State secrets and concealed bodies: exhumations of Soviet-era victims in contemporary Russia¹

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Introduction

This chapter discusses the search for, exhumation, and identification of the remains of victims of mass political repression during the Stalinist Great Terror (1937–38) in the USSR. It does not consider those who died in the concentration camps and prisons of the Gulag system, but concentrates rather on those who were subjected to the severest form of repression, that is, those who were shot following sentencing during judicial or extrajudicial processes.

Such sentences were, as a rule, carried out in the place where the investigation had occurred and the sentence was passed, i.e. in those cities that had prisons where the people under investigation could be held. In particular, these tended to be administrative centres at the district, regional, or republic level.

The need to conceal the facts and the locations of these unlawful executions, combined with their large scale during the years of the Great Terror, when in a single night several dozen or even several hundred people might be killed, led to the creation of a network of unmarked burial pits into which the corpses of the executed were thrown, and then covered over.² These pits are known to be widespread, a fact corroborated by the accidental discovery of such mass graves in many regions of the former Soviet Union. There were many discoveries during the periods of *glasnost* and *perestroika* at the end of the 1980s. The best known of these are: the Butovo and

Kommunarka cemeteries in the Moscow region, the Levashovskii religious sanctuary and Kovalevskii forest in the St Petersburg region, the Kuropaty rocks near Minsk, the village of Bykovnia near Kiev, the Rutchenkovskoe field in Donetsk, Piatikhatki in Kharkov, Zolotaya Gora in Chelyabinsk, Kolpashevskii ravine near Tomsk, and the Medvedevskii forest near Oryol.³

As such, it is unsurprising that in 1989 such burial pits were discovered in the Voronezh region and in Voronezh itself. Voronezh was the administrative centre of the 6-million-strong Central Black Earth region of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, which existed between 1928 and 1934, 500 kilometres to the south of Moscow. Within the modern-day boundaries of the region, such burials are to be found in the regional centres of Boguchar, Bobrov, Borisoglebsk, Ostrogozhsk, and Novokhopersk. However, to date, only in Boguchar and Voronezh have any burial pits been opened and remains exhumed.⁴

In the Voronezh region, a memorial zone in the small village of Dubovka marks the main location in which the remains of victims shot during the period of political repression and mass state terror have been discovered and exhumed. Dubovka is located 35 kilometres from the city centre, in its Zheleznodorozhnyi region, in the urban district of Somovo. Between 1989 and 2013, sixty-two pits were opened. From these, the remains of 2,890 people have been exhumed and reburied in the memorial zone.⁵

In the early 1990s, the remains of victims of repression were disinterred from pits in the city of Bobrov. No attempt at research was made and the remains were conveyed to dedicated ground outside the city, where a monument now stands. In 1989, in the village of Podgornoe (which stands within the city limits of Voronezh) two pits were discovered, from which the remains of sixty-nine people were disinterred.⁶ In June 2007, in Boguchar in the south of the Voronezh region, five pits were opened, from which the remains of twenty-one people were disinterred. They were reinterred on 3 August 2007, in the city's public cemetery.⁷

As this then shows, the scale of work done in Voronezh is sufficiently impressive to be worthy of our attention in this chapter.

The discovery of mass graves at in Voronezh and the investigation of their contents

For the sake of brevity, we will consider issues of searching for, disintering, identifying, and reintering remains disinterred from

concealed burial pits all to be aspects of exhumation, thus giving the latter term a broad construction.

Ever since the collapse of Soviet power in the USSR and the beginning of democratization, those events have been the constant object of public attention, being among the most important events in the twentieth-century history of the country. Political and legal assessments of the communist terror plus the question of how to destalinize society were the subject of unceasing discussions between their respective supporters and opponents.

However, in this instance, it is to a great extent the 'technical' side of the matter that will be of most interest; in particular, the following questions:

- Why – to what end were the exhumations carried out, and how were their results then used?
- Who – who was the driving force behind the exhumations, and who carried them out?
- How – how did the exhumations occur? What techniques were used in searching for, disinterring, and identifying the remains of victims of political repression in Voronezh?

These questions are closely interlinked, and answering them will prove easier by following an outline of what, and when it, happened.

Seventy-five years ago, during the so-called Great Terror, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued a decree dated 3 July 1937 and entitled 'On Anti-Soviet elements', which was signed by Stalin. There followed an operational order made by the then head of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (the law enforcement agency of the Soviet Union, hereafter NKVD), Nikolai Ezhov, introducing a simplified judicial process to be implemented by the troikas on the ground. This ushered in a period of mass murder, in which as many as several dozen people could be shot over the course of a single night.⁸

By far the largest proportion of victims in Voronezh were shot in the cellars of the NKVD building in the centre of the city. Their corpses were secretly transferred to specially selected sites outside the city, and thrown into pits. One such site was hilly, sandy, and in places marshy, being part of the flood-plain of the River Usmanka, which adjoins the territory of NKVD training camps in the village of Dubovka. In the early 1950s, these sites were planted with pine forest, which formed a natural camouflage for burial pits containing the bodies of several thousand people.⁹

These burials remained secret for fifty years. In 1989, several residents of the village of Somovo wrote to a local newspaper describing how in February 1938 they had witnessed bodies being dumped into a pit somewhere near Dubovka. Journalists picked up on the story, and ran a campaign calling for the Voronezh mass graves to be investigated.¹⁰

On 3 August 1989, a group consisting of local newspaper correspondent V. M. Kotenko, deputy chief of the Committee for State Security (KGB) A. K. Nikiforov, searchers from an organization called Rif (Reef), the local historical museum in Voronezh, and members of the civil organization Memorial, together with I. A. Tekutev, one of the original witnesses, examined the forest at Dubovka. On 6 September 1989, the first pit was discovered by searchers from Rif.¹¹

Clearly, the 1989 discovery of human remains in this area necessitated their disinterment in the interests of an investigation, and so an exhumation in the narrow sense of the word took place. For precisely this reason, on 9 September 1989, in the presence of a great number of journalists, as well as Voronezh region KGB officers and members of interested civil organizations (namely Rif and Memorial), the pit discovered on 6 September was opened and the remains of forty-two people were removed.¹²

On 13 September 1989, A. V. Kosyakin, an investigator from the State Prosecutor's Office in the Zheleznodorozhnyi region of Voronezh, examined the material pertaining to the discovery of these human remains in the forest near Somovo. The nature of the gunshot wounds (without exception, these were to the back of the head) pointed clearly to the cause of death being execution. Analysis of shell-cases found in the pits established that some of them were designed for the 1895 pattern 7.62 calibre Nagan revolver, and that all of them were made in the Tula ammunition factory no later than 1936.¹³

Incontrovertible proof of the fact that the victims of mass Stalinist terror discovered were peaceful residents, ordinary Soviet citizens, came from the fact that the Somovo district was not occupied during the war. Furthermore, the nature of clothing and footwear remnants ruled out the possibility that this might be a military burial site, such as for prisoners of war who had died of their wounds in hospital or the like. Indeed, the most widespread finds were of rubber overshoes from small manufacturers, which were worn over felt boots or leather shoes in rain and snow. There was a variety of shoes, including women's shoes, home-made footwear, and even bast sandals.¹⁴

Since there were indications that a crime had been committed at the sites which had been examined, the investigator concluded that a criminal investigation should take place, which he proposed to pursue himself, and that preliminary enquiries should begin. After this, the searches and excavations were on an official footing, although they took place with active public support, from members of Rif, the local historical museum and Voronezh Memorial, joined by teaching staff from Voronezh State University and a large group of employees from the Voronezh regional history museum. By 18 October 1989, eleven pits had been discovered.¹⁵

Given the large scale and public importance of the investigation, on 2 November it was handed over to the Voronezh Regional State Prosecutor's Office, where it was taken up by senior investigator V. D. Likhachev on 20 November. The investigation had as its objectives: to establish the causes and circumstances of death; to establish the particular crimes committed; and to identify those responsible.

A Voronezh KGB inquiry established that 252 personnel from the Voronezh region NKVD were directly implicated in signing off and carrying out unlawful sentences of capital punishment, death by shooting: investigators, warders, administrative staff, drivers, and others.¹⁶ Investigations and evidence further suggested that twenty-seven former NKVD personnel were directly implicated in the actual shootings. But, as the investigator declared, '8 of these are dead, while the location of 18 is unknown'. For this reason, the case was closed.

Of the ninety-seven former NKVD personnel in the Voronezh region who may, as a result of the nature of their role, have known the burial locations of those who had been shot, ten had died. The whereabouts of sixty-six were unknown. Seven were questioned, with no result, while questioning of the others 'proved impossible due to their advanced age and poor health'. Charges were not brought against anyone following the death of those responsible, and on 14 June 1992 the criminal investigation into the mass burials discovered in the Somovo region was closed 'due to the absence of perpetrators'.¹⁷

Nonetheless, the investigations that followed the exhumations established the burials as arising from the execution of victims of political repression by NKVD organs in Voronezh during the Great Terror of 1937–39.¹⁸ This carried great socio-political importance during a period in which Soviet dictatorship was being overthrown in the USSR. As the investigation continued, information was received about the existence of similar secret burial sites in other cities in

the Voronezh region: Borisoglebsk, Boguchar, and Bobrov. The lack at that time of documentary evidence supporting the fact of mass executions in the provinces greatly increased the role of exhumation in the formation of public awareness of the methods of governmental control to which the communists had resorted. And this can be understood as one of the purposes behind the exhumation of the victims of political repression.

Meanwhile, digging continued. By the end of 1989, eleven pits had been discovered, and the remains of 465 people had been disinterred. Voronezh city council decree no. 174-R, dated 23 June 1990, entitled 'On the conduct of work connected with investigations into the mass executions of people between 1930 and 1950' not only allowed such excavations to continue, but also obliged public institutions to provide transport, tools, and materials for such work.¹⁹ At the same time, council decree no. 276, dated 16 September 1990, created a commission to organize a commemorative rally and the reinterment of the remains of victims of political repression.

The first reinterments took place on Saturday 13 October 1990. Through the efforts of regional and city commissions for the restoration of justice for the victims of political repression, and of the general public, 437 people were reinterred. They were interred in coffins which were lowered back into the pits from which the remains had been exhumed. Memorial plaques were placed on the burial mounds, bearing the inscription 'Here lie the remains of 437 people'.²⁰

The ceremony was accompanied by a large-scale commemorative rally and an Orthodox service amidst a great throng of people. Metropolitan Mefodija of Voronezh and Lipetsk attended, while the city and regional leadership were represented by A. N. Tsapin and I. M. Shabanov, respectively.

Work in Dubovka continued in 1990 and 1991, overseen by the young and energetic deputy chairman of the city council, B. A. Artemov. At his suggestion, on 6 November 1991, the city council created a temporary committee for the commemoration of the victims of mass repression, to be headed by Artemov himself. At the same time, the scientific research and investigative group Memorial was created, working directly on the excavations in Dubovka. The group was joined by members of Rif; by the legal expert I. M. Porokhnevich, deputy head of the search team centre; by regional history museum staff N. V. Dushutin and A. V. Kirianov; by engineer K. A. Ratushnyi and by students from Voronezh State University. On October Days in 1991 and 1992, the burial ceremonies were

repeated. By this stage, in all, twenty-four pits had been opened, and the remains of 924 people had been exhumed.²¹

Disillusionment with the results of the country's experimentation with democracy in the middle and late 1990s led to diminishing public interest in criticizing the communist regime and commemorating its victims. The exhumations in Dubovka ceased. Questions as to the whole point of the exercise took on exaggerated importance.

However, after a delay of fourteen years, in 2006, digging resumed. To a great extent, this was linked to the ousting of communists from positions of authority, and the arrival in office as the governor of the Voronezh region of V. G. Kulakov, who, as unlikely as it sounds, was a former head of the NKVD; also to the ascendance of Metropolitan Sergei of Voronezh and Borisoglebsk, who ran the diocese, and likewise the appearance in post of a conscientious secretary to the regional administration's commission for the restoration of rights to rehabilitated victims of political repression: the dynamic V. A. Sych. At his initiative, and with the active participation of search organizations and Memorial, on 4 August 2006 the remains of 255 people,²² exhumed from six pits, were reinterred in tombs in the newly created Alley of Sorrow, in the central section of the memorial zone.

On that same day, at the burial site, Metropolitan Sergei blessed the foundation stone of a chapel to be built in memory of the blameless victims of execution. In all, in 2006, the remains of 399 people were exhumed from nine pits and reinterred.²³

In autumn 2007, thanks to the efforts of the civilian search organizations Brig and Don,²⁴ and with the untiring participation of Memorial, the remains of 336 people were disinterred from six pits in Dubovka. The name of one of the innocent victims was established. This was a priest, I. A. Dukhovskoi, born in 1887. A document pertaining to his arrest that by some chance had been preserved and then discovered in the pit allowed the names of forty-seven other people shot alongside him on 17 December 1937 to be established.²⁵ In this manner, one of the tombs in Dubovka ceased to be anonymous.

On 8 August 2008, 206 people found their final resting places in three graves, and a further eighty-nine did so on 30 October, 2009. On 30 October 2010, the date which had been officially designated back in 1991 as the date of commemoration for the victims of political repression, 238 people were buried, while a further 170 were buried on 18 August 2011. Their total number now stood at 2,362.²⁶

The forest fires of the hot summer of 2010 did not bypass the memorial zone. The fire passed along a strip from the main road to

the Usmanka River, a tributary of the River Don. The great majority of the graves, including the Alley of Sorrow, remained practically untouched. But several pits were revealed on the site of the burnt forest, which had taken on the look of a lumber yard. The majestic forest had been transformed into an ugly wasteland of burnt tree stumps and timber waste, useless for building with.

The future of the memorial zone, which is a unique historical monument to the Stalin era, is a cause for serious concern. Following its transformation into a lifeless timber desert, it faces being chopped down. This process has already begun. And yet there are dozens of unmarked mass graves here remaining to be discovered. What will happen on the plots of land that have been hived off from the forest? In whose ownership will they end up? Is economic activity not likely to destroy this sacred place of commemoration of the victims of repression? These questions remain unanswered.

The opening of three pits in 2010 was marked by a grisly record: the remains of sixty-four, eighty, and as many as ninety-four people in the last, were disinterred from them. Work in 2011 was carried out in accordance with the 'Memory' project, drawn up by the Voronezh city commission on restoring the rights of the victims of political repression, and agreed with the corresponding Voronezh regional government commission, with input from the historical and patriotic association Don and from the civic organization Voronezh Memorial. The plan for this year was not only to exhume remains from several pits that had been located, but also to establish the boundaries of the entire memorial zone – no easy task, but of the utmost importance if the cemetery is to receive official status as a historical monument. The first part of the work was completed: the Don association excavated five pits in the memorial zone, from which the remains of 170 people were exhumed. By this stage, in total, fifty-three pits had been discovered, and as of 18 August, the remains of 2,362 executed prisoners had been reinterred.²⁷

In 2012, that same Don association, led by M. M. Sigodin, and Voronezh Memorial worked together on the excavation of seven burial pits, from which were exhumed the remains of Voronezh residents shot by the Voronezh NKVD during the Great Terror. As usual, items associated with day-to-day existence in prison were recovered from the pits: mugs, toothbrushes, remnants of rotted clothes and footwear. Also, several dozen shell-cases, buttons, and small Orthodox crosses of the executed. But one particular find can only be described as curious – a rusty Nagan revolver in its holster. Most likely, it belonged to one of the executioners.

In one of the pits, a crumpled, half-rotted sheet of paper was discovered. This was a copy of a search report, filled out during the arrest and given to the person who was subsequently executed. The printed text on the paper fragment can be easily made out (it transpires printer's ink lasts very well), in particular, the headline of a table, which reads 'Description of items, valuables and documents'. There was also a fragment which read 'Everything is correctly listed in the warrant, and has been read to us, in attestation of which, we sign', followed by the signatures of witnesses.²⁸ It can be asserted with some confidence that the first name of the condemned began with the letter 'M'. This could greatly ease the search for the full name of the victim, by comparing the recovered fragment with the original document, which will be in the archived dossier on the as-yet unidentified victim. However, the fact that the archive of such dossiers is closed will not allow this identification work to proceed.

On 30 October 2012, the remains of a further 320 martyrs were laid to rest following an Orthodox ceremony. The overall total of people interred, in sixty tombs, now reached 2,681. Finally, 2013, saw the recovery of a further 208 sets of remains, to be interred in October. The total has now reached 2,890. A grim new record of 108 people in one pit has been set.²⁹

Such is the story of how this unique memorial cemetery came to exist, while still not having official status or clear perimeters, nor yet even a fence.

Techniques used in searching for and opening burial pits: removing, researching, and identifying objects and reintering human remains

Even the brief description of events surrounding the exhumation of the victims of political repression in Voronezh allows us to begin formulating answers to the questions posed earlier, namely: why? To what end were the exhumations carried out, and how were their results then used? Who? Who was the driving force behind the exhumations, and who carried them out? How? How were the exhumations carried out? What techniques were used in searching for, recovering, and identifying the remains of victims of political repression?

Searching for pits is done using the very simplest of apparatus to inspect the 6 square kilometres of the memorial zone, namely: two right-angled lengths of 3-millimetre-diameter aluminium wire

('dowsing rods'), and flexible steel probes which are 8 millimetres in diameter and 2 metres in length. The searcher holds one dowsing rod in each hand, in a loose pistol grip. Places where the soil density changes can be established by observing their behaviour, suggesting the existence of sites where a burial pit may potentially be located. Further exploration of the site is done using the probe, which penetrates the upper layer of the soil until it comes into contact with a skeleton. The presence of any remains, the depth at which they lie, and the extent of the pit is established by listening for characteristic sounds and by the sensation of hardness of the object with which the probe has made contact. Further checks are made by means of an inspection shaft: two ditches running at right angles to each other are dug down to the depth at which the upper layer of remains lies. After this, it is possible to embark on the opening of the pit.³⁰

Notwithstanding the primitive nature of the techniques just described, they almost never lead to errors being made. We do not know of a single instance when the probe has indicated the presence of a pit, only for this not to be corroborated by the presence of human remains. A different matter is the possibility of overlooking unmarked burial pits, and it must not be assumed that all pits in the zone explored up to now have been completely accounted for.

We are undertaking attempts to establish the positions of pits using aerial photographs of the memorial zone, taken by German reconnaissance aircraft in 1942 and now held by the National Archives and Records Administration in New York.

Once it is clear that there are remains, the searchers begin to remove the top layer of soil, and to extract tree stumps. Then begins the gradual removal of skeletal remains and other objects (fragments of clothing and footwear, and the day-to-day objects of prison life: mugs, spoons, combs, toothbrushes, soap dishes, coins, cigarette holders and pipes, etc.). Small metallic objects are recovered from the soil with the aid of a metal detector.

Skeletal remains are photographed and analysed with the aim of identifying bullet wounds in the skull. The number of executed people in the pit is calculated according to the quantity of thigh bones.

Identifying individuals is only possible if fragments of documentation are discovered. Such cases have occurred; however, they are exceptionally rare. And so we have begun attempts to develop a method of group identification, i.e. to associate the contents of burial pits with individuals named in lists of those condemned.³¹ For such identification to be possible, it is necessary to determine the gender

and age of the executed through features of the skeleton, which can in principle be done as part of medical/judicial post-mortem examinations. On the other hand, it is necessary to have access to the execution lists, but these are held in archives which are closed to us. It is also necessary to have knowledge of the regulations governing executions, and the transportation of corpses.

Given these conditions and, perhaps, a little good will, in those situations where the executions and burials involved groups of people, hope may be preserved that the 'curse of anonymity' might one day be lifted from the memorial cemeteries of the victims of political terror. This applies to the memorial cemetery in the village of Dubovka.

The implications of the graves for contemporary Russian society

From the point of view of legality and due process, any report of crime, and still more the discovery of human remains, demands investigation in order to establish the identity of the person, the cause of death, whether there are any clear signs of crime, and whether, in the interests of justice, a criminal investigation should be launched.

However, in the context of contemporary Russia, which is still searching to discover the direction its future development will take, the exhumation of victims of repression at the hands of the previous regime has special significance for both the public and the leadership in the country. The faith in the rightness and ideals of communist ideology that was implanted in the minds of Soviet citizens, along with the idealization of the actual communist past and the significant effort to draw a veil over its darker sides, transforms exhumation into a political act aimed at enabling a deeper understanding of the historical processes of the past. The exhumation of burial pits containing the victims of mass communist terror and the creation of a memorial cemetery to the victims allows us to put a completely different slant on the words of Mayakovsky in his poem 'To Comrade Nette – the steamship and the man':

Communism on paper seems dreary,
All sorts of old nonsense gets printed.
What you did gives sudden life to dry theory:
The true nature of Communism unstinted.³²

In the awareness of the burial pits, the poet's panegyric to individual belief in the communist idea turns its monstrous side to us, a side

which has become impossible to conceal or deny, no matter which theoretical tracts might be resorted to. Linked with this aim is also the goal of forming objectivity in the public's memory of past events, in particular of communist terror, as a real consequence of the use of extrajudicial violence as a means of exerting state control.

It should likewise not be forgotten that the results of exhumations can act as primary sources for further historical research into the Great Terror, and, given the continuing lack of access to archives, they are in fact often the sole sources. In the Russian context of continued secrecy surrounding the burial sites of executed victims of political repression, and constant resistance from the relevant state institutions to their archived material being used for research into this matter, exhumations are almost the sole source of data available when researching issues around the mass imposition of capital punishment during the years of the Great Terror. By way of illustration, when conducting searches for burial sites in the Voronezh region, searchers have been unable to consult any documents at all, relying instead exclusively on the testimony of a handful of witnesses and their own experience of surveying and inspecting potential sites where the remains of executed victims may be concealed.

On the other hand, the results of the exhumations have posed many questions to the researchers, such as, for example, how secrecy was maintained around the executions given the necessity of large-scale earth-moving and transportation operations in order to bury the victims; how it was that objects have been discovered in the mass graves which could not have been in the cells of the accused. One example of such objects is a large silver cross discovered in one of the pits.³³

Despite the exceptionally rare nature of those instances where a set of remains has been identified or the exact name and place of burial of an executed victim has been established, we still cannot deny the significance of such outcomes for the relatives of the deceased.

There is also an ethical and moral imperative to exhumation, linked to the awareness of the need to return human remains to the earth in accordance with the customs and creeds that obtain in society. In particular, in Russia, the tenets of Orthodoxy that have taken root dictate that an unmarked pit may not be considered a proper place of burial for an Orthodox Christian, and that any remains within one require reinterment with all due ceremony, which in turn requires exhumation.

For twenty-three years in a row, now, on the Russian day of commemoration for the victims of political repression, 30 October,

memorial services have been held at the Dubovka cemetery. These are organized by the city administration with the help of the clergy, of Voronezh Memorial, and with support from search teams, civic organizations, Cossack associations, students at the military aviation institute, Voronezh cadets, and with the participation of relatives of the deceased and of other victims of political repression. And every year, on 30 October, everyone in whom the memory of repression is still alive – the now-adult children and grandchildren of the tortured and executed, members of Memorial, schoolchildren, and students – all gather at the Spartak cinema in Voronezh, from where they set out for Dubovka to take part in the sombre reinterment ceremony, and in the rally commemorating the victims of political repression. And this, too, is to be understood as one outcome of the searches and exhumations.

As is clear from what has been said, from 1989 to the present, the driving force behind the exhumation and reinterment of the victims of political repression has undoubtedly been democratic society: journalists, civic groups and repressed people's organizations, and search organizations, including Voronezh Memorial. It is on these groups that the city and regional administrations rely, providing public funds for them to conduct searches, exhumations, and reinterments. Annual expenditure on these activities does not exceed 500,000–700,000 roubles (\$20,000–25,000). No more than 40 per cent of this amount goes on search and exhumation work.³⁴

Regarding the organization of the reinterments, transportation for the participants in the rally at Dubovka is provided by the Voronezh city administration. The memorial plaques on the tombs are made possible by funds from the regional budget. Technical help with the organization of the reinterments comes from the Somovo district management committee, and public utility services in the city of Voronezh. The ceremonial aspect of the reinterment is overseen by the Voronezh diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The people actually conducting the searches for the unmarked burial pits are members of civilian organizations, whose main focus is searching for the remains of soldiers from both the Soviet army and the enemy army who were killed during the Second World War and remained where they fell on the battlefield. These organizations include those mentioned earlier: the diving and search club Rif, which was actively involved in the search for burial pits between 1989 and 1992; the Voronezh city youth organization Brig took part in searches and excavations until 2010. After this date, such work has been done exclusively by the historical and patriotic

search association Don, a Voronezh regional civic organization, and the Centre of Search Technology. None of these organizations is professional, although they possess both the necessary permits and plenty of experience in conducting searches and exhumations. They are focused on the search for victims and places of interest from the war of 1941–45, and so digging for the victims of political repression is not one of their regular activities. The Don association has its own premises where discovered items can be preserved and exhibited.

Between 1989 and 1992, the Voronezh regional history museum took an active part in the excavations, collecting and exhibiting finds from burial pits.³⁵ Unfortunately, the museum has in effect ceased to take an active role following the resumption of digs in 2006. A regular participant on a voluntary basis is the Voronezh city historical and educational organization Memorial. Its aims include observing and describing excavations, and publishing information gained as a result of the digs, as well as archival work on findings from previous excavations.

The future for the Dubovka memorial zone and the excavations' legacy

What are the outcomes and the prospects for further searches, exhumations, and identifications in the memorial zone we have been describing?

The Dubovka memorial zone has transformed into a unique memorial cemetery for the victims of political repression in Russia. The significance of such historical places for commemorating victims of political repression in central Russia is indisputable. According to both researchers and searchers there still remain at least several thousand more people buried in the region in unmarked pits. It should be borne in mind that in the 1930s, Voronezh region also included the Tambov, Lipetsk, Kursk, and Belgorod regions. Voronezh was, in the 1930s, a place of exile for many figures who had been repressed for political reasons, including those exiled from the Central Asian republics, Georgia, and Armenia.³⁶ Those on Stalin's lists of condemned people found their final resting-place here: Party members, Soviet officials, and economic managers in the Central Black Earth region, as well as members of the intelligentsia, from both arts and sciences, plus thousands of ordinary workers from the villages and towns of the region.

Meanwhile, despite the efforts of the Voronezh region the proper ratification of the Dubovka cemetery's status as a historical monument has proven impossible: the scale of the work required for this is too large: there needs to be a thorough search made, using modern search methods, in order to conclusively discover all the burial pits and to reinter all the remains found within. By this means, the precise boundaries of the memorial zone will be established, which will provide a solid justification for removing cemetery land from the property market and transferring it into the care of appropriate institutions.

The land assigned for the memorial cemetery must be given a suitable appearance. A border fence is vital. The tombs should be renovated, and then maintained in an appropriate manner. A structure should be erected within the cemetery on which the names of the executed can be read.

Furthermore, the natural destruction and neglect of the memorial zone (from forest fires and construction work on commercial and private residential buildings) is leading to the loss of a unique monument to the victims of political repression in central Russia.

Judging by the experience of the past twenty-three years, it seems that this outcome can only be avoided if Dubovka is included in the list of Russian memorial sites which are supported by the 'Federal Programme to Commemorate the Victims of Political Repression'.³⁷ Following a presidential decree, under the auspices of this programme, a working group on historical memory is being developed within the Russian President's council for the development of civil society and human rights. A proposal to include Dubovka in this programme has been made to the working group by Voronezh Memorial and the Voronezh regional government. And we hope that the publication of this chapter will further increase the likelihood that this monument to the victims of communist terror will be added to the list of sites supported by that federal programme.

Notes

- 1 Translation from the author's Russian by Dr Ian Appleby.
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- 3 A list of monuments to the victims of political repression. Database 'Pamiatniki zhertvam politicheskikh repressii na territorii byvshego SSSR' (Monuments to the victims of political repression on the territory of the former USSR), The Andrei Sakharov 'Peace, Progress and Human Rights' Museum and Social Centre. www.vainahkrz.kz/e/2382177-spi-sok-pamyatnoikov-zhertv-politrepessiy (accessed 17 February 2014).
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