVR	Foreign Intelligence Service
Sovnarkom	Council of People's Commissars, the first Soviet government
Voenkomat	Military Commissariat
Krai	Best translated as "province" or "territory," a krai is a territorial subdivision that generally encompasses a large area, such as Primoriye in the Far East or the Krasnoyarsk region in Siberia.

ABBREVIATIONS, ADMINISTRATIVE DELINEATIONS

- Oblast** Often similar in size to an American state, an oblast is a territorial subdivision of the Russian Federation. Since 2004 the governors of oblasts, as well as the mayors of Moscow and St. Petersburg, which are also considered “subjects of the federation,” have been appointed by the president.
- Raion** A raion is a subdivision of an oblast or city and is responsible for most local administration, including the police and the courts.
- Okrug** An okrug is an administrative subdivision of Moscow. The Moscow okrugs were created in the mid-1990s as a result of the consolidation of groups of raions. An okrug can also be a Russian military district, for example, the North Caucasus military okrug.

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AND IT NEVER HAPPENED ANYWAY

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Introduction



In spring 1989 a group of students from the Memorial Society entered a pine forest near Barnaul in western Siberia carrying shovels and tarpaulin bags. They were seeking the site of a mass burial ground of Stalin's victims. There had long been rumors about burial pits in the area. But before perestroika, few had the courage to search for them.

It was a cool, windy day. The students ascended a steep incline near the walls of the old city prison. In the winter, the forest is blanketed with snow, but the spring reveals depressions in the earth created as bodies buried just beneath the surface decompose. The students reached an area of sparse trees. There were several dozen such pits, twenty-five to thirty-five feet in diameter and about one and a half feet deep. They chose a pit in the center and began to dig. The shovels soon hit bones. The members of the group, which included Vladimir Ryzhkov, a future liberal member of the State Duma, opened a mass grave containing the remains of ten to twelve persons and the rotting remnants of shoes and clothes. In the back of the skulls were visible the holes from bullets. There were several Soviet coins from the 1930s. Some of the victims were barefoot.

According to longtime residents of Barnaul, victims were shot at night in the basement of the oblast NKVD building on the corner of Lenin Prospect and Polzunovskaya Street. There are traces of bullets in the old bricks. The building today is still being used as a prison. The internal courtyard, which dates from the 1930s, is used as an exercise yard by the current detainees.

The students did not open the remaining pits. It was already clear what

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they contained. The city council and the mayor's office put up a memorial plaque. But the site was never fully investigated. Like many others, it still has no official status. In fact, there is no federal registry of such burial grounds, of which there are hundreds if not thousands all over Russia. As a result, many Russian families still do not know where their relatives are buried.

Ryzhkov was deeply moved by what he saw. The task of registering the sites, he wrote, "is work first of all for ourselves. If we don't do this, no one will do it. . . . I know as one who stood at the edge of that cold pit that a person who sees this, forever becomes different."¹

Russia as a country has not been willing to face the full truth about Communism. Some people insist that the scale of the crimes has been exaggerated or that they were a product of necessity in a unique historical situation. Some say that there were comparable crimes in the West. Many argue that the Soviet system had redeeming features, that it brought literacy to millions of people and modernized the country. In fact, the failure to condemn Communism unreservedly — as Nazism was condemned in Germany — is now taken for granted in Russia.

During the period 1929 to 1953, eighteen million persons passed through the Soviet labor camp system. The artificial famine of 1932–33 took seven million lives. Nearly a million persons were shot during the Great Terror of 1937–38. In all, the number of persons who died in peacetime as a result of the actions of the Communist authorities is estimated at twenty million. If one considers the demographic impact on three generations (1917–53), it can be estimated that the total population loss — those killed and those who were never born — comes to 100 million persons.²

Despite this, there is no will in Russia to understand the moral significance of what took place. Vyacheslav Nikonov, a political scientist and the grandson of Stalin's prime minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, said, "People are not interested in the past. Any attempt to dig into the past evokes only irritation."³ But this attitude is not without risk. Communism built on the authoritarian instincts of a historically enslaved population. Left unexamined, these instincts now threaten Russia's future.⁴

The situation in Russia bears some resemblance to that of Germany after World War II. The German philosopher Karl Jaspers at that time wrote, "All of us have somehow lost the ground under our feet. Only

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a transcendent . . . religious or philosophical faith can maintain itself through all these disasters. . . . We are sorely deficient in talking to each other and listening to each other. We lack mobility, criticism and self-criticism. We incline to doctrinism. What makes it worse is that so many people do not want to think. They want only slogans and obedience. They ask no questions and they give no answers, except by repeating drilled in phrases.”⁵

Russia has neither a national monument to the victims of Communist terror nor a national museum. In 2008, on the territory of Russia, there were 627 memorials and memorial plaques dedicated to the victims. This is fewer than the number of labor camps.⁶ The majority are not in central locations, and almost all were created by private citizens, not the government. (Exceptions are a few monuments erected by local Russian governments during perestroika and the monuments in Katyn and Mednoe to the Polish victims of the Katyn massacre, created by the Polish government with Russian cooperation.)

At the same time, sites that are critical to the memory of what happened in Russia during the Communist terror may be destroyed. One such place, the building of the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR at 23 Nikolskaya Street, where thirty-five thousand persons were sentenced to death in two years, has been purchased by a bank close to the government of Moscow. It will be renovated and used as part of a trade and entertainment complex.⁷

A visitor strolling through Moscow finds little to remind him that the city was the scene of mass terror, yet a “Topography of Terror” prepared by the Memorial Society lists hundreds of sites. On April 4, 2007, a group of deputies in the State Duma, acting at the request of Memorial, appealed to the country’s leadership to return to the idea, first raised during perestroika, of creating a national museum and monument dedicated to the victims of Communist terror. One of the places that would unquestionably be part of the memorial, the authors said, was the building of the Military Collegium on Nikolskaya Street. There has been no response.⁸

Reminders of the Stalinist terror are visible everywhere. Bolshoi Us-pensky Street, which in 1922 was renamed Potapovsky Lane, begins with a three-story building on the corner of Arkhangel'sky Lane in which Viktor Abakumov, Stalin’s minister of security, had his apartment. It ends at Pokrovka Street, once the site of the Uspeniya Bogoroditsa church, which

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was built at the end of the seventeenth century and was considered the most beautiful church in Moscow after St. Basil's.⁹ According to legend, Napoleon in 1812 liked the church so much that he wanted to transport it to Paris.¹⁰ More than a century later, on November 28, 1935, the Moscow city council ordered the church destroyed. The reason was the "urgent necessity of broadening the thoroughfare on Pokrovka Street."¹¹

Immediately next to the empty square where the church once stood is an apartment building that today houses an art gallery. During the Great Terror, the bodies of executed "enemies of the people" were buried in its basement and in an underground passageway that led under Potapovsky Lane to Sverchkov Lane.

This activity was known to the residents of Potapovsky Lane, but no one spoke of it during the terror. People from every building on the lane were taken to be shot. Twenty-two persons were taken from building number 9, three from building 6, and one each from buildings 4, 5, and 7. Four persons were taken from building 10, two from house number 12, and one from number 16. In all, thirty-five residents of the quiet side street, which is 283 paces from beginning to end, were executed during the Great Terror. More than a hundred others were arrested and sent to labor camps or exile. Similar figures exist for nearly every street in Moscow.¹²

Besides the lack of a national monument to the victims of Communist terror, there has been a failure to punish the guilty. Instead, the Soviet Union's most criminal leaders, particularly Stalin, have been tacitly rehabilitated.

In 1998 the number of Russians approving Stalin's activities, according to public opinion polls, was 19 percent. By 2002–3, with Vladimir Putin as president, the percentage had risen to 53 percent and was still at that level in 2008.¹³ In August 2009 an inscription honoring Stalin — "We were raised by Stalin on loyalty to the people . . ." — was unveiled in the restored Kursk metro station in Moscow, and serious consideration was given to displaying posters of Stalin in Moscow and St. Petersburg in connection with the sixty-fifth anniversary of the Soviet victory in the Second World War.¹⁴ In the end, the idea was dropped, but Stalin's portrait appeared as an advertisement on a bus that ran along the main street in St. Petersburg, Nevsky Prospect.¹⁵

The support for Stalin is sometimes attributed to a sense of national inferiority in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. But its roots are deeper. It derives from the fact that criticism of Stalin in Russia did not