

Nooit Meer Auschwitz Lezing 2024

by Nikita Petrov

AMSTERDAM, 24 JANUARY 2022

NEDERLANDS **AUSCHWITZ** COMITÉ

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Sociale Verzekeringsbank

Laudatio Annetje Fels-Kupferschmidt Award 2024

*January 24, 2024**Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen, Amsterdam*

Excellencies, honored guests, students, friends, ladies and gentleman,

WHEN PUTIN ORDERED the liquidation of the organization Memorial in 2021, he was drawing the practice of repressing the memory of repression from an old playbook with a long tradition. Memorial, in its turn, came from a similarly long – but opposite – tradition of calling attention to state-sponsored repression. Researchers, observers, and Memorial staffers and constituency suddenly found themselves faced with padlocked doors at their headquarters on Karetny Ryad, in central Moscow. Putin's regime seemed to be operating on the naïve assumption that barring entrance to a building would block access to the knowledge of the past and present human rights violations that the organization had brought into the public space since the late eighties.

But let me take you back to the beginning of that story. In 1987, a group of 11 persons embarked on a campaign in Moscow to gather signatures for a monument to the millions of victims of Stalinism. They were accused of agitation and told by the Communist Party that its priorities lay in economic reforms. The petitioners persevered, though, and within a year, this group, now named 'Memorial', had gathered over 30,000 signatures from cities across the Soviet Union and the Nobel-Prize winning physicist and human rights leader Andrei Sakharov had become the growing organization's honorary chair. By now their mandate had expanded to include a research center, archive, and reception room to offer social services to survivors or their descendants. In 1990, Memorial succeeded in its original

mission to erect a monument to victims. For its symbolism, instead of a sculpture, the organization opted to bring a massive boulder from the Solovetsky Islands – Lenin’s first concentration camp – and place it right in front of the Lubyanka, notorious KGB headquarters. This was only the beginning.

From its inception, Memorial organized public meetings for long-silenced Gulag survivors to share their stories and air their grievances, arranged exhibitions of the grim mug shots of doomed prisoners, lobbied for reparations for victims, and placed discussion of the Stalinist terror on the public agenda. In its 35 years of existence, Memorial emerged as the leading research center and archive on Stalinism today. It gathered thousands of oral and written eyewitness testimonies from Gulag victims and produced hundreds of scholarly reference works on the Stalinist state apparatus. Memorial was the most prominent organization representing victims’ rights, and, in parallel, it grew into the most venerated human rights organization in Russia.

For its efforts in exposing the scope of state-sponsored crimes, unearthing mass graves, bringing victims’ names back into the public space, and calling attention not only to past but also current human rights violations, Memorial earned the Nobel Prize in 2022. For that very same list of accomplishments, Memorial earned the indignation of the Russian government. When Putin ordered the dissolution of the organization in 2021, he was implicitly conceding that Memorial’s facts could not be refuted. Nor, could they be tolerated by a regime, dependent on repression for its survival.

On the day of Nobel’s announcement, Memorial’s headquarters were confiscated by the state. This was the culmination of years of harassment that started under the Soviet authorities, who obstructed Memorial’s work from the time that it emerged in the second half of the 1980s. Memorial’s mandate was discomforting, because it unsettled the very foundations on which the regime rested, then and now. In the last fifteen years, however, dislike for the organization turned to hostility, and legislative tools were developed to curb any activities undesirable to the state. In 2013, Memorial was designated a ‘foreign agent’, a notorious label whose irony did not escape the founders and constituency of Memorial. The accusation of being

a foreign agent was institutionalized in the Stalin era to justify the arbitrary arrest, torture, and execution of just about any citizen. In 2021, on the basis of their ‘foreign agent’ status and their continued pursuit of truth, the International Memorial Society and its Human Rights Center were closed by court order. Then, in a practice harking back to Soviet times when dissidents were summoned to OVIR (the foreign visa agency) and given the choice of arrest or emigration, the authorities froze the bank accounts of Memorial’s Board members – a first step in the banishment process, after which a number were forced to flee the country.

The decimation of Memorial’s ranks in Russia was followed by the persecution and harassment of those members who remained in Russia, including 6 a.m. raids on the homes of researchers like Nikita Petrov, who will speak to us today, and elderly ladies who had spent decades interviewing survivors of the camps for Memorial’s oral history archive. The oral histories they gathered not only supplied the facts omitted by Russia’s official history, but they added the emotional impact of the terror – how it felt to have friends, relatives and campmates killed or ‘disappeared’, and to live with the fear that even a casual remark about the government could result in the destruction of one’s family. So, in addition to erecting the physical monument to victims of Soviet terror, the process of speaking with citizens who experienced the repression, also generated an archival monument to its victims.

Allow me to enumerate here a few more of the activities that have distinguished this organization. Since the late 1980s, Memorial researchers investigated and excavated mass graves on Stalin’s killing fields all over the territory of the Soviet Union. They lobbied for forensic investigation, the opening of relevant archives, official recognition, and reburial. Many of these graves contained the remains of thousands of victims of mass executions that began in 1937. By 2005, around twenty-five such sites were found in Russia, some containing the remains of up to 20,000 victims.

On the human rights front, while Memorial earned substantial international recognition for its monitoring reports, refugee assistance, and investigation into Russian violations in Chechnya since the mid-1990s, its human rights

activities have been marred by tragedy. In 2006 and 2009, Memorial lost two key collaborators, journalist Anna Politkovskaya and local activist Natalia Estemirova, who were assassinated for their outspokenness. Oleg Orlov, director of the banned Human Rights Center, who survived being kidnapped in Chechnya, was recently tried for anti-war protest. Initially, he was sentenced to a fine, but now the Court is looking to sentence Orlov to incarceration of up to three years. He maintains that Memorial exists not just to remember and honor the victims and investigate and archive their histories, but to assure that a repressive regime never again massively violates the rights of its citizens. I will return to the Never Again theme shortly.

I have mentioned some names, but allow me to elaborate more on who makes up Memorial, since we are honoring their work here today. Memorial's founders had gained their stripes through long, personal histories with repression. While Sakharov was its honorary chairman, from Memorial's inception until his 2017 death, Memorial was led by Arsenii Roginskii. Roginskii's father, Boris, a Jewish engineer and Talmudic scholar, was arrested in 1938 and sentenced to six years in camp. He served eight. Arsenii was born in the so-called camp zone, because his father was not allowed to leave the area outside the camp. Boris was re-arrested in 1951 for moving too close to his native Leningrad. This time, he did not survive the incarceration, and died three months after arrest. Later, Arsenii Roginskii as a young adult, was not permitted to study at Leningrad University because he was Jewish, but he got his degree at Tartu University. He was keenly interested in history, and the early alternatives to Bolshevism. He started collecting materials and connecting with friends who were also interested in the history of repression. The Soviet system maintained itself not only by repressing people but by repressing ideas, and it – like the current Russian regime – most certainly wanted to maintain control of how the story of the past was to be told. In 1981 Roginskii was summoned to OVIR, the visa office, and told he had permission to emigrate to Israel within ten days. He did not accept the offer.

In August of that year, he was arrested on Article 196 for the “forgery and production and sale of forged documents”, and for sending materials to underground journals.

Why was he charged with forgery? Because Roginskii was Jewish, and the son of a former political prisoner. As such, he was automatically barred from working in Soviet research institutions. The documents in question were letters he had used to gain entry into the Leningrad archives.

After surviving five camps in four years, and weighing fifty kilos, Roginskii was released in 1985, and went back to Moscow to eventually lead Memorial. After his death in 2017, he was succeeded by early Memorial member Jan Rachinskii. Elena Zhemkova, Memorial's Executive Director, now in exile in Germany, was one of those original eleven petitioners. And Nikita Petrov, vice-president of the research center of Memorial and historian of the Stalinist repression, joined the organization's ranks in the late eighties. He was one of the few researchers to gain access to KGB archives in the nineties. Subsequently, he earned his Ph.D. at the Oost-Europa Institute of the University of Amsterdam. Dr. Petrov's research on perpetrators is pioneering. He identified those who were awarded medals for massacring thousands of Polish officers at Katyn forest in 1940, and he gathered archival materials to support a ban on the Communist Party for a 1992 hearing that had the potential to be the Russian Nuremberg. He is also credited (or, I should say, discredited) for discovering and exposing some not so heroic wartime histories of Soviet officials. Petrov was personally named in the Supreme Court's rejection of Memorial's appeal to save their headquarters, because his work was in violation of a law that forbids diminishing Soviet accomplishments during the ‘Great Patriotic War’.

Finally, aside from symbolic reparations, the post-Soviet Russian governments made no effort to confront an onerous past. No perpetrator was tried, there is no institute of national memory, and the current textbooks relate a political narrative. In the absence of governmental initiatives to seriously address state-sponsored repression, Memorial filled the void by challenging the arbitrary use of authority and demanding accountability for both the massive political crimes of the predecessor regime, and the grave human rights violations of the current regime. There is no comparison between Auschwitz and the Gulag. And Never Again Auschwitz means that we can never forget the merciless annihilation of European Jewry, Sinti and Roma for no other reason than that they were Jewish,

Sinti or Roma. However, there are more lessons in the Never Again Auschwitz message. We can also never again look the other way when fellow citizens are terrorized, arrested, deported, and then erased from official memory.

The Annetje Fels-Kupferschmidt Prize was created to recognize individuals or organizations whose dedication to remembering and honoring victims of the Holocaust is exemplary. In that spirit, it also honors those who have dedicated their lives to exposing egregious human rights violations. Thanks to Memorial, we can now name the names of millions of victims of Stalinism, we can (or could) commemorate them in front of the former KGB headquarters, we can identify the homes from which they were deported, never to return, and we can identify where they were incarcerated or executed. Despite today's grim reality, the accomplishments of Memorial are all the more heartening because they attest to the fact that even in the wake of a 70-year dictatorship, and despite an entrenched culture of repression, civil society in Russia – however fragilely – was nevertheless able to emerge, flourish, and build strong foundations. That is a hopeful message for the future.

—Nanci Adler, December 2023



Solovetsky Stone (Memorial monument, Moscow, 1991)



Dr. Nikita Petrov, Memorial

Auschwitz Never Again Lecture

*Annetje Fels-Kupferschmidt Award
of the Netherlands Auschwitz Committee
Amsterdam, January 24, 2022*

Nikita Petrov

Ladies and gentlemen,

IT WAS A GREAT HONOR for me to receive this honorary award for the Memorial. On behalf of the Memorial, I want to express my great gratitude. The long-term activity of our organization is well known. Of course, it is quite difficult to describe it in detail in a small lecture, which I have to give. Too many facts, names and events have accompanied the history of the Memorial Society. I will try to highlight only the main events of our history and try to describe everything that happened in recent years, when the history of Russia tragically went backwards.

Thirty years ago, it seemed that with the end of the Communist Party's power in Russia, the Soviet criminal past had been overcome. The era of great upheavals is over, the cold war is over, the world is becoming safer, and the confrontation between totalitarianism and democracy has ended with the complete triumph of justice and common sense. It was a happy time when we, the activists of the Memorial Society, enthusiastically and joyfully sincerely believed that now nothing prevents us from implementing those ideas and achieving those goals for which a broad and mass movement arose in 1987, which took shape in the form of the Memorial public organization.

The appearance of the Memorial was a public reaction to the long-standing Soviet lies about the true history of the country, a reaction to the concealment and silence of the monstrous crimes of the Soviet regime against the people of our country. We wanted to speak openly about the tragedy of the Soviet era: mass

political repression, we wanted to name all the victims, investigate all cases of political violence and human rights violations and demand punishment for those responsible for arbitrariness.

A public initiative that arose in 1987 to erect a memorial complex in memory of the victims of Stalin's repressions gave the name to a public non-governmental organization that was being formed at the same time - Memorial. In 1988, public polls showed that the name of academician Andrei Sakharov, as a symbol of the organization, enjoys mass support.

In November 1988, the "Week of Conscience" was held in Moscow. For several days in a row, in the Palace of Culture of the Moscow Electric Lamp Factory, activists of the Memorial movement held meetings and conversations with a large gathering of visitors, collected information from the descendants of the repressed, and compiled lists of victims of Soviet repression. The walls of the halls were hung with portraits of the executed, and there was also a "Gulag Map" symbolizing the camp empire of the USSR.

It was then, at the end of 1988, that the main directions of the Memorial Society's activities were formulated. These were the main tasks:

- » Perpetuation of the memory of victims of political repression in the USSR and rehabilitation of all victims of repression.
- » Assistance to people who have survived repression – former GULAG prisoners.
- » The organization of a museum, library and archive under the auspices of the Memorial, which would preserve historical materials about the history of political repression in the USSR.
- » Conducting in-depth research on the history of Soviet repression and the struggle for access to documents about repression in state archives and in the archives of the KGB.
- » Educational work and publication of books and collections of documents on the history of repression. In the late 1990s, the Memorial's most important work was a "School Competition" designed to encourage high school students for their essays on the history of their families and the history of their regions.

Of course, the activists of the Memorial had a very clear understanding that the political repression of the Soviet past is inextricably linked to the present. And therefore, another, and at the same time the most important task in the activities

of the Memorial was the struggle for human rights and the demand for freedom for all Soviet political prisoners still remaining in camps and prisons. The last of them were freed only in early 1992, when the Soviet system and the omnipotence of the Communist Party had already collapsed.

The collapse of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in August 1991 ushered in a new era. Memorial activists joined many state commissions of the new Russia and participated in the development of the Federal Law on the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression (adopted in October 1991). They participated in the work of the Commission of the Supreme Council of Russia on the reception of archives of the Communist Party and the KGB for state storage. They participated as experts in the consideration of the "Case of the Communist Party" in the Constitutional Court of Russia.

The decision on the Communist Party case was rendered by the Constitutional Court on November 30, 1992. And it gave a clear assessment:

"For a long time, the country was dominated by the regime of unlimited, violent power of a narrow group of communist functionaries united in the politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU, headed by the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU."

Approximately the same assessment was recorded in the preamble of the Law on the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression in October 1991:

"During the years of Soviet power, millions of people became victims of the arbitrariness of the totalitarian state, were subjected to repression for political and religious beliefs, on social, national and other grounds. Condemning the long-term terror and mass persecution of its people as incompatible with the idea of law and justice, the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation expresses deep sympathy to the victims of unjustified repression, their families and friends, and declares its unwavering desire to seek real guarantees of the rule of law and human rights."

Evil was called by name. And a legal assessment was given. For the Russian society, these legal assessments should have become both a historical and a moral guideline. At that time, we understood and hoped that this tragedy should never happen again. This was our motto: "Never again!" Just as Holocaust survivors said it after the collapse of Nazi Germany.

But how did it happen that after all this, Russian society is sliding back into a historical pit. Totalitarian methods are reappearing in Russian reality, censorship and ideological dictatorship are returning. Fear reigns in society again.

The wording of the laws turned out to be insufficient. The chance of lustration and deep reform of the political system was missed. The same “middle link” of former Communist Party leaders remained in power in Russia. The turning point was the second half of the 1990s. It was then that a line of confrontational confrontation with the West was outlined in Russian politics. The social consciousness and rudimentary habits of people, acquired by them during the 70 years of the Soviet regime, began to have a negative impact on the government and gradually led to the return of “Soviet traditionalism” and paternalism. And the Russian government, quickly catching these public sentiments, skillfully played, encouraging the nostalgic feelings of the population, calling for imperial revenge. All this became quite obvious at the very beginning of the 2000s.

Let’s see what the Soviet Union and its political system really were. The nature and foundations of the Soviet totalitarian system are fully described by several characteristic features:

Firstly, it is an ideocratic state in which ideology prevails over law, in which the state denies the value of democracy, in which human rights are trampled and unanimity is forcibly introduced.

Secondly, it is a state that asserts either the class or other superiority of its people, its special value and “uniqueness” in relation to other countries and peoples.

Thirdly, this state, by virtue of the first two signs, is building an isolationist policy, inciting national or social discord, justifying or even propagandizing war as a means of solving interstate problems.

Fourthly, it is the cult of the leader and the course towards the irremovability of power. The sacralization of power and the assertion of the “indispensability” of its leaders.

Fifth, it is a celebration of repressive practices, including extrajudicial killings. The use of violence and terror to suppress political opponents and any form of dissent.

A number of other distinctive features of the Soviet system can be distinguished. But the above, in my opinion, are the most important and defining. Today, it is

safe to say that according to all these five signs, modern Russia is moving in the opposite direction to democratic values.

And one of the important proofs of this is the history of the prosecution and political defamation of members of the Memorial society. Nanci Adler, who described the history of the Memorial in her wonderful book, told about this very well here.

Human rights activities can be considered as an essential and necessary element of civil society. A state that suppresses independent public organizations, including human rights organizations, cannot be “legal”.

It is worth considering on whose behalf the political course in our country is being carried out. It is clear, and this is reflected in the Constitution of the Russian Federation, that the source of power in our country is the people. The leaders of our country claim that they act on behalf of and at the will of the majority of the population. But if some part of our people has a different opinion and they do not agree with the current political course of Russia, do they have the right to express their point of view? After all, they, like most of the “consonants”, regularly pay taxes, and the government (governing bodies) exists, including at their expense. That is, the government should take into account their point of view. But in practice, we see that, just like that, the government does not accept their point of view at all and even persecutes them for expressing it!

But it is not only the Memorial’s human rights activities that have become a serious irritant for the Kremlin. History is another area where the real struggle for the truth is now unfolding. Of course, the Kremlin does not directly deny the fact of mass Soviet repression and millions of victims. But at the same time, he strongly encourages the rewriting of history in favor of imperial, nationalist and other ideological projects under the general motto of “patriotism”.

Today, not only long-hidden and, finally, open pages of history are being attacked, but also seemingly well-known and proven facts. Debunked myths and refuted lies are once again presented as legitimate versions of past events, or are presented as “truth”. Myth-making and attacks on history are characteristic of authoritarian regimes. New brainwashing technologies are being successfully mastered in Russia, but traditional ways of implementing historical policy are not neglected

either – with the help of school textbooks, monuments, fake symbols, et cetera.

Everything is turning inside out today. When the Supreme Court considered the Prosecutor's Office's statement on the liquidation of the International Memorial in December 2021, Prosecutor's representative Alexei Zhafyarov said that Memorial was "speculating on the topic of repression" and "creating a false image of the USSR as a terrorist state."

And this is despite the fact that, as mentioned above, there is a decision of the Constitutional Court of Russia in 1992, which clearly states the practice of violence and the unlimited power of the Communist Party based on violence. And, of course, there was a statement about the "long-term terror" in the Federal Law "On the rehabilitation of victims of political repression."

Note that these are the current legislative acts. And Memorial fully shares both the decision of the supreme judicial body of Russia and the norms of Federal law in assessing the Soviet past.

In the Supreme Court, Prosecutor Zhafyarov also made a curious curtsy to the Memorial, casually mentioning the merits of the society and the benefits of its activities, "but in the past." And immediately struck another note:

"Initially, the Memorial was created in order to restore historical truth and perpetuate the memory of victims of political repression, but we all change over time. Despite all attempts to present itself as an exclusively socially useful organization, the Memorial's activities by now are actually mainly aimed at falsifying the history of our country, at gradually reformatting the mass consciousness of the population from the memory of the winners to the need to repent for the Soviet past."

This phrase became a self-revelation: "we all change over time." An interesting recognition of someone who is ready to change principles and beliefs in favor of a political order.

Has Memorial changed? His goals and objectives are still the same as they were 30 years ago.

And today Memorial is faithful to its line, only this line has diverged from the authorities. It was not the Memorial that changed, but the government took a tilt in another, directly opposite direction – contrary to the ideas of the rule of law.

Yes, the authorities inspire modern Russian society with the idea that "we have

nothing to repent of" and we "will not allow anyone to instill in us a sense of guilt." Now it has become a program line in the field of teaching history in Russia.

Therefore, the most important action of the Memorial, which has acquired a special sound in recent years, was the "Return of Names". It is very symbolic when on the eve of the day of remembrance of political prisoners in different cities and not only in Russia, but also around the world, the names of people killed by the Soviet system are read out. This return of names is a direct reminder of the monstrous crimes of Soviet totalitarianism. I bring to your attention a short video about how this is happening now.

[video demonstration]

The Memorial is primarily about people who devote themselves to the struggle for historical truth and human rights. And despite all the persecution by the state, we, the members of the Memorial, will continue our work to return names and return to truth and human dignity.

Thank you for your attention.

—*Nikita Petrov*

DE ANNETJE FELS-KUPFERSCHMIDT ONDERSCHIEDING

WERD EERDER UITGEREIKT AAN

- » Professor Raul Hilberg [2004]
- » Judge Albie Sachs [2005]
- » Mme Simone Veil [2006]
- » Mr. Jorge Semprún [2007]
- » Mrs. Irene Khan [2008, *on behalf of Amnesty International*]
- » Judge Thomas Buergenthal [2009]
- » Mrs. Louise Arbour [2010, *on behalf of the International Crisis Group*]
- » Mr. Daniel Libeskind [2011]
- » Professor Christopher Browning [2012]
- » Mrs. Beate Klarsfeld [2013]
- » Mr. Luis Moreno Ocampo [2014]
- » Professor Abram de Swaan [2015]
- » Lieutenant-Général Roméo Dallaire [2016]
- » Professor Timothy Snyder [2017]
- » Professor dr. Deborah E. Lipstadt [2018]
- » Professor Philippe Sands [2019]
- » Mr. Joachim Gauck [2020]
- » Mrs. Deborah Dwork [2023]

De 'Nooit Meer Auschwitz Lezing' wordt jaarlijks georganiseerd door het Nederlands Auschwitz Comité in samenwerking met het NIOD, instituut voor oorlogs-, holocaust- en genocidestudies en de Sociale Verzekeringsbank.

Op de website van het Nederlands Auschwitz Comité worden samenvattingen van de lezingen gepubliceerd (www.auschwitz.nl)

AANKONDIGING

NOOIT MEER AUSCHWITZ LEZING 2025

Woensdag, 22 januari 2025

COLOFON

Dit is een uitgave van het Nederlands Auschwitz Comité, Amsterdam,
het NIOD instituut voor oorlogs-, holocaust- en genocide studies, Amsterdam en
de Sociale Verzekeringsbank, Amstelveen.

ONTWERP Yardmen bv, Amsterdam

OPLAGE 500 exemplaren

DRUKWERK Drukkerij Peters Amsterdam bv