Terror, Rehabilitation, and Historical Memory: An Interview with Dmitrii Iurasov

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Dmitrii Iurasov, a founding member of Memorial, a nonstate association (neformal) dedicated to reviving the country’s historical memory and preventing the resurgence of mass state repression, travels around the Soviet Union giving lectures to packed auditoriums on the events of the terror. As such, he serves as the de facto liaison between Memorial in Moscow and the more than fifty affiliates in cities as far away as Magadan and Vorkuta. To a great many people, he is Memorial’s public face.

Iurasov, who turned twenty-seven in 1991, was twelve years old when he began to study what he calls “the repressions.” Since that time he has compiled a file from archival and published sources that currently contains a quarter million index cards, each with data on the life and fate of a particular “victim.” Only the Scientific Information Center of the Ministry of Internal Affairs has a more substantial record of the people who, in Memorial’s formulation, were “subjected to state terror.”

When asked to write an article about Memorial and his involvement in it, Iurasov preferred that it be done as an interview. What follows is a slightly abridged translation of Iurasov’s responses to questions put to him over the course of several days during a visit he made to the United States in the fall of 1990.¹

Iurasov speaks in a extremely loud voice and evinces what many take to be a disarming degree of self-assurance. He also possesses something of a photographic memory. His narrative of the formation of Memorial—a story that remains in dispute among the various founders and early participants—can only be considered

¹ Iurasov’s trip, funded by Soros and the Ford Foundation, was organized in connection with the Harriman Institute’s Project on Contemporary Informal Politics in the Soviet Union. Those of us connected with the project, which is directed by Mark von Hagen and Stephen Kotkin, are preparing the publication of a series of volumes about and by Memorial. An archival repository for materials generated by Memorial and other nonstate associations has been established at Columbia University by Eugene Beshenkovskii.
a partial one, if only because he has been almost exclusively involved in research-related activities rather than in matters of Memorial’s organizational structure or political battles. But precisely for this reason his perspective is unique among Memorial’s leading members.

No one alive today knows more than Iurasov about the technical aspects of terror and rehabilitation, except for the still largely invisible functionaries of the repressive “organs” themselves. Iurasov demonstrates that, however “inefficient” and “arbitrary,” the apparatus of repression operated through intricate, cumbersome juridical procedures that need to become part of our understanding of the terror and, more broadly, of Stalinism. [SK]

**Question:** What is Memorial, and when and how was it formed?

**Answer:** Memorial is an all-union voluntary organization dedicated to historical and educational work. It arose in 1987, in the period when the entire society was gripped by so-called perestroika. The movement was founded by a few individuals, ages twenty-five to thirty-five, who formed an “initiative group” to fight for the construction of a monument to the victims of the Stalinist repressions.

In late November 1987, not long after Gorbachev’s speech on the seventieth anniversary of the October coup d’état, our group went to the Arbat [a recently established pedestrian mall] armed with signs and slogans to demonstrate. One of the signs carried words from Gorbachev’s speech, that “the Stalinist repressions were a crime that cannot be forgotten or forgiven.” Our goal in going to the Arbat was to collect signatures to give the Supreme Soviet, demanding a monument or memorial complex dedicated to the victims of Stalinism. We managed to remain on the street for thirty minutes, until the police came, confiscated our petitions and signs, and arrested the initiative group for “disturbing the peace.”

Seven people, the ones carrying signs, were arrested: Iurii Samodurov, Dmitrii Leonov, Lev Ponomarev, Aleksandr Veisberg, Vladimir Lysenko, Nikolai Starkov, and Elena Zhemkova. I was not arrested; I was collecting signatures among the crowd, not carrying signs, so the police didn’t notice that I was one of the demonstrators. They found me later, but since people testified that I hadn’t carried a sign, I was let go after having been assessed a small fine, which was collected at my place of employment. Everyone else was given a court date. From this moment, Memorial existed: we had publicly stated the fact and purpose of our existence.

After the incident on the Arbat, we began to collect signatures, not on the street, but in institutes and offices. Within a half-year, by June 1988, we had a remarkable number of signatures—forty-eight thousand. We asked Iurii Afanasev, the rector of the Historical-Archives Institute, to present them at the Nineteenth Party Conference called for July 1988. Afanasev was a delegate, and he carried out our request. With little resistance, the conference adopted a resolution to create a memorial in the city of Moscow. A bank account was opened for people to make contributions to pay for the cost of construction. Money started coming in immediately.

It soon became clear that we would have a memorial, although not necessarily right away. We were interested in a thorough, irreversible de-Stalinization of the country. The authorities agreed without hesitation to allow a memorial—this fact
itself, that what we were fighting for was agreeable to the authorities, was an indication of the need to widen our activities. We turned our attention and energies to creating a grassroots movement as a step toward the creation of real guarantees against re-Stalinization. For us this meant educational work with the masses—the creation of an archive, the publication and dissemination of information. We were determined to become a safeguard against re-Stalinization, and that meant opposing antidemocratic tendencies wherever they appeared, whether in laws, speeches, or actions of the authorities.

Our next task was to create a permanent organizational structure. A preparatory conference in that direction was called for October [1988]. We found sponsors among some of the existing organizations of the intelligentsia—the theater union, the union of architects, the filmmakers union, but not the writers union—and with their help we obtained temporary office space and were able to organize our conference. Prominent intellectuals—Iurii Afanasev, Andrei Sakharov, Vitalii Korotich, Anatolii Rybakov, Iurii Kariakin, Ales Adamovich, and Evgenii Evtushenko—were named to the presidium and ruling council of the organization. Additionally, a working collegium of fifteen people was also formed to attend to operational matters within Moscow. All told there were around seven hundred delegates, representing forty-two cities. We all considered the preparatory meeting a resounding success.

To incorporate our organization legally, we next moved forward on holding a constituent assembly, which took place in January 1989 at the Palace of Culture of the Moscow Aviation Institute. It was attended by approximately one thousand delegates, and by many foreign and Soviet correspondents. In addition to settling our organizational structure, we announced two immediate goals: (1) the return to Solzhenitsyn of his citizenship and the publication of his *Gulag Archipelago* in the USSR; and (2) the freeing of all political prisoners held in the Soviet Union. There had been an “amnesty” in spring 1987, during which over 150 political prisoners were released, but those released were not “rehabilitated” and many others were not freed. We wanted every political prisoner released and the state to admit the unlawfulness of having arrested them in the first place.

Thus, although we set out as an expressly nonpolitical movement, we were already deeply involved in contemporary politics, and not simply doing historical work. In fact, we had married the restoration of the country’s memory in the present to the issue of the country’s future development so that the past would not be repeated. For us the past was significant in itself, but even more so as an aid for the future.

**Q.: How conscious were people at the time of the various dimensions and repercussions of Memorial’s activity?**

**A.:** We were becoming more conscious of the political meaning of our work for the present, but much was still unclear. During a speech at the preparatory conference, Andrei Sakharov emphasized that the work of the soon-to-incorporate Memorial must be conducted in concert with all international agreements protecting human rights (Helsinki, Vienna, and so on). Sakharov also stressed that despite having signed these agreements and pledged to carry them out, the Soviet Union was violating them. Furthermore, he insisted that all our laws be brought in line with
international law. Many people did not understand him. He was well ahead of us. I myself did not understand why this was necessary. Later, of course, it became obvious that Sakharov was right. In the past we had laws, but they were violated; his suggestions were the most important guarantee against a repetition of repressions in the future. It also occurred to us that even after the Soviet Union became a law-based state—I myself doubt this will ever happen—Memorial would continue to act as a public force to oversee and uphold international law on Soviet territory.

Sakharov was elected chairman of the organization. We also elected a governing board of twenty-five people, of which I was one. This was a long way from just building a monument. We produced a charter and program, pledging, as members of Memorial, to fight against all manifestations of totalitarianism, whether in the past or future. We did not differentiate between repressions in various eras (Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev). We saw as our main task the need to move forward to a law-based state through educational work, especially among the young generation. Totalitarianism was in the first instance a question of consciousness. Over ideas, we wrote, only other ideas could be victorious: not the fist, not the prison cell, not barbed wire.

Memorial does not take upon itself the goal of judging and condemning people. We are not going to be a court, to organize trials. We categorically refuse the use of force. Instead, we name the people who participated in repressions in order to make public their past activities, have their names recalled, and thereby inform the rest of the population. We are guided by the principle of enlightenment, not revenge. Despite the nature of our enemies, in fact because of it, we refuse to adopt their methods. We have never made any statements about trying to become a political party. We have no desire to become a party seeking power. Our field of activities includes constant public scrutiny of the observance of laws, shaping public opinion, and the defense of citizens’ interests and rights.

We obtained use of a photocopier and every delegate at the constituent assembly received a copy of both our charter and our program, which were put to a vote. The delegates voted to adopt them, after which the documents were sent, in February 1989, to the Supreme Soviet for official registration to obtain legal status. Unfortunately, however, to this day [November 1990] we have still not been registered.2

Q.: What has been the attitude of the authorities to the registration of Memorial?
A.: At first [in 1988] the authorities explained that the Supreme Soviet was soon to be reelected and transformed, so it would be best to wait for the new Supreme Soviet to be formed, and then we’d be registered. A new system of competitive elections was designed to first convene what was called a Congress of Peoples’ Deputies, from which the new Supreme Soviet was to be formed. One-third of the seats to the Congress were allotted to “public organizations” (the party, the trade unions, the writers union). Memorial supported several candidates, but lacking official legal status, we were not permitted to field our candidates as a public organization.

2 By contrast, some local branches had been registered at that time by regional authorities.
When the new Supreme Soviet assembled in late May and early June 1989, our leaders (Sakharov, Kariakin, Yevtushenko), who were elected to the overseeing Congress of Peoples’ Deputies, approached the authorities once again. Our request for registration was again denied, but now we were given a different explanation. Anatolii Lukianov, Gorbachev’s lieutenant, said that no new public organizations could be registered because there was as yet no law on public organizations. Only in 1990 was a proposal for a law on public organizations published for discussion, but it has not yet been adopted and no one knows when it will be.3

Meanwhile, two million rubles have been received at the bank in Memorial’s name, but this money is criminally frozen. The Minister of Culture has simply taken over the funds. We are not permitted to publish a newspaper, or anything else with the money. How is it possible that the people’s money was illegally taken over by the Minister of Culture? The authorities claim that the money can only be used for construction of the monument, specifically to pay for cement and marble, and because the Nineteenth Party Conference appointed the Ministry of Culture to oversee the construction of the monument, the Ministry assumed control over the funds. Of course, people sent money from around the country for many purposes—the creation of a library and archive, publications—and not simply for a piece of cement.

Despite this naked theft of our funds by the authorities, however, our activities continue. During 1989–1990 Memorial took part in more than thirty political actions around the country, such as organizing demonstrations and serving as outside witnesses at political trials. Also, you must remember that the people who make up our leadership are members of the opposition in the new Soviet parliament and as such spend most of their time criticizing the government. It is for these reasons that our money has been frozen and we have been refused registration.

Memorial has the potential to become a truly mass organization, given the sheer size of the antitotalitarian constituency that totalitarianism created. We have scores of regional branches around the country, including those in the national republics. Our membership continually increases, and clearly the authorities are afraid of our coming together, with a unified structure, in the center of the country. Memorial is the neformal [nonstate association] with the greatest social support; we exist on the level of a Popular Front, with a huge following in society. We could become one of the strongest political forces.

Q.: What happened to the plans for a memorial complex?
A.: As 1989 gave way to 1990, many of us involved in Memorial became concerned that, because the people who had managed to survive the camps would not live forever, we had to erect some kind of monument as soon as possible. So, it was decided to bring a stone from the former Solovki labor camps4 and place it, with an

3 Such a law was enacted in late October 1990, although its effects remained unclear until the events of August 1991 removed most obstacles to the registration of nonstate associations, Memorial included.

4 The Solovki camps, known also by their Russian acronym SLON, were organized almost immediately after the revolution at the site of an old monastery in the far north. The camps were closed in 1939, but most of the prisoners, those who were not shot, were relocated to other sites.
inscription, in the square next to the KGB headquarters at Liubianka. The Moscow city soviet, which is now controlled by the democrats, gave its permission to use the public space. It was decided to carry out the ceremony on 30 October [1990], which [since 1974] has traditionally been celebrated by the human rights movement in our country as Political Prisoners Day.

There was a great debate about what to write for the inscription. Some people insisted that the word totalitarianism be used, others wanted it to mention Stalinism, or the total number of victims, and so on. It was finally decided to dedicate the stone “in honor of the millions of victims of the totalitarian regime.” I consider this formulation appropriate, and am pleased that a memorial has been established.

But to this day [November 1990] we at Memorial have no permanent facility and are not permitted to use official archives. Gorbachev, who spoke with Peoples’ Deputies Daniil Granin and Vitalii Goldanski, replied to a question about Memorial, “We do not need yet another political party.” But Memorial has never tried to become a political party. Gorbachev is smearing us with this (as if it were a crime to form a political party and he himself could decide who should and who shouldn’t do so). Anyway, he could simply read our documents which explain who we are and never mention becoming a political party. It seems that the authorities, Gorbachev included, are hoping that without registration the movement will start to die, as people get frustrated and leave. The authorities are trying to strangle the movement and to blame any breakdown on us, letting out rumors about our disorganization, unprofessionalism, and internal squabbling.

Q.: What in fact has been going on inside Memorial?
A.: The authorities’ persistent refusal to register Memorial did exacerbate some of the tensions within the movement. There were, for example, arguments about the need to avoid angering the authorities by limiting our activities to nonpolitical issues. Relations between some of the more active members of Memorial have often been strained: Who is not satisfied with someone else’s leadership, and so on. Such disputes, although inevitable, are a shame.

One group within Memorial, which as an umbrella organization includes people from all political viewpoints, threatened that, if Memorial did not divorce itself from politics, this group would start a separate nonpolitical association. That is in fact what they did, but their action was premeditated and had little to do with any supposed deficiencies inside Memorial.

In July 1990, Nikolai Numerov called a meeting and, in Gorbachev-like fashion, dictatorially pronounced himself president of the breakaway All-Union Association of Those Who Suffered from Stalinism. He also appointed a vice president and a legislative branch. His mimicking of Gorbachev was slavishly literal, but this was more than some kind of bad joke. Numerov was after personal power and in the bargain hoped to discredit the existing Memorial organization.

Numerov is a party member, the “hand,” as we say, of the Moscow city party committee. Through him the Party sought to drive a wedge between the leadership of Memorial and the old veterans of the repressions, citing Memorial’s lack of effectiveness and claiming the splinter group would achieve what Memorial supposedly was not able to. The new association, which has around two thousand mem-
bers, obtained official registration immediately. This opportunism and underhand-
edness has had very serious deleterious effects.

Q.: What is Memorial’s relationship to the party’s own commissions on the repres-
sions of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s?

A.: Since we [at Memorial] are not registered, these commissions simply ignore us, as if we didn’t exist. They have access to many of the documents that we need (party archives, MVD, KGB), but they use these materials only to clear the names of their own party and police cadres. These archival materials ought to be the basis for much broader historical inquiry. Yet despite persistent requests, Memorial has never been allowed officially to use archival materials. Generally speaking, archives have been closed to everyone in our country.

It is worth taking a moment to explain our country’s archival system. We have three distinct lines of archival formation: centralized state archives proper (the Central State Archives of the October Revolution or TsGAOR and the Central State Archives of the Economy or TsGANKh), institutional [vedomstvennye] archives (those of the KGB, Ministry of Internal Affairs of MVD, the Supreme Court, and the Procuracy), and party archives (including those of the Institute of Marxism and Leninism, or TsPA IML, and the still unacknowledged archives of the Central Committee). Lately we have heard much noise about the declassification of archival materials. This is being done by commissions made up of people who have long been charged with ensuring that the archives were kept closed. Now they decide what to open for researchers. Many collections have been opened up for use by researchers, but only in the state archives branch of the triad.

By contrast, the institutional and party archives, which can only be opened with the sanction of the respective boss of the institutions themselves (the KGB, the Procuracy, the Central Committee), remain completely closed. It’s a strange situation: almost all of the country’s most important political institutions have not turned over their documents to the central state archives. These administrative and political organs retain total control over what anyone outside the respective institutions can know about their operation, past or present.

Some documents from institutional archives have been turned over to the state archives. But these materials remain “closed,” and the Main Archival Administration insists that only the corresponding institutions can give permission to use the materials. This is false, however. When the MVD or KGB have been approached for permission, they have invariably referred us back to the Main Archival Administration. In sum, as far as archival documents are concerned, what has thus far been made available in state archives is not very useful for our purposes; what is useful to us remains inaccessible.

We need a law on the formation of a unified archival system with guaranteed public access. This is one of the goals Memorial is currently fighting for (along with greater funding for the archives, whose facilities are in disastrous shape). All institutions located inside the country must be compelled to turn over their documents within a specified period. We need a regular process for determining the length of time after which documents become declassified. And, I want to emphasize, we need public scrutiny over the process of decategorization of these archives, because
we do not trust the institutions to observe the laws the state may pass. What's to stop them from destroying documents, if they haven't done so already?

Q.: Perhaps this is a good time to relate the story of how you personally became involved in Memorial.

A.: The story of how I came to be associated with the struggle to restore our country's historical memory goes back some time. When I was still in the early years of grammar school, I took a great interest in Soviet history. Later, when I was in the seventh grade I discovered by accident in the library the Soviet Historical Encyclopedia, in which I saw strange phrases in the biographies of important officials: "unlawfully repressed," "posthumously rehabilitated," "repressed during the cult of personality." I couldn't for the life of me make out what these phrases meant. I noticed that in the biographical information in the encyclopedia, the year of death was usually the same for everyone: 1937, 38, 37, etc. It seemed that almost all our famous people, at least those worthy of a biographical note, died between the years 1936 and 1939. So what happened during those years? There was no war then; I had been told in school that the war began in 1941. When I was twelve years old I began transcribing the names of all the people described as repressed from the encyclopedia into a notebook.

Somehow I knew it was better not to ask anybody about these things. This was already suggested by the lack of concrete information given in the encyclopedia. I began to look through other reference materials published in our country. For example, in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia [2d edition], the years of death are given, but the expression "repressed" is not used. Why? In one encyclopedia things are put one way, in another, differently. I was determined to solve this mystery. It turned out that the Historical Encyclopedia was published in the early 1960s, that is, during the Khrushchev period, but the Great Soviet Encyclopedia appeared in the 1970s, that is, Brezhnev's time. I came to the conclusion that evidently the "line" about these people changed when our leadership changed. Why, I had no idea. At that age I was incapable of figuring out why, but I did notice the existence of a mystery.

I was afraid to ask anyone at home. I lived with my mother and younger sister (my parents were divorced when I was an infant; I don't remember my father). I did ask my mother if anyone in our family was repressed; she said no. Repressions were not a subject that was discussed at home. There was nothing anti-Soviet about our family.

To figure out the mystery, I continued to compose a list of people's names from the Historical Encyclopedia. There were altogether 350 names of those repressed. I thought this was all of them; I assumed that everyone who was repressed was in the encyclopedia. There were those in the other encyclopedia who died during the same time, but it did not say they had been repressed. I recorded their names too, but placed a question mark after them.

In the ninth grade I discovered the Encyclopedia of Writers, which had many new (for me) names of people who were said to have been repressed. Only then did I conclude that there had been more than 350 people who had been repressed. I added their names, six hundred more, to the list and removed the question marks from the
almost three hundred names out of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. Keep in mind that these encyclopedias are multivolume works; all of this was a great deal of work.

It was at this time that I finally began to understand what I was doing from the theoretical point of view. I discovered in the library special volumes hidden from the public containing the speeches of Khrushchev and others about the cult of the personality and the repressions. I now understood what the term *repressed* meant, what rehabilitated meant, what period it all occurred in. Remember that after Khrushchev was removed from power, we were not taught anything about de-Stalinization.

In 1980 I made a list of famous people I had heard of but whose fate I was not sure of. I took this list to the central state archives (TsGAOR), thinking that the archivists would help me find out what had happened to these people. Not only did they not answer my questions, they told me to drop what I was doing. Clearly, doing things through official channels was not going to lead to anything. I had to proceed “unofficially.” Before I finished school (we have ten grades), I knew that I had to get a job as an employee of the archives to be able to see what they had there. I set my sights on a job at TsGAOR.

**Q.: In other words, you made a conscious decision to infiltrate the archival system?**

**A.:** More or less. In July 1981 I went to the personnel department of TsGAOR. The head of personnel asked me why I wanted to work there. We talked a long time. I guess he liked me. In our system, people do not come in “from the street.” Employment is assigned from above. It’s all done officially, with lots of paperwork and stamps. But for whatever reason, he hired me off the street as a collections curator [*okhranitel’ fondov*]. I had no idea what the range of positions were, but it turned out that I had been given a job in the so-called *spetsfondy* or *spetskhran*, the closed collections. This was a miracle.

My job was to write numbers on the pages of files. This was my entire responsibility—the lowest possible level (I had had no special training as an archivist). I did this work for a few weeks. I was not permitted to enter the areas where the hidden files were kept, but I started to snoop around to look for materials on repressed individuals. I had no idea whether they were even in the archive where I worked, but I discovered that many such collections were in fact right there. I did all this secretly.

**Q.: How old were you at the time?**

**A.:** I was 17, just out of [high] school.

**Q.: What kinds of materials did you find?**

**A.:** I saw, for example, a lot of materials on personnel—not the actual files, which were in the KGB archives, but reference cards about the files held by the KGB. I had stumbled upon a huge personnel index of all the employees of the NKVD. In other words, I stumbled upon exactly what I was looking for, and I began to study the personnel files closely. I wrote out the information they contained, smuggled it out of the archive, and recopied it onto note cards at home. By this time I had already accumulated ten thousand names, arranged alphabetically, from reference sources, books, journals, newspapers, and so on, which I had been combing for the past several years.
Besides the NKVD materials, I hit upon the files of the former Party Central Control Commission (now it is the Committee of Party Control), which should have been in the party archives but for some reason were in TsGAOR. I read the appeals by former Communists asking to be rehabilitated and reinstated in the Party, and the decisions reached by the commission. I made notes.

There was also the so-called Prague Archive on Russia that had been confiscated in 1945 by SMERSH [Death to Spies] and in 1946 sent to Moscow. Consisting of materials collected by Russian émigrés living in the Czechoslovak Republic during the interwar period, the archive contained something like one million files. When the entire state archive system was removed from the control of the security police and placed under the supervision of the Council of Ministers in 1961, the Prague archive was one of countless collections that remained “closed.” I was especially interested in the criticism of the Stalinist system that these documents contained.

**Q.: There must have been many other files for you to peruse?**

**A.:** There was a lot more there in the spetskhran, but I worked with just these three groups of documents: NKVD personnel, the Central Control Commission, and the Prague Archive. After a while, however, I was caught. This was two months after I had been hired (August 1981). They discovered not that I took notes, but only that I was reading the files. (Recall that my work called only for numbering files, not reading them.) At first the archival administration thought of firing me. Instead, they sent me to a different department. Had they caught me taking out notes, I would have been arrested by the KGB.

In the event, the only other place in the archive where there was an opening was in the section covering materials from the so-called state control and the political-juridical organs of the USSR. These files were only partially secret. Parts of them were given to select researchers; other parts were available to no one. Here I was also supposed only to number files. They knew what had happened in the previous department, so they watched me. At the beginning I did nothing suspicious, waiting for their observation of my every move to slacken. After two months I was able to resume my former activities.

So I read the files of the People’s Commissariat of Inspection, and its later incarnations: State Control of the USSR and the Commission of Soviet Control attached to the Council of Ministers of the USSR. I also saw the files for the extraordinary commission charged with overseeing matters that had taken place on the territory occupied by the Nazis. There was also the archive of the People’s Commissariat of Justice, that of its internal closed school for training judges and procurators, the NKVD of the Russian republic, and many others. My new department consisted of three floors with over one million files on each floor covering the entire spectrum of the various state control organs and much of the repressive apparatus.

**Q.: Can you offer some examples of what you found in these materials?**

**A.:** I saw around two hundred folders from the files of the State Control of the USSR dealing with personnel questions. The last page always showed whether the person in question had been arrested and when. It was easy to go through the files quickly and add names to my growing list. I was struck by how everything was
formulated and carried out in legal language. There was much method in the
madness, and it was all expressed in juridical terms and procedures.

At the same time, to move to a second example, in the materials from the
Juridical Academy I came across instructions written during the early part of the
terror to train new specialists, not through the normal three-year courses, but in
three months. Judges and procurators in three months! At the highest levels of the
state bureaucracy! Here was a lesson about the purges: not only would their effects
be profound and lasting in many aspects, but the administrative apparatus that was
to help carry them out had had to plan for the purges' devastating effects on the
administrative apparatus itself.

Q.: *How could you be sure you were seeing complete and not sanitized files?*
A.: Some of the materials mentioned in certain files was missing. This could only
mean that at some point material had been removed to the institutional archives at
NKVD headquarters. But there was a great deal still there, and it was as rich as the
black earth. I'll give you one example. Semen Firin, who in 1934 became the chief
of Dmитлаг, the camps located near Moscow responsible for the construction of the
Moscow-Volga canal, was arrested in 1937 and accused of organizing an attempt,
along with 208 of the prisoners under his charge, on the life of Yezhov. They were
all shot. I saw the material concerning the group's rehabilitation glued to the
original files on the supposed crime, arrest and sentence. These particular files on
Firin contain extraordinarily useful material on the operation of the gulag.

I should add that I was also able to use the closed library of the Main Archival
Administration (GAU), where I read through books that I never saw anywhere
else. The same library had complete runs of all the main newspapers and of many
obscure ones, plus numerous books and reference works.

In sum, I worked in the central state archives (TsGAOR) and the archival
library from September 1981 to November 1982. While still working, I enrolled, in
the summer of 1982, in the evening section of the Historical-Archives Institute. But
in November 1982 I was called up for two-year military service, and both my
archival work and my studies had to be put aside.

Q.: *What stage had you reached in your work by then?*
A.: At the time I began my army service, I had twenty thousand names in my card
file, twice as many as when I had finished high school in the spring of 1981. If I may,
I'd like to take a little time to discuss the methodology behind my card file.

At first I used notebooks, into which I wrote the names of those repressed in
the order I uncovered them. But because I had to look through all the notebooks to
find a single name, I decided instead to begin using index cards and, on the analogy
of a library card catalogue, to write out a single card for each person and to order
them alphabetically. My cards contain full names, dates of birth and death, national-
ity, social background, year of entrance to the party, participation in revolutionary
events and in public and political life, last office held at the time of arrest, the exact
facts of the repression and rehabilitation, and lastly the date the index card was
composed and the sources used. I felt sure that one day the raw material I was
collecting would be processed and analyzed. I describe my methodology in greater
Q.: In other words, even after you began turning up important insights into the machinery that produced and maintained the documents cataloguing the terror, you were still interested less in an inquiry into the nature and operation of the organs of repression than in a compilation of parallel personnel files that give special attention to the facts of repression?

A.: Yes, that's correct. So, returning to the two years I spent in the army (November 1982-November 1984), I managed during that time to do another five hundred cards based on military memoirs in the army library. I could have been sent to Afghanistan, but instead I was dispatched in a roundabout way to the Baltics, to a special unit charged with intercepting communications signals. My job was just to move a satellite dish from a control panel in an underground bunker. Whatever signals came in, officers did the decoding, and I was never told what information we captured.

During my free time in the army, to keep my mind from corroding, I wrote a novel called the “Brothers Kaganovich.” I first got interested in this remarkable family of four brothers when I discovered that in 1929, as a present to Stalin on his fiftieth birthday, Lazar Kaganovich had a dacha built for him in Nikolino Hill, about thirty kilometers outside Moscow, where Kaganovich already had his own dacha. All the Kaganovich brothers were close to Stalin at one time, so I decided to investigate them and did some reading. Then, once in the army, from memory, I wrote six chapters, which were confiscated by the army’s “special department” soon after I began to read them aloud to the soldiers. I got seven days in the brig and was expressly warned not to engage in “anti-Soviet activity.”

The army’s “special department” asked me where I obtained my information. I said it was from memory, but they didn’t believe me. Their threat to send me to a military tribunal was enough to make me stop writing the novel, but I continued to add to the card file from the sources in the library. Somehow I managed to take them out with me when I was demobilized in 1984.

Q.: You seem to have managed to do a wealth of things that confound expectations. What happened next?

A.: In January 1985 I resumed my job at the archives, not at TsGAOR, but at TsGANKh, also a state archival institution (for the economy). The army had sent TsGAOR documents to the effect that I “had disorganized an army collective with anti-Soviet activities.” This disqualified me from a job there [TsGAOR], but for whatever reason, TsGANKh saw fit to hire me. At TsGANKh, however, they kept me away from the archival materials themselves. I worked in the finding-aids [opisi] section, that is, in the department of documents on the documents, and learned about all the files that the archive held. This was enlightening, but I knew that for my larger goals I had to change jobs. Yet not a single department of TsGAOR would accept me back. I also tried and was rejected at TsGALI and TsPA IML (at the latter I was told one had to be a party member).

It occurred to me to have a look in the internal archival guidebook, to see which other archives there were. I came across a reference to the archive of the Supreme Court and figured that was a good place to try to find a job. There was no indication in the guide that it was a supersecret archive. I telephoned. The person at
the other end of the line said come on down. I went over and found out that I had to
go through a security clearance. I filled out the very detailed forms, and was told to
wait two months while the KGB looked into things. This led me to believe that I
wouldn’t get clearance, as the materials at the Supreme Court were under the
highest level of secrecy, and I had had a bad experience at TsGAOR and again in
the army. (At the same time, I had returned to my studies at the Historical-Archives
Institute.)

When I called at the end of the two-month period, I was told I had been
cleared. They hired me as a senior curator—a promotion from my last job—at a
salary of one hundred rubles a month, plus another fifty for the fact that I worked
with secret documents.

Q.: This seems scarcely possible.
A.: Let me say that it was a complete mystery to me, too. They must have checked
me out thoroughly. At least nothing about my family would have caused them
alarm. (My mother, a party member, works in a secret, closed aviation factory. She
has not been in favor of what I do, trying to convince me to stop but never taking
measures against me. My father works in construction in the city of Krasnoiarsk.
He has a new family and has had nothing to do with me for a very long time.) I can
only conclude that it was an oversight; maybe there was a lack of coordination
between one KGB department and another.

Q.: I see that you yourself do not appear entirely convinced by this explanation, and I
am not sure how satisfied others will be with it either. Describe what you found at
your new job.
A.: First of all, the archive of the Military Collegium is enormous, yet it is serviced
by only four people: the boss (a colonel of the KGB), his deputy (a KGB captain),
a trained archivist, and myself. (I was the only nonparty member; I had been kicked
out of the Komsomol in the army.) The small size of the staff stems from the fact
that no researchers ever used the materials.

All told the place holds 2.5 million files from the Supreme Court and the
Military Collegium (which dealt with spying, diversion, and large-scale political
crimes), detailing their sixty years of operation. Each file, none of which has been
processed or numbered, contains many, many names of accused and convicted
persons. But because the names therein are of people who had already been judged
and sentenced, there was no need to ever look at the files again. And so, why
process them?

The archive is located in the basement of the building of the functioning
Supreme Court. As soon as they are no longer needed upstairs, the files are trans-
ported downstairs, where they are haphazardly piled up. No one besides those
employed by the Supreme Court ever sees them, or even knows about their exis-
tence. This is a perfect example of an institutional archive. As an insider, I learned a
great deal about the rules and regulations for creating and managing court cases,
information that remains utterly concealed from the public.

To be precise, these files do not contain all the information of a case but only
the information thought necessary for the court to render a judgment. Detailed case
materials that were sent over temporarily from the NKVD had to be returned.
Nonetheless, the materials that remained behind—indictments, discussions, and sentences—are extraordinary. They include the Promparty case, the famous historians’ case of the 1930s, the case of the so-called Mensheviks, the Zinoviev and Kamenev trials, Bukharin, Trotsky, and all the rest, many forgotten. The actual records of investigations of the cases are kept in the KGB archives; what I saw are stenographic accounts of the trials, and the sentences given. In the years 1935–1940, the Military Collegium alone sentenced 50,000 people, 36,000 to death; the rest got substantial prison terms.

The Military Collegium, which was then headed by Ulrikh, took up the cases of only the highest individuals, from directors of the largest enterprises to heads of state bureaucracies and commanders of military districts. All of them were accused under article 58, and not on one but on a full “bouquet” of subarticles: diversion, treason, terror, spying. This was done to guarantee that their case would be heard before the Military Collegium and that they would almost surely get the “highest measure” [vysshka, a death sentence]. There was thus no need to issue direct written instructions on how to deal with specific individuals; the judicial paperwork came encoded with instructions.

It is important to remember that those who were judged by the so-called dvoikas and troikas—organs not provided for in the constitution that arose during the heat of the terror to handle the enormous case overload—did not appear at their “trials.” They were judged in absentia. But those who were judged by the Military Collegium and the Supreme Court were called to appear. As a result, in cases before the latter two bodies, there is a stenographic record of the proceedings in which the voices of the accused are recorded.

When asked if they had anything to say after hearing the charges, most people stood up and repudiated the accusations. (Previously it was not known that many people had resisted. Indeed, in the absence of documentation, it was often assumed that they confessed, or at least put up no opposition.) The court then adjourned for three minutes, returning with a guilty verdict and a sentence. In such a way were Tukhachevskii, Bliukher, Meyerhold, and all the rest disposed of. Usually, the whole process of condemning a person to death took fifteen minutes. As for appeals, almost all were rejected. I did find a few cases in which a death sentence was commuted to one of twenty-five years.

Several copies were made of the proceedings: one was sent to the Central Committee (that is, to Stalin), one to the NKVD, one kept by the courts, and so on. In other words, the courts had to report the results of their work to the absolute highest authorities. It was not necessary for these authorities to give specific orders on what to do in any particular case. The NKVD had sent over the case; the court’s job was clear, and both Stalin and the NKVD awaited the results. This must be kept in mind when examining the surviving instructions, or lack thereof, for carrying out specific aspects of the terror.

During the war years, on account of the rise in potential for military-related crimes, even more people—one hundred thousand—fell under the wheels of the Military Collegium than had done so during the terror of 1935–40. And the postwar years until Stalin’s death witnessed another forty-five thousand, almost as many as
during the immediate prewar terror. Both of these periods are as yet completely unstudied.

**Q.:** Perhaps you could give some further details of what you saw in these archives?  
**A.:** I came across a 1958 letter on the rehabilitations to Khrushchev cosigned by the then chairman of the Military Collegium, Aleksandr Borisoglebskii, and the chairman of the Supreme Court, Aleksandr Gorkin. They reported that between 1953–1957, by all judicial organs of the Soviet Union, 612,000 people had been rehabilitated. Of these, 47,000 were rehabilitated by the Military Collegium, 80,000 by the Military Tribunals of military districts, 80,000 by the Commissions of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, and the rest by oblast and krai courts. Only those courts that had sentenced someone could rehabilitate that person, so the figures give a sense of which courts did what amount of sentencing.

It is interesting to note that the courts charged with overturning false convictions did not themselves initiate the process by requesting to see the files of the cases from the KGB. A rehabilitation got underway only after the Central Committee instructed the courts to look into the fate of a particular person, at which point the courts directed an inquiry to the KGB. There was nothing “legal” about rehabilitations; it was all purely political.

**Q.:** But still, the work took a juridical form?  
**A.:** Yes.

**Q.:** Did you come across any evidence of rivalry, strife, and cross-purposes among the various components of the repressive apparatus?  
**A.:** I can’t say I was really looking for that.

**Q.:** You say there were over six hundred thousand rehabilitations in just four years in the 1950s. How did the process of a rehabilitation start?  
**A.:** Repressed individuals themselves or their relatives would write an application for rehabilitation to the Central Committee. This application was sent to the procuracy, which then requested the original files and summoned the person in question (if alive) to an interview. The witnesses and the investigating officer, if alive, were also summoned and asked if they stood by their original testimony. People had a chance at last to confront their torturers, many of whom were also tortured by someone else in the system, and on down the line.

When the Military Collegium received the original files along with the “recommendations” of whatever procuracy had looked into the matter, the Collegium rubber-stamped the recommendation of rehabilitation just as it had rubber-stamped the death sentences. Virtually all rehabilitations were of people convicted in the prewar period.

It is important to emphasize that the wealth of documents generated by the repressive organs has not been destroyed. On the contrary, the files were once more expanded, as new information was added to the huge folders already created during the repression itself. Detailed reports of a rehabilitation were issued and sent to the Central Committee, Procurator, MVD, and KGB. By contrast, those rehabilitated (or their surviving relatives) received only a tiny scrap of paper acknowledging the fact of rehabilitation, without explanation or apology.
Q.: What an enormous amount of work was involved for the bureaucracy in the rehabilitations.

A.: Indeed. Many of the original documents were found to be confusing and to contain numerous contradictions. Furthermore, there were many cases in which the person eligible for rehabilitation had been shot, or had died in the camps. The original witnesses and investigators had to be sought. And often the courts would find that the investigator of one fabricated case had fabricated others. Sometimes egregious fabricators, called lipachi, were indicted and tried. Most, however, were just retired with pension.

Quite against regulations I managed to remove copies of some of these documents. Of course, I myself did not have direct access to the Supreme Court’s photocopying equipment upstairs, but I was permitted to make formal requests that certain materials be copied for work inside the archives. These requests were considered routine and carried out. What was not routine was that I then took the documents home. I have some three hundred to four hundred pages of photocopied documents in all.

Q.: Some of these documents circulated among Western journalists?

A.: Yes. I gave some copies to journalists. I showed them [the documents] around a bit.

Q.: Can you give some examples?

A.: There was a list of people who had been the object of a personal vendetta by Beria. It was evidence used at his secret trial in 1953, after which he was shot. It was clear from the document that after the suicide—or murder (to this day it is still not clear)—of Sergo Ordzhonikidze in February 1937, Ordzhonikidze’s entire extended family (eleven people) was set upon by Beria and destroyed. On the Beria list there were over 130 names in all, mostly Georgians.

In the document one can read the names, occupations, sentences given, when they were carried out, whether torture was used and, if so, what kind. Beria, as the first secretary of the Caucasus Regional party committee, had personally initiated the arrests. Most were shot. Beria never liked Ordzhonikidze, but while the latter was Commissar of Heavy Industry, Beria couldn’t touch him; as soon as Ordzhonikidze was dead, however, Beria moved against his family members, just as he moved against the members of the Georgian intelligentsia. It was all done out of intense jealousy.

Beginning in 1954, those closest to Beria, all generals in the security apparatus, were secretly tried and convicted: Samson Nadaraia and Rafael Sarkisov, former chiefs of Beria’s private guard who pimped for him—ten years; Mikhail Michurin-Raver, chief of the MGB, for fabricating cases—shot; Arsenii Putintsev, chief of counterespionage in the MGB, for fabricating the so-called Leningrad Case—fifteen years; Arkadii Gertsovskii, for carrying out experiments with biological weapons on prisoners—ten years; Solomon Milshtein, chief of the transport department section of the NKVD, for fabricating the trials of supposed wreckers in transport—shot; Amaaiak Kobulov, chief of the MGB administration, for fabricating cases—shot. I could name another two dozen of such people who, during the
time of the rehabilitation, continued to be sentenced for mass fabrication until around 1958. This material, which I came across in the archive, has never been made public.

Not all former lipachi were tried—only those for whom there was the greatest amount of compromising material uncovered during the rehabilitation process, and those for whom the Central Committee gave a special order to investigate. Beria’s collaborators at the highest level of the police apparatus, however, were quietly yet systematically wiped out.

Q.: What struck you most about the rehabilitation documents that you saw?
A.: One point worth mentioning is how the material given to the relatives of rehabilitated individuals was falsified, despite the fact that the officials responsible for composing the material had all the correct information in front of them. Two documents were given out: one, on the rehabilitation itself, that testified to the overturning of the previous judgment but in which virtually no other information was given out (the spaces for place, date, and cause of death were left blank); the other document, which supplied information on the death of the person rehabilitated, was falsified to conceal the magnitude of those shot during 1937 and 38. Death rates were invented (1946, 1947, and so on), while places and causes of death were also made up. Thus, on the one hand, people were rehabilitated; on the other, their survivors were coldly lied to. This tells you what kind of “rehabilitation” it was.

Q.: How does one go about making an inquiry today about a particular case?
A.: Anyone rehabilitated who is still alive retains the right to request the case files (to see who denounced them, for example). Relatives are not expressly forbidden to see the files, but neither are they expressly permitted. In practice, files are not shown to relatives but only to surviving former convicts—but not always. Sometimes the latter’s requests are refused, even though such a refusal is against the organs’ [KGB’s] own regulations (those refused with valid reasons are in any case supposed to have the right to appeal).

People have to know where to go to see their files. As a rule, the files are held in the KGB archives of the oblast where the person was arrested: in Moscow, in Leningrad, in Omsk. In our country, however, there are innumerable instances of oblasts being changed. For example, Pskov used to be in Leningrad oblast, so that a person arrested in Pskov in the 1930s would have had his or her files kept in the Leningrad NKVD. The interested person ought by logic to apply to Leningrad to see the file. But Pskov was later made into its own oblast, and it turns out that all the files pertaining to those arrested in Pskov were moved there from Leningrad.

Those arrested en route, say, on a train, can find their files at the place where the case against them first arose (usually where they worked and lived). But if they made it to their destination and only then were arrested, then the files would be kept at their place of arrival. For example, if a person worked, say, in Erevan but was arrested while on a visit in Moscow, the file is in Moscow.

Often it happens that relatives have no idea where their family member was arrested. They write requests for information everywhere and anywhere. The place they ought to apply, and where their request will end up, is the GNITs MVD (the
Main Scientific Information Center of the Ministry of Internal Affairs). It is here in the former “first section” that card files are kept for all those arrested and convicted in the Soviet Union (and not in the KGB, which has the actual case files).

Obviously, there are many similar names in the MVD’s catalogue, and one cannot obtain information only knowing a person’s name; one must also know the place of arrest. If those requesting information don’t know the city of arrest, at least they must know the oblast. If this is not known, they must know where the person last worked prior to being arrested, and so on. When the GNITs has located the person, they issue a piece of paper indicating the KGB branch where the file is kept.

In the replies from GNITs to requests for information on disappeared relatives, there is some astonishing information. It seems that for record-keeping purposes, GNITs numbers each name in the card file. The highest number I have seen in GNITs’s replies to requests was one in the sixteen millions. This indicates that at least this many people were convicted of political crimes (that is, they were convicted under article 58). It is possible that the actual number is greater.

**Q.: Who is included in these figures?**

**A.:** Let me emphasize that this is only from the card file for those who were convicted of political crimes. There is an entirely separate card file for those convicted of [regular] criminal offenses. I have never seen a number higher than eight million on any of the answers given to the Supreme Soviet by GNITs from the card file for criminals.

We know that sometimes when the names of those arrested were not known, functionaries charged with filling out the forms would just make something up. Other times, only estimates of total numbers could be given, with the individuals remaining anonymous. No one knows how many people were rounded up and disappeared without a trace, although the number is obviously large. These people’s stories may never be retrieved. But the stories of far more people for whom there are documental records are also in danger of being forgotten as long as the relevant documents remain in the hands of the repressive organs. In the meantime, we can show our commitment to recalling their names and fate by attempting to compile our own record, however incomplete.

**Q.: How long did you remain at the archive of the Military Collegium?**

**A.:** From the middle of 1985 to November 1986. During this time I managed to gather on index cards the names of some one hundred thousand people repressed by the Military Collegium and the Supreme Court. Also, I have a list of those rehabilitated by these same institutions that includes not only the figures for the total number of those rehabilitated by year, but the number of their case, witnesses, and information about the original case (such as whether they were tortured). This I achieved in a year and a half.

**Q.: Why did you leave?**

**A.:** It was not by choice. One morning in November 1986, my boss at the archive confronted me with my notebook, throwing it on the table where I worked. I was sent to the special department. My right to enter the archive was rescinded. Shortly thereafter I was fired. They discovered and confiscated only one of my notebooks, however, thinking it was everything. Apparently, they did not know that I was
compiling a card file. My home was not searched at the time, and I was not arrested. I was shaken up, though. I decided to spread some of my materials among friends for safekeeping. Some of the copies of documents I had smuggled out of the archive I gave to foreign correspondents for publication in the event of my arrest.

At school I also encountered difficulties, which led to my being kicked out of the Historical-Archives Institute.\(^5\) Thus, I had lost the opportunity to work and go to school. Needing to support myself and also to have something to do, I began to give paid lectures about my work, which until then I had kept hidden from public view. In other words, I took the first steps to “legalize” my work. My first big speech was in April 1987 at the Central House of Writers (TsDL), a stenographic record of which appeared in a May issue of the émigré publication *Russkaia mysli*.\(^6\)

Q.: It was at this meeting that you first caught the public eye and became a celebrity. But how did you, then an unknown, get an opportunity to address such a gathering?
A.: During the session at the Writers House, I simply passed a written request to the members of the presidium of the meeting (Mikhail Shatrov and Natan Edelman), asking to be allowed to speak about my work. The presidium read my note aloud, put it to a vote, and I was given the floor.

I should say that after publication in *Russkaia mysli*, I was summoned to a “conversation” with the Moscow oblast branch of the KGB. What bothered them was that I had been published abroad in an émigré paper. They warned me to discontinue my activities. I was not intimidated, however. I next wrote an article for the underground publication *Glasnost*\(^7\) about the pending destruction of archival materials based on firsthand observation. Again I was summoned by the KGB. This time I was accused of having received foreign currency and drugs from the CIA. (The KGB asserted that the CIA was the source of *Glasnost*’s finances.\(^8\)) A formally legal search of my home for foreign currency and drugs was carried out; of course, neither was found.

What they really wanted was to find out what materials I had at home, and to lay the groundwork for a break-in of my apartment that was carried out later, on 7 September 1987. At that time, in my absence, they broke in and confiscated 150 notebooks, not all the contents of which I had transferred to index cards, 15,000 to 20,000 index cards, and several books: Robert Conquest’s *The Great Terror* [in Russian], Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, *Vsia Moskva* for 1936, *Ves’ Lenin-grad* for 1934, and others—in short, many of my most important sources. They could have done it all smoothly, leaving no trace of entrance, but they made it look

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5 Iurasov claims that he was not permitted to take his exams. As others, including the school’s rector Iuri Afanas’ev, tell the story, Iurasov either failed the exams he took, or decided not to take his exams because he knew he would fail. Iurasov does not deny that, insofar as school work was concerned, he was not among the school’s most hard-working students.

6 *Literaturnaia gazeta* had published an article by a correspondent, Ion Andronov, in which Andronov, citing material published in the American weekly *The Nation* by Katrina vanden Heuvel, accused the journal *Glasnost* of being in the pay of the CIA. Andronov, who was widely suspected of being a KGB plant on the prominent weekly’s staff, was later expelled from the United States in connection with an intelligence scandal. But in the meantime everyone involved in the production of *Glasnost* and many people who at one time or another had seen a copy of it inside the USSR were subjected to all manner of harassment. Copies of *Glasnost* were also confiscated on the same pretext.
like a criminal theft. I wrote a letter protesting this search and illegal confiscation to the Chairman of the KGB [then it was Chebrikov], but received no reply. Instead, I was summoned back to the KGB for an interrogation, during which they denied that they had taken anything from my apartment. If somebody had broken in, they said, it wasn’t them. I was also questioned about my activities with Memorial (about our attempts to demonstrate and gather signatures on the street).

At this time my former boss at the archives of the Military Collegium, Vladimir Terebilov, a member of the Central Committee, wrote an official denunciation of me, confirming that I had received foreign currency and drugs from the CIA. This served as the justification for forbidding the Soviet press to publish anything I wrote. (Much later Terebilov was removed from his position in connection with the so-called Gdlian case.7) I was going around from journal to journal asking for help, but everyone refused to have anything to do with me. I felt in danger of disappearing completely at any moment, given the silence about me that had been officially organized.

Then, in the fall of 1988, the television show “Vzgliad” lifted the curtain that had descended around me, giving information about how and why the curtain had come down in the first place. This was the most popular show on television, viewed by millions of people. The folks at “Vzgliad” are fantastic; they did an excellent job explaining who I was and what I was doing. I’m very grateful. They broke the blockade at their own risk. After the “Vzgliad” program, which had the effect of legalizing me, I was hired by the Volgograd Philharmonic to give lectures about Stalinism. But in order to give lectures, one must obtain the permission of the censors [like a security clearance]. Surprisingly, the Volgograd censorship bureau gave its stamp of approval, and I began to travel and speak about my work.

Q.: How were you received, especially by local officials, some of whom were participants in the sordid events you were about to lecture on?  
A.: In Dnepropetrovsk, in September 1988, I was grabbed in the airport while waiting for my plane back to Moscow by officers from the local KGB branch. I had given a lecture there, by invitation of the local philharmonic. They took me inside the examination room of the airport’s customs office, and accused me of taking part in an attempt on Gorbachev’s life. Then they put me on the plane; when it arrived in Moscow, I was met by Moscow KGB and taken to Lubianka.

In Moscow I was accused of having connections to two leaders (Skubko and Kuzin) of the Democratic Union who were supposedly planning an attempt on Gorbachev’s life.8 When I denied knowing these people (I did know them), they produced a tap of a phone conversation I had had with Skubko and Kuzin, who were also involved in Memorial. (I was not, however, involved in the Democratic

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7 Tel’man Gdlian, a former employee of the procurator’s office, publicly and dramatically asserted in 1989 the existence of corruption at the highest levels of the state, hinting that the scandal reached all the way up to the then “second” secretary of the party, Egor Ligachev. But subsequently Gdlian was unable to produce any evidence.

8 In 1988 the Democratic Union became the Soviet Union’s first self-pronounced (but unrecognized) alternative political party.
Union.) The KGB must have planted a phone tap when they broke into my apartment. I was outraged. I demanded to be allowed to call home, to tell my mother that I had been illegally grabbed, without as much as being told of what I was accused of. I also insisted on writing a complaint to the procurator. They allowed me to call home, and promised to pass on my complaint.

I demanded further that they return the material they had stolen from my apartment. But they continued to deny involvement in the break-in. I was held for three days, and questioned each day, but at least they allowed me to sleep. After three days I was released: no explanation, no apology. To this day I don’t think they were sure what they hoped to accomplish with this stupid provocation, my last conflict with the KGB. But to this day I have not gotten back what they stole from my apartment, and cannot be sure that they won’t take similar actions in the future.

Q.: During the time you began lecturing around the country, you continued your work in Memorial. What kinds of activities were you involved in?

Q.: In November 1988 I took part in the Week of Conscience organized by a number of progressive journals. There were events and exhibitions every day, each with a different theme. It all took place on a grand scale, involving thousands of people, and was centered on the need to know and always remember one’s past. The events were held at a Palace of Culture. There was a line to get in like the one outside the Lenin Mausoleum: tens of thousands of people. This was not surprising, since the events had been announced in the popular journal Ogonek. In the announcement, people were asked to bring documents and photographs detailing the repressions, and artists were asked to bring sketches for a monument. It was also announced that Iurasov, the young man with the card file who was recently seen on the program “Vzgliad,” would conduct a reception.

Out of two rooms at the exhibit I organized a kind of research laboratory, where people could come and seek information about those they knew to have been repressed. I made gigantic lists on paper that we put up on the wall of over twenty thousand names from my card file. People came looking for the relatives and friends. There was also a list of the NKVD torturers (who in most cases themselves were also repressed). It was all an enormous amount of work.

We made a memorial wall with one thousand of the photographs that people brought, like a columbarium where the ashes of the dead are kept. There was also an exhibition of the sketches for a proposed monument to all the victims. We had maps of the camps, drawn to my specifications, with more than one hundred locations marked. (Remember, Solzhenitsyn's opus had still not been published in this country.) Bringing it all together, in a research laboratory, gave for the first time in our country a public sense of the scale and nature of what had happened in our country: Stalinism, Gulag, totalitarianism. It was a critical moment for us all.

We retrieved the past and made it the important instrument, in the present and for the future, that had been our goal. One million visitors attended the weeklong events.

That week six thousand letters addressed to me from around the country arrived through the mail, and another three thousand were handed over to me personally. I added many names to my card file, and instructed people on how one
went about finding out what had happened to missing relatives and friends. All they had were the incomprehensible pieces of paper testifying to rehabilitation, and another piece of paper with false information about dates and places of death. Some people had no information of any kind. It was the most difficult week I have ever experienced. Thousands and thousands of people, morning to night, needing to speak with me about their tragedies.

Once the Week of Conscience was over, I resumed my work of lecturing through the philharmonic. Between 1988 and 1990, I visited more than fifty cities and gave more than two hundred lectures about Stalinism and the repressions.

Through the announcement in Ogonek, the work at the Week of Conscience, and my job as a lecturer, I became the liaison between the Moscow Memorial and all local branches. (This post was made official when we had the constituent assembly of Memorial in 1989.) The all-union ties that we were not allowed to establish because the authorities refused to register us began to form in this fashion. More than fifty cities have become affiliates of the still unofficial All-Union Memorial. In April [1989] there was a Week of Conscience in Leningrad, and another in Kharkov and Perm, organized on the basis of my material. Many of my lectures were attended by over a thousand people, and tickets were often sold out well in advance.

In November 1989, Andrei Sakharov wrote a letter and instructed me to carry it on a trip I was about to make to Vorkuta, where the miners had announced a strike, to give lectures about the Stalinist repressions there (it was a big Gulag site). (Others had also flown there: Seliunin, Zazlavskaya, Staravoitova.) I read aloud Sakharov’s letter, in which he spoke about the justness of the miners’ demands and also about the importance not simply of economic demands, but of political demands without which the economic issues could not be solved. As a commissar of Memorial, I emphasized the need to create a Memorial in Vorkuta.

During almost the entire year 1989, I was off giving lectures somewhere. There were still instances when my lectures were moved to a different day, or to a different room, evidently to reduce the size of the audience. Other times before being able to deliver a lecture I was put on a plane and simply sent out of a city by the authorities. Pressure was exerted on the organizers of my trips, and many were intimidated by the threats. If I was able to get to a city, I made sure to get on the local television and radio and to get an article in the local newspaper. Gathering information for my card file, I also did everything possible so that the locals would have a strong Memorial branch.

As a rule, after I had spoken in a given city, I began to receive letters, documents, and testimony from thousands of people. For collecting exact information about those who had been repressed, I made up a questionnaire, which was typed in multiple copies using carbon paper by volunteer typists and which I began to distribute beforehand at all my lectures. Completed questionnaires would then be mailed to me, and on this basis I continued to expand my card file even though I had lost my access to archives. In mid-1989 my questionnaire—which I had had to make copies of and distribute on my own with very limited technical means—was published in the periodical Gorizont and, after that, in many other journals and newspapers. Since 1989 I have received more than thirty thousand letters [on de-
posit at the Harriman Institute] containing testimony from people who were repressed or who knew others who were. As of today [October 1990], my card file consists of 250,000 index cards. About half have been taken from archival sources; the other half from newspapers and letters.

Q.: Is it true that you became involved in electoral politics?
A.: In 1990, I was talked into making a bid for a seat in the Supreme Soviet of the Russian republic from the 29th national-territorial electoral district, Vladimir oblast. I had been in Vladimir oblast many times, and given lectures about the question of the so-called 101st kilometer. This was the starting point outside Moscow at which people who had been convicted of a crime and served their sentence were permitted to live; no closer. Therefore, many, many former zeks lived in the oblast. A group of people from a factory and an institute in Aleksandrov that liked my work urged me to run. So I decided to give it a try.

It was a huge territory to cover, and I had at first nineteen, and then nine, opponents. My main adversaries were General Kubassov, a well-known cosmonaut; Ion Andronov, billed as an international journalist and specialist on the USA and Canada who (it was not mentioned) had been kicked out of the USA and blacklisted in Moscow; the obkom first secretary Kondriukov; and the chairman of the oblast executive committee of the soviet Dmitriev. In other words, the entire local power structure, plus one formidable outsider, was arrayed against me.

The local political mafia did everything in their power to prevent me from meeting with voters. They slandered me continuously and mercilessly in the press. There was much voting fraud. In the end, Andronov was elected. Out there in Vladimir, no one knew him and his sordid past. On the contrary, he was lauded as exactly the kind of person needed for the new times: a person with international experience. In such fashion did longtime scoundrels use the electoral system to their advantage, and gain a second life.

Even though I lost—I got one hundred thousand votes—I gained tremendous political experience, learning how to conduct a dialogue with voters, how the election system worked, what methods people were capable of, and how powerful and influential the apparat was in the campaign. I do not at all regret my participation. On the contrary, I’m very grateful to have had the chance. In retrospect, I think that I would have won had I run in Moscow where I was better known. But I doubt I will try this again. I am, in any case, apolitical, as anyone fully committed to scholarship must be.

Q.: How would you describe your philosophical outlook or world view?
A.: Philosophically, since I am a Russian, I believe in the “Russian idea” as developed in the writings of Nikolai Berdiaev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Aleksei Fedorov. In 1985–86, after I was demobilized from the army, I had a chance to read them in tamizdat. Basically, the “Russian idea” means that I cannot live anywhere besides Russia, no matter what catastrophes take place there. I feel the strongest connections to the culture and history of Russian people. I can only realize myself on Russian soil. In Russia there are now great difficulties, but they are artificial; that is, they have been created by foolish and wrong policies, and are not inherent in the culture. These difficulties make life in Russia very hard. Of course, here in the
United States it would be easier to live, to work. But my life and work are devoted to the Russian people, and this people nourishes me spiritually.

Russia has its own way, a third way. The barbarism that Russia has experienced proves that we should not slavishly copy America or Europe. This goes for the market system, but especially for cultural matters. It so happens that the champions of the “Russian idea” in our country today are on the extreme right, and the form in which they propagate the Russian idea discredits the concept. Through their tendentious efforts the Russian idea has been debased and has become associated with crude nationalism. But to believe in the Russian idea should not in any way involve disrespect for other peoples. On the contrary, one must have the utmost respect not only for one’s own people but for all peoples and the unique contributions each has to offer.

Q.: What were you involved in just prior to your visit here to the United States, and what are your plans for the future?

A.: In the early fall of 1990, in connection with a documentary being made by Mosfilm, I went to Magadan. The film’s title, Khranit’ vechno (preserve forever), is taken from the front page of KGB case files. It deals with the Kolyma camps, plus my life and card file. There are many conversations between me and former prisoners of the camps.

We visited two uranium mining camps that had been opened during the Second World War, one in Pevek (in Chukotka) and the other in Butygychag (Kolyma). We also traveled to the so-called Elgen state farm, a former orphanage for children born in the camps that is described in Evgeniia Ginzburg’s Journey into the Whirlwind. In short, we traced the entire Kolyma trail, seeing and recording the remnants of the camps, for example, in Ust-Omchug, Ust-Nera, Seimchan, Iagodnyi, and so on. We saw stone barracks, isolation cells, metal gates, barbed wire, guard towers, uniforms, utensils, all preserved. Of course, absolutely no one lives there today. We went by helicopter.

In Magadan itself, the capital of the region, we found and interviewed some survivors and filmed the headquarters of the former camp administration Dalstroii, still operating but now as a “regular” trust called North-Eastern Gold. It is still the biggest and sturdiest building in the city. Thus, it is quite possible to obtain a living impression of the old Kolyma camp system. They built these camps solidly, for the long term, and so their remains have survived, despite the severe climate.

The most important thing was just seeing the camps, way out there at the end of the earth, frozen solid. It makes your hair stand on end. What the Communists did can be compared only with what the German Fascists did. This all must be seen.

When I first started my work with the card file, I didn’t realize the significance that I now see in it: the revival and preservation of the historical memory of the country. From the period of the Bolsheviks coming to power the history of the peoples of the Soviet Union was not simply destroyed; it was also deeply buried. Only falsifications ordered from above were allowed to be learned. The stolen truth must be restored, the names of those who lived, worked and died in the misguided utopia must be recalled.

Of course, I can’t write about all the millions who died or suffered; for that,
one person’s life is not long enough. But I can help to restore the memory of concrete people, living and dead, who did not occupy important positions, who were not party members. Their lives and fate must be documented and passed on to future generations. The right of memory must be returned to the people and the false Bolshevik thesis—“there’s a person, there’s a problem; remove the person, you remove the problem”—must be repudiated forever. While humankind survives, it must preserve the memory of its forebears, to remain human and to avoid becoming, as in the Chingiz Aitmatov story, people without memory, whom it is easier to make into slaves.

Postscript

On the once again Liubianka Square, the stone brought from the Solovki islands that serves as a monument to the victims of repression now faces an empty pedestal that had supported the statue of the Cheka’s founder, Feliks Dzierżiński. Moreover, after the events of August 1991, all Soviet archives, including those of the Party and the KGB, were ordered turned over to special commissions charged with transferring them to state jurisdiction. Memorial has thus seen two of its original goals fulfilled. And the association has finally received its own building, which, in addition to offices, houses a museum of repression.

Lately, Memorial has been turning more and more of its attention back to where many of its founders began: the human rights movement. A number of its leaders now hold advisory positions in the Russian government’s human rights commission. Some regional affiliates have restyled themselves as nongovernmental human rights monitors. Dmitrii Iurasov has accepted a post in the party archives.