



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Memorial (Russia)

(2004)



Memorial representatives
in Stockholm

...for showing, in traumatic times, the importance of understanding the historical roots of human rights abuse, to secure respect for them in the future.

Memorial is the short name of the International Volunteer Public Organisation Memorial Historical Educational, Human Rights and Charitable Society. It was founded at the end of the 1980s as a result of a major movement in October 1988, which took the form of Initiative Groups appearing in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other cities. The union of regional Memorial societies was the first non-political NGO not organised by the state in Russia's recent history. Its first leader was Andrei Sakharov. Today Memorial unites 89 organisations: in many regions of Russia, in Ukraine, in Poland, Latvia, Germany, Kazakhstan and Italy. Its 18-member Board of Directors is elected every 4 years at a conference of all Memorial member organisations.

As embodied in its Charter, Memorial's "primary missions" are:

- To promote mature civil society and democracy based on the rule of law and thus to prevent a return to totalitarianism;
- To assist formation of public consciousness based on the values of democracy and law, to get rid of totalitarian patterns, and to establish firmly human rights in practical politics and in public life;
- To promote the revelation of the truth about the historical past and perpetuate the memory of the victims of political repression exercised by totalitarian regimes.

Memorial's work falls into three main areas:

1. Creating a historical memory about the crimes committed by the Soviet regime through research and publications.

Memorial has built an enormous network of archives specialized in the field of historical research into totalitarian repression that are open to the public. This work is co-ordinated by the Moscow-based 'Scientific-Informational and Enlightenment Center, Memorial', which has 75,000 documents and 23,000 books, and paintings and graphic works by GULAG prisoners. Many of the Memorial regional branches also have archives and museums. Near the city of Perm in the North West Urals Memorial has built the only existing museum of a Soviet concentration camp on the site of the last camp for political prisoners. Memorial's archive includes 400,000 letters from 'Ostarbeiter' (people taken as slave labour to Germany during the Second World War), and has published CDs

with brief details of political prisoners - the most recent, 2 CDs entitled Victims of Political Terror, was published in 2004 and also released at the 2004 Frankfurt Book Fair. They contain records and short histories of about 1.3 million people of 120 ethnic origins born in all areas of the USSR, who were killed by the Soviet regime. Memorial estimates that this accounts for only about 10% of the total number. In Russia Memorial organises an annual essay competition about "the life experience of man and family against the background of the 20th century history". About 3,000 entries are received every year.

On the basis of its archives Memorial has also published the so-called Stalin Lists, with the names of 44,000 people executed on the personal order of Stalin. Memorial also campaigns for the victims of political repression to receive compensation from the state.

2. Social work for the victims of the Soviet regime and their relatives.

Examples of Memorial's work in this area include the organisation of meetings, care for the elderly, and medical help for victims; provision of care for people who have been raised in KGB children's homes, because their fathers had been shot as alleged traitors and their mothers detained; and helping victims to enforce their rights under the act on the rehabilitation of the politically prosecuted.

This act is presently under review, and the moral responsibility of the Russian state for the Soviet crimes, which Memorial had helped to include in the law when it was enacted in 1993, will probably be deleted. They are now trying to prevent this. There is also currently a proposal that the special benefits granted to the politically prosecuted (like free use of public transport etc.) should be replaced by direct payments. Memorial has calculated that these would be worth less than the benefits and is campaigning to maintain the benefits.

3. Human rights work in present-day Russia.

Memorial monitors the situation in so-called 'hot spots' of actual or potential conflict and human rights abuse - Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Tajikistan, Turkmenia, Moldavia, Crimea (Ukraine) and, in Russia, North Ossetia, Krasnodar region, and Ingushetia. Since 1994 Memorial's main focus for this work has been Chechnya. Memorial also generally monitors 'contemporary political repression' in the former territories of USSR, analyses and seeks judicial assistance for displaced people in Russia and works for equal rights for national minorities in several regions in Russia. Specific examples of Memorial's work in this area include giving legal assistance and lobbying support on behalf of refugees from Chechnya and from 'older' conflict regions like Armenia and Azerbaijan or Afghanistan (from the time after the Russian invasion); and publishing reports of, and campaigning against human rights violations in Russia, especially in Chechnya. They have five offices in and around Chechnya, with four offices in Grosny, and publish a monthly web documentation about the disappeared and about 'cleansings' that have taken place.

There are three different units of about the same size in Memorial for these three different fields. Some staff members are very much specialised in one field, e.g. historians working with the documentary work. However, as much of the work is project based, there is some internal fluctuation of staff, when a project in one field is running out and another one starting in another field.

The rationale that links these three different work areas of Memorial is that the documentation of past violations of human rights is connected with the present human rights situation, because historical knowledge is needed to sensitise people for present and future abuses, and to understand present conflicts better. They have all along kept the three fields together in one organization rather than separating them, because they view the connection of the three aspects as their specific strength. In the public perception, Memorial is mainly known for their present-day human rights work.

Memorial's work can be dangerous. Its office in Petersburg was attacked in 2003 and 2004. In 2004, the Memorial member and expert on minority rights Prof. Girenko was shot dead in his flat in Petersburg, probably by a right wing group. He had given testimony in cases against right wing extremists. There have also been repeated anonymous threats on the life of Wladimir Schnittke, head of Memorial Petersburg.

In April 2002, Memorial received the Lew-Kopelew-Award for peace and human rights in Cologne, and in June 2003 Svetlana Gannushkina, who is head of the legal network at Memorial and works with legal advice to refugees and displaced persons, received a human rights prize from the German Amnesty section. In 2004 Memorial's Human Rights Centre received the UNHCR's Nansen Refugee Award for helping dozens of thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons. In June 2004 Memorial received the National Endowment for Democracy Award in Washington DC.

Quotation

The spirit of our work is the fight for truth and law. Attempts to comprehend the past and to find answers to present-day challenges are indispensable elements of this fight.

Elena Zhemkova, Memorial

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