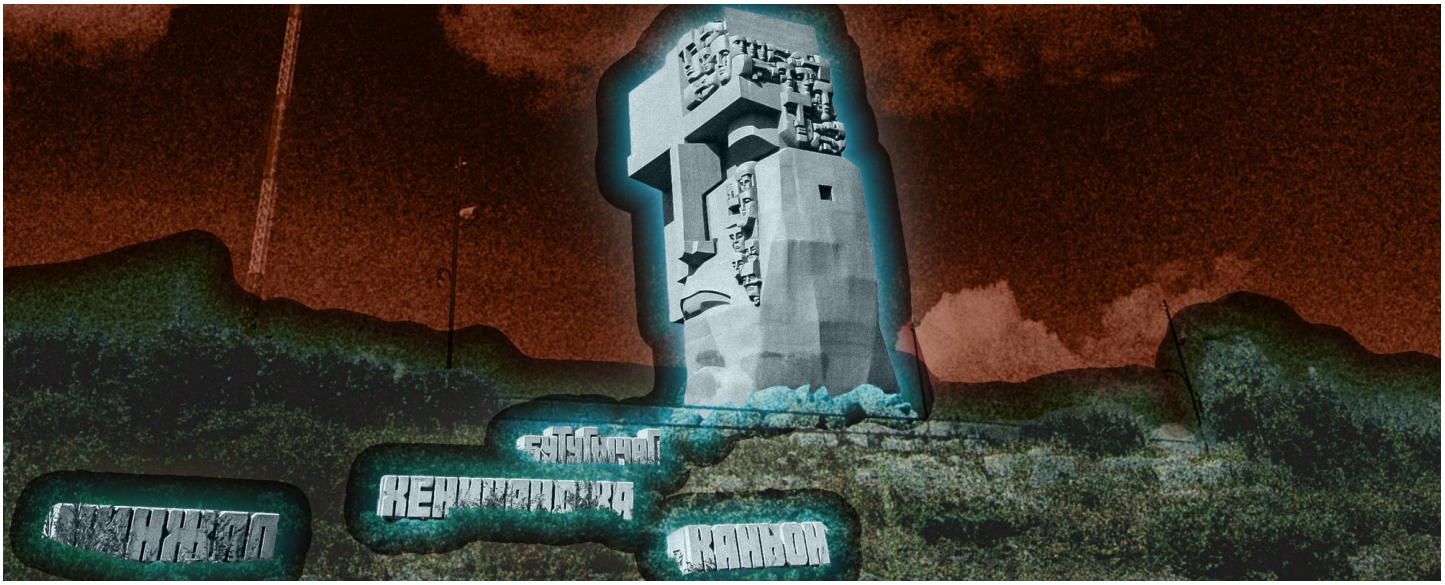

The ‘Mask of Sorrow’ monument commemorating prisoners of the Gulag system, Magadan, Russian Far East. It was installed in 1996 with funding partially provided by both federal and local authorities / Illustration: OVD-Info / Photo: Sergei Kovalev, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0

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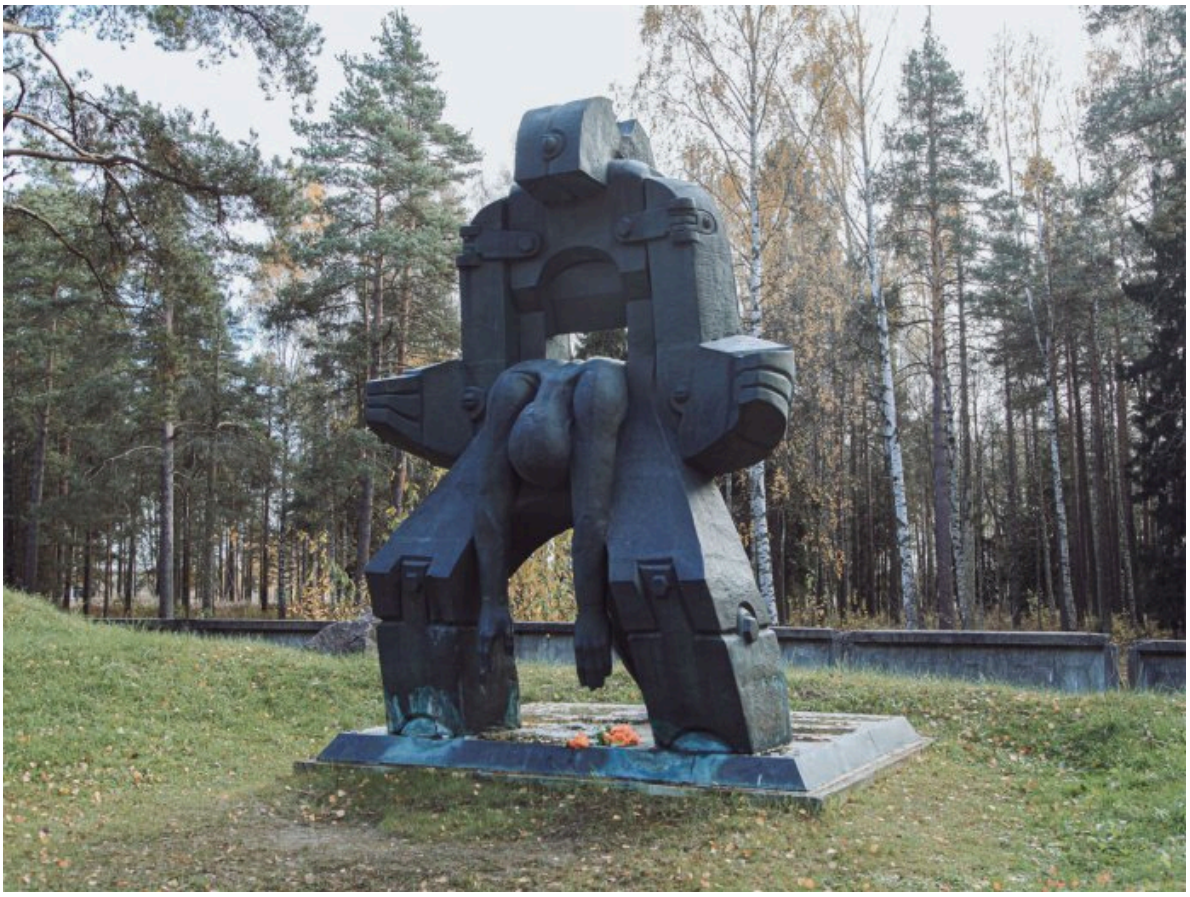
Memory Wars

ALEXEY UVAROV EXPLAINS CIVIL SOCIETY’S STRUGGLE TO COMMEMORATE REPRESSION VICTIMS.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has witnessed competing approaches toward remembering Stalin’s era of mass repression. Often, the discussion around the historical memory of Soviet repression is stereotyped as driven by Muscovite intellectual elites. Yet to understand the broader dynamics of memory-making in Russia, we need to look beyond Moscow. Then, we will see how local communities across Russia have independently driven memorial efforts for decades, highlighting that the impulse to remember repressions’ victims is of much value to ordinary citizens, deeply connected to their personal and local histories.

Since the 1990s, a network of grassroots memorial initiatives has emerged. Ordinary people, local historians, activists, and descendants of repression victims have created monuments, museums, and more across Russia's regions — often in the face of indifference or even hostility from the state. Their persistence reveals the resilience of civil society under increasingly authoritarian conditions.

As of 2023, around two thousand monuments to the victims of political repression in the USSR have been installed in Russia since 1988. However, this process was not continuous. The majority of these memorials were erected in the 1990s and early 2000s, during a wave of public reckoning with Soviet-era crimes. By 2010, over 1,700 such monuments had been installed, driven largely by grassroots initiatives and countrywide organisations like Memorial.



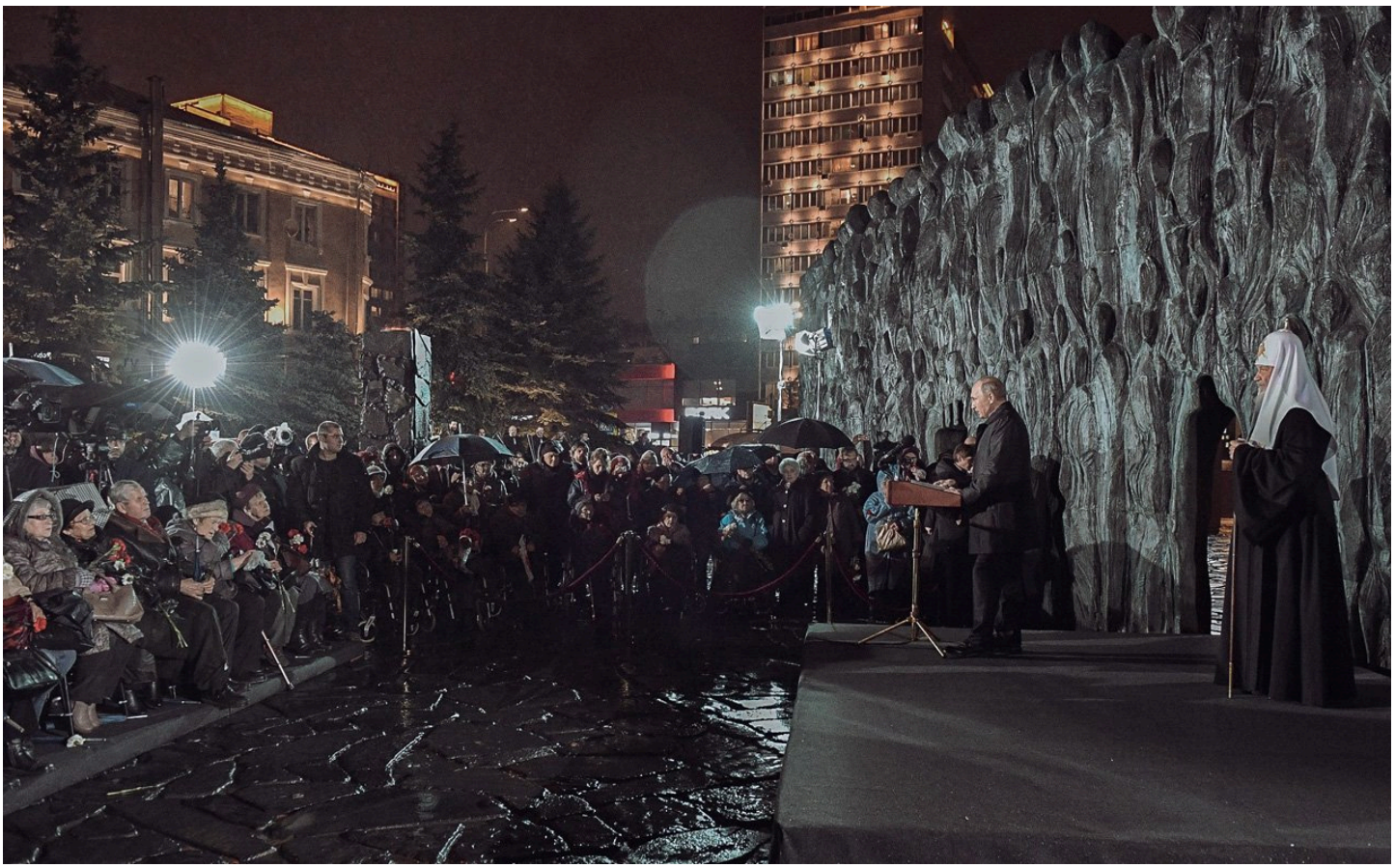
‘Moloch of totalitarianism’ monument erected in 1996 at the entrance to the Levashovo Memorial Cemetery commemorating victims of Soviet political repression between 1937 and 1954. Levashovskaya Pustosh served as a secret burial ground for victims of the Great Terror, with evidence suggesting that 19,540 bodies were buried there / Photo: Grigorius m, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0

By the mid-2010s, independent efforts faced increasing restrictions, with authorities blocking (like in Borovsk, Yakutsk and Novgorod) new installations, limiting access to execution sites, and even removing existing memorials. The key exception to this decline was the ‘Last Address’ initiative, launched in 2014, which placed hundreds of small commemorative plaques on residential buildings where repression victims had lived. However, broader trends indicate that the initial momentum for public remembrance ultimately clashed with the state’s tightening grip on historical memory.

Until the mid-2010s, the Kremlin appeared to sanction a form of ‘controlled’ commemoration. In August 2015, the Russian government approved a national policy to commemorate the victims of political repression. The concept, signed by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, emphasised that Russia cannot become

a full-fledged rule-of-law state without honoring the memory of millions who suffered from political persecution. The policy includes creating memorial museums, educational programs, financial support for victims, and research initiatives.

In 2017, President Putin inaugurated the ‘Wall of Sorrow’ memorial in Moscow. However, independent organisations, like Memorial, were already facing mounting legal and administrative pressures. Already in 2012, Russia passed the ‘foreign agent’ law, and by 2013, the Ministry of Justice attempted to designate Memorial’s human rights division under this label. In 2014, its regional branches faced intensified audits and fines, and in 2016, Memorial International was officially classified as a foreign agent, leading to mounting financial penalties and state scrutiny. By 2019, authorities had escalated pressure with fines, office raids, and restrictions on access to Memorial’s online database of repression victims.



President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church at the opening of the ‘Wall of Sorrow’ memorial in Moscow, 30 October 2017 / Photo: kremlin.ru

By 2020, however, cracks in the state's commemorative stance grew apparent. Prosecutors began reexamining Soviet convictions labeled as 'unjust, ' particularly those of alleged Nazi collaborators, signaling that the Kremlin might no longer regard all repressions as crimes of the Soviet regime. This reevaluation accelerated dramatically after the full-scale invasion in 2022, when thousands of earlier rehabilitations were revoked in secretive court and prosecutorial proceedings. Official rhetoric increasingly invoked ideas of 'traitors,' 'enemies,' and 'fifth columns,' resurrecting languages reminiscent of Stalinism.

Consequently, the conflict between activists, who strive to keep the memory of repressions alive, and the Kremlin, which seeks to rewrite or minimise that painful history, intensified. Many believe the state's hostility toward these memorials stems from a need to preserve a nostalgic, heroic image of the Soviet Union — admitting the full extent of the terror could undermine its current ideological stance and raise unsettling questions about continuity between past and present repressive methods.

The Kremlin's 'war on memory' has grown into a systematic drive to sanitise historical narratives, maintain political legitimacy, and reinforce a tightly controlled national identity — effectively burying the darker chapters of Soviet history and discrediting those who seek to preserve their memory.

A good example here is the Sandarmokh memorial site in Karelia, a Russian region bordering Finland. The site was discovered in 1997. Thousands of political prisoners from the infamous Solovetsky camps were executed and buried there in secret mass graves during the height of Stalin's terror. For over twenty years, Sandarmokh drew annual commemorations attended by people from Russia and beyond. Yuri Dmitriev, a historian and researcher of Soviet-era mass executions, played a crucial role in uncovering the burial sites.

Yuri Dmitriev at the dig site in Sandarmokh, Karelia, 1997 / Photo: Veniamin Ioffe

Over the years, Dmitriev helped identify the names of more than 6,200 victims resting there, turning the site into a significant memorial cemetery. Reflecting on the challenges of locating execution sites, Dmitriev said: “The first time I came to Solovki about 20 years ago, I asked: ‘Guys, I heard there were a lot of dead here, but not many cemeteries. If people died, they must have been buried somewhere, right?’ — ‘Well, yes, there, there, and there.’ But when you check — nothing. ‘But an old woman told me she personally saw them buried here…’ You check — nothing. The Chekists knew how to bury the traces.”

In 2016, as Russian authorities pushed an alternative narrative about Sandarmokh, Yuri Dmitriev was arrested on charges of child abuse and possession of child pornography. While initially acquitted of the most serious accusations, the verdict was overturned, and he was retried and sentenced to 13 years in prison, later increased to 15 years.

Independent experts found no evidence supporting the Kremlin’s claims. Dimitriev adopted a three-year-old, and since she was sickly from a young age, he photographed her and measured her height and weight for years, keeping all information in a ‘health diary’

folder on his desktop — these records were what the state classified as 'pornography'. Human rights organisations, including Amnesty International and Memorial, condemned the case as politically motivated. The new, harsher sentence was met with outrage from civil society, with Memorial calling the verdict "cruel, unlawful, and politically motivated." Many international historians and human rights defenders continue to advocate for Dmitriev's release, seeing his case as a symbol of the Russian state's effort to suppress independent historical research.

Recently, however, authorities in Karelia began supporting an alternate interpretation of the site, suggesting the graves contain Soviet soldiers executed by Finnish forces — despite overwhelming historical evidence of Soviet responsibility. In a further crackdown, Sergey Koltyrin, a museum director who studied mass executions at Sandarmokh, was imprisoned on dubious charges in 2019 and died in custody in April 2020.

Destroyed memorials to Polish and Ukrainian victims of political repression in Krasny Bor, another killing field in Karelia widely known due to Yuri Dmitriev's investigations, August 2024 / Photo: Memorial

A similar struggle over historical memory can be seen in efforts to preserve sites of Soviet repression, such as Siberia's Perm-36 Museum — the only remaining Gulag camp in Russia. Perm-36 is unique among former Gulag sites in Russia because it is the only camp that has been fully preserved as a museum on its original territory. Unlike most other camps — especially those in remote regions like Kolyma — Perm-36 retains its original buildings, including barracks and guard towers. The idea for the museum came to Shmyrov during a 1992 expedition to former political labor camps, organised with activists from the Perm branch of Memorial and accompanied by several former inmates. At the former Perm-36 camp in the village of Kuchino, locals had already dismantled much of the site for building materials. As the group explored the area, villagers observed them closely, recognising some of the former prisoners.

Seeing the site's historical significance and the risk of its complete erasure, Shmyrov made a simple yet resolute decision: "We need to create a museum." With no government funding available, the restoration began in an unexpected way. As Shmyrov recalled: "At first, we had the idea to start a small farm... A writer friend left Perm without his royalty money, agreeing to take it as a loan. With this money, one of my students and a friend rented the former prison sawmill. Miraculously, within a year, they repaid the loan and even made a profit."

This unorthodox funding helped kickstart the restoration. By 1995, the special regime barracks, one of the camp's main buildings, was "restored entirely with our own hands over the summer of 1995, without any help from the government," per Shmyrov. The museum soon gained international recognition, hosting exhibitions, educational programs, and the 'Pilorama Festival,' which blended rock music with discussions on political repression. "Pilorama became a unique example of cooperation between civil society and the state, built on the principle of non-interference. No one else managed to combine rock 'n' roll with serious discussions about the fate of the country," Shmyrov said.

‘Pilorama Festival’ at the Perm-36 museum, Kuchino village, Perm region, 2010 / Photo: Perm-36 museum Facebook page

However, the museum’s growing influence drew government scrutiny. In 2014, authorities stripped Shmyrov and his team of control, turning Perm-36 into a state-run institution and altering its exhibitions. The removal of its original curators was seen as part of a broader effort to rewrite history. Viktor Shmyrov emphasised that the collection had been assembled independently and with integrity — and that it would not be surrendered to efforts that distort its meaning or historical truth. Despite political pressure, Perm-36 remains a symbol of historical resistance, reminding future generations of the Soviet Union’s repression and the importance of preserving memory.

Civil society’s struggle to protect historical truth from the Kremlin extends throughout Russia. In Yoshkar-Ola, the Gulag History Museum, founded in a former NKVD detention center, was shut down by 2018 under vague pretexts, and its exhibits dismantled. In Yakutia, grassroots memorials thrived in the 1990s but faced gradual government resistance, culminating in the 2023 removal of a monument dedicated to Polish exiles. Even Moscow’s Gulag

History Museum was abruptly closed in 2024 under bureaucratic justifications, part of a broader effort to suppress historical truth.

The repression is also evident in the North Caucasus, where the legacy of the 1944 deportations remains a deeply contested issue. Despite official restrictions, remembrance of Stalinist repression endures through grassroots memorials, religious gatherings, and storytelling. However, authorities continue to suppress independent historical initiatives. The Memorial to the Victims of Stalinism in Dagestan and the Memorial to the Victims of Deportation in Grozny, once powerful symbols of remembrance, have faced state interference — the one in Grozny was dismantled and parts of it moved to an entirely new spot in February 2014, the same month the Crimea annexation began. In 2019, the moved gravestones, which made up the memorial, were moved to a new spot once again.

1. Postcard from Grozny with original view of the Memorial to the Victims of Deportation with the inscription in Chechen: 'We will not weep! We will not break! We will not forget! ', as it was opened in 1992 / Photo: Deniev Dagun, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0

2. Dismantling of the memorial in 2014 / Photo: Caucasian Knot

3. Dismantling of the memorial in 2014 / Photo: Sakharov Center

Across Russia, state actions reveal a systematic attempt to control narratives of the Soviet past, erasing uncomfortable histories while local communities continue to resist through informal acts

of remembrance. Yet, despite mounting obstacles, local communities persist in their efforts to honor the victims.

From small towns to major cities, dedicated groups continue to hold commemorations, install plaques, conduct independent research, and organise informal gatherings. This ongoing struggle over memory reflects a broader conflict between civil society and state authorities seeking to control historical narratives. Even as public space for discussion shrinks, grassroots remembrance efforts endure, ensuring that the stories of millions who suffered are not erased.

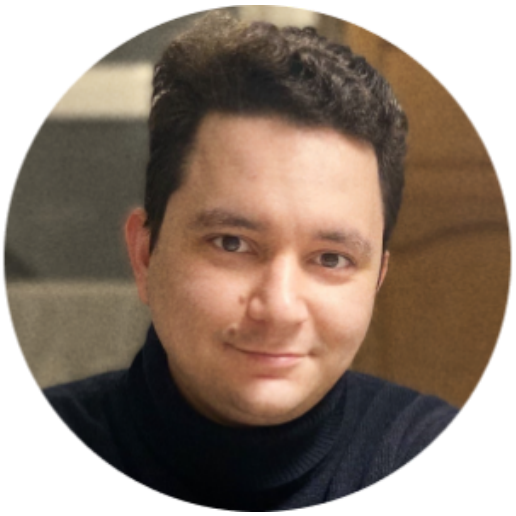
One such effort is the Last Address project, which relies on personal commitment and community involvement to preserve historical memory despite growing hostility from authorities. Initiated in 2014 by journalist Sergey Parkhomenko, it installs small commemorative plaques on buildings, marking the final residences of victims arrested and executed during Stalin's repressions.

Originally concentrated in major cities like Moscow and Saint Petersburg, the project quickly expanded to smaller towns and even remote villages. As Parkhomenko explains: "the core idea of the project is not merely to hang metal plaques on buildings; rather, it is to create a community that builds this people's memorial collectively, a community that discusses it, thinks about it, tells its children about it."

Vladimir Leshchenko, great-grandson of peasant Afanasy Leshchenko, who was executed in 1937 on charges of counter-revolutionary agitation, fastens a Last Address plaque to the house built by his ancestor in 1926. The house was confiscated from Afanasy Leshchenko during the dekulakization campaign in 1930. Afanasy's son and Vladimir's grandfather, Pavel Leshchenko, was also executed in Tomsk on February 13, 1938 / Screenshot: @tomsknkvd, YouTube

The fundamental principle of the initiative is its grassroots funding — each plaque is financed by individual applicants who have personal connections to the commemorated victim. "This ensures a personal and emotional connection," Parkhomenko notes. "Every plaque appears because a specific individual decided: 'I made this happen. Without me, this plaque would not exist.'"

The project faces mounting hostility since 2022, with many plaques vandalised or removed. Despite authorities rarely investigating such incidents seriously, activists persistently reinstall the plaques, reaffirming Parkhomenko's determination: "Even if the state's deadening breath takes this from us, we'll find other ways to express the same idea — the idea of the value of every human life, our rejection of totalitarianism."



Alexey Uvarov,

a researcher at the University of Bonn. He is a historian specialising in the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. Uvarov's research focuses on memory culture and historical politics in Eastern Europe, and nation-building in the post-Soviet space.

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