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**THE TRAGEDIES OF SANDARMOKH:
FROM AN ANTI-STALIN CULT
TO AN ANTI-PUTIN PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN***

FOREWORD

There is not much positive to say about the debate over the mass graves of Sandarmokh. Found in the late 1990s, the Sandarmokh forest in Karelian Republic, Russia, contains hundreds of mass graves. In 1997, the activists of the anti-communist organization “Memorial”, which is known to be financed from abroad, launched an anti-Stalin political cult around the graves, claiming they contain approximately 10000 victims of political terror of the late 1930s representing 58 nationalities. However, later professional Russian historians suggested the Sandarmokh graves might contain political prisoners executed or starved by Finns, who occupied Karelia during 1941–1944.

Exhumations were carried out in Sandarmokh in three phases: first in 1997 lead by “Memorial”-linked amateurs, later in 2018 and 2019 by search groups assisted by the Russian army. Exhumed bodies were given to Investigative Committee of Russia (equivalent of FBI in the U.S.) and results were published in August 2020. They showed that the Sandarmokh had 342 grave pits, of which 60% were empty and the rest contained up to 2000 bodies. The 16 exhumed bodies were 25–35 years of age, including females, buried in Soviet army clothes. Engravings in the shells point at Finnish army during the 1940s.

Thus the mystery of Sankarmokh was solved. But there was another tragedy: the fierce fight between the Russian liberals and Russian professional historians, and the aggressive anti-Putin propaganda in the Finnish anti-Russian press to defend the anti-Stalin cult of Sandarmokh. The fact is that the

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Sandarmokh issue was not only the bitterest history dispute, but also the most politicized, and the most aggressive debate concerning a concrete historical event, for more than 20 years.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to investigate three issues: 1) Who is buried in the mass graves of Sandarmokh forest in Karelia? 2) What kind of cult has been created around these mass graves? and 3) Who is behind the anti-Putin propaganda campaign against the scientific investigation of the graves?

The hypothesis is to say that there is in fact dual tragedy in this: 1) the tragedy of thousand innocent victims being executed or starved and buried unknown in mass graves, and 2) the tragic way of how these victims are abused by the liberal media and politicians in building a fake cult around the grave site for political purposes, in order to accuse the Russian state of falsifying and white-washing the history of political repression. A sub-version of the second tragedy of political abuse is the Finnish approach to the issue, claiming that a thousand Finns would be buried in Sandarmokh (or that up to 20,000 Finns would have been executed in political terror of the late 1930s).

There is huge amount of propagandistic information available about Sandarmokh in the Russian liberal media and Finnish media, claiming that Sandarmokh is the execution and burial site of up to 10000 victims of 58 nationalities. This cult also includes the idea that this version cannot be disputed, and if that happens, it would be an attempt to white-wash Stalinist crimes by the Putin regime. This version has been delivered worldwide in several “New York Times” articles, as well as materials in the Finnish tabloid “Ilta-Sanomat”, belonging to the anti-Russian media holding “Sanoma Corporation”. Also “The Washington Post” has joined the campaign.

However, for a long time, there was no scientific historiography about the Sandarmokh issue available, until in 2019, when Karelian professor Sergei Verigin and Karelian journalist Armas Mashin published their book titled “The Riddle of Sandarmokh”, on archival findings and analysis of politicized debate on Sandarmokh¹. The main problem is, that there is no primary source nor any kind of evidence showing, that victims of political terror of the late 1930s would have been executed and buried in Sandarmokh. However the logic of the creators of the anti-Stalin cult of Sandarmokh is, that most victims of political terror of the 1930s in Karelia, would have been buried in Sandarmokh.

In her book “Never Remember” (2018), Masha Gessen investigates also the Sandarmokh issue, explaining how “Memorial” activists Veniamin Iofe and Irina Flige identified the graves in 1997, on the basis of archival documents,

pointing at Solovki camp prisoners executed near Medvezhyegorsk in Russian Karelia. However, there is no indisputable evidence pointing at Sandarmokh as their burial site, not to mention that 10000 victims of 58 nationalities would have been buried there².

The first publication concerning Sandarmokh and the starting point for constructing the anti-Stalin cult, was a Russian-language book titled “Execution Site Sandarmokh” (1999), published by Karelian authorities and activists. The book contains lists of executed individuals compiled from the local archives. Significant part of the book is written in Finnish and consists of a listing of executed Finns. Although the publication claims all the individuals mentioned in the book were executed in Sandarmokh, even the editor of the book gives rather hesitating statement in the preface: “[...]I cannot give an official conclusion that they were shot in Sandarmokh. I know they’re there, but I can’t prove it”³. This is a clear evidence of the fact that even the creators of the cult did not have evidence that the Sandarmokh mass graves contain executed victims of political terror. But who are the victims then? Who is buried in Sandarmokh, why they were buried there, and why did they die?

THE KILIN-VERIGIN HYPOTHESIS AND ANTI-PUTIN REVENGE

The issue of Sandarmokh was raised again in an opinion piece by a leading Karelian historian, professor Juri Kilin, in the Finnish newspaper “Kaleva”, July 3rd 2016. Kilin is widely known expert in Soviet-Finnish war history. In his column, Kilin proposed a hypothesis suggesting that instead of victims of political repression, the Sandarmokh graves would contain Soviet prisoners of war executed or starved by Finnish occupiers during the Finnish occupation of Karelia 1941–1944. After professor Sergei Verigin, another well-known historian from Karelia joined Kilin in developing the idea, the initiative was called the “Kilin-Verigin hypothesis”. This was also the starting point of the scientific research of the Sandarmokh case.

It should be noted that the Finnish occupation regime in occupied Karelia during 1941–1944 was extremely harsh and cruel. Professor Sergei Verigin says the Finnish occupation regime was even more cruel than the German one, which is proven by the size and quantity of the Finnish concentration camps. Finns occupied the territory with approximately 86000 Soviet citizens. The Finnish occupation regime established in occupied Karelia 14 concentration camps for Soviet civilians, 42 camps for the prisoners of war, 34 labour camps, and nine prisons — all together about a hundred penitentiary establishments. Russian archives contain information about arbitrary execution of prisoners of war by

Finns and death rate of 100% at some of the camps. The Finnish scholar Lars Westermarck found out in 2009, that some Soviet prisoners of war were shot even before being taken to the camps and the murders were covered up by falsifying documents. Soviet prisoners of war were kept close to Sandarmokh as well⁴.

Later in 2019 Sergei Verigin published the first scientific inquiry about the Sandarmokh problem, together with his colleague, the Karelian journalist Armas Mashin. The book titled “The Riddle of Sandarmokh”⁵, published in Russian and Finnish⁶ in separate versions, suggests that the Finnish occupiers might have buried Soviet prisoners of war in Sandarmokh during 1941–1944. For the book, the journalist Armas Mashin compiled a unique media analysis on the politicized debates over Sandarmokh. It showed that some liberal journalists, scholars and politicians from Karelia joined Finns on building the anti-Stalin Sandarmokh cult and some of them even “defected” to Finland to avoid conflicts with the supporters of the Kilin-Verigin hypothesis. The clear goal of the supporters of the Sandarmokh cult was to prevent the exhumation and the scientific investigation of Sandarmokh, which was called “illegal” by the activists, although it was carried out with state support.

The anti-Russian part of the Finnish press reacted with a fierce campaign against the exhumation and Kilin-Verigin hypothesis. Especially Finnish popular tabloid “*Ilta-Sanomat*” launched an unheard of anti-Putin campaign, claiming that exhumations and the hypothesis were an attempt to falsify history and deny Stalinist crimes by the Putin regime and that the supporters of the Kilin-Verigin hypothesis were “3rd class historians” presenting “insane claims” and “living in KGB-bubble” of “Stalinist reality”⁷.

As we see, the Finnish anti-Russian press started to defend the anti-Stalin cult of Sandarmokh with another anti-Putin propaganda campaign. This makes us to think that the anti-Stalin cult of Sandarmokh was mostly planned and probably also financed by Finnish anti-Russian circles, who tried to create an anti-governmental cult site inside the Russian territory.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

My personal interest concerning Sandarmokh forest grave site is based on my work with the Russian-Finnish wartime history issues. In late 1990s, the Finnish press started to write about Sandarmokh. I visited the site first during wintertime in 2003. I noticed the place is gloomy, it is far away, hard to find, the roads are not necessarily good and have been much worse. It would be difficult to believe the site would have been accessible in the 1930s.

At the site, typical Karelian pines rise to heights. At the entrance of the site, there is a small temple including name lists of the political repression victims,

and a huge stone with the engraving “People, do not kill each other” (which is a quotation from a poem dedicated to Sandarmokh, by the Karelian poet Oleg Mishin, known in Finland as Armas Hiiri, and supported by Finns). There is huge amount of memorial items, such as stones, plates and crosses, for victims of a certain nationality or for individual victims, often with photographs. Everywhere around one can see large round graves which are easily recognisable since they have sunk a little into the ground.

When the history dispute started again in 2016, I followed the topic and asked to visit the exhumation site in August 2019 and was granted the right to observe the process. In principle the site looked the same: the small wooden temple, the big stone, maybe even more of the small memorial objects scattered in the forest, in addition to the visible round mass graves sunk into the ground. The exhumation was carried out in few graves (all together 16 victims were exhumed in 2018 and 2019). Also, several other items were lifted from the graves, such as, bullets and shells, and also private items, such as dishes and shoes, and of course victims’ clothes.

Despite the fact that the Russian side invited Finnish observers and experts to participate in the exhumation process (knowing the anti-Stalin cult includes the idea of 1000 Finns executed there), I was the only Finn and foreigner, to witness the process. In addition, there were lots of Russian liberal media journalists wondering around the site and asking provocative questions. This made my visit to some extent unpleasant. I got the impression that some liberal organisations had sent journalists from far away to harm and disturb the exhumation process.

However, observing the site and routes, I made the conclusion, that in the late 1930s, especially wintertime, it would have been logistically impossible to bring 10000 people to this site to be executed and buried. Even the contemporary roads were hard to drive.

In Finland, I was witnessing the anti-Putin media campaign over Sandarmokh, claiming that the scientific research and the exhumation process was actually an attempt to deny Stalinist crimes and falsify history of Stalinism. Most of this campaign was concentrated in media outlets owned by notoriously anti-Russian media holding “Sanoma Corporation”, such as “Ilta-Sanomat” and “Helsingin Sanomat”. Also “New York Times” published several articles, and “The Washington Post” joined the campaign.

RESULTS OF EXHUMATIONS 2018–2019

Bodies and objects exhumed from Sandarmokh in 2018 and 2019 were given to the experts of the Investigative Committee of Russia for further

ballistic, forensic, anthropologic and archeologic analysis. Results were published July 2nd 2020. They show that Sandarmokh has 342 grave pits of three different sizes, of which 60% proved to be empty. Number of bodies at the site cannot exceed 2000. Of them 16 were exhumed and identified as 25–35 years old individuals, among whom several women. While Irina Flige from “Memorial” said that most of the alleged Sandamokh victims were executed naked, the exhumation showed most bodies had clothes on. Buttons found in the graves point at Soviet army uniforms and engravings in the shells to weapons used by the Finnish army during the 1940s. Especially the shells and their engravings were profoundly analysed and traced. Thus professor Verigin has said that Kilin-Verigin hypothesis is correct: Sandarmokh is a grave site for Soviet prisoners of war and Soviet civilians who assisted them, executed and starved by Finnish occupiers in prisoner camps during Karelian occupation 1941–1944. Verigin also suggested to erect a new monument at Sandarmokh to commemorate the victims of Finnish occupation 1941–1944. This new monument would mean the end of the anti-Stalin cult of Sandarmokh⁸.

CONCLUSION

The case of Sandarmokh presents us a new kind of politicised and propagandistic debate. It started in the summer 1997, when “Memorial” activists found a huge mass grave site and started to develop an anti-Stalin cult, claiming that up to 10000 victims of political repression were executed and buried there in the late 1930s, from almost 60 different nationalities, including up to 1000 Finns. However even the authors themselves admitted, that they had no evidence that the victims buried at the site indeed were victims of the political repression. The cult-building continued however for two decades, making Sandarmokh a significant international memorial site for the victims of Stalinist repression, and resulting vast amount of monuments and artefacts erected at the site, from tombstones, crosses and pictures of real individual victims of Stalinist terror, to monuments for various nationalities. The cult-building was opposed by a scientific project called Kilin-Verigin hypothesis, which suggested that the victims buried in Sandarmokh might be Soviet prisoners of war executed and starved by Finnish occupiers during 1941–1944. This hypothesis was based on archival findings and supported by exhumations carried out in summers 2018 and 2019.

The scientific hypothesis and exhumations were attacked fiercely by an anti-Putin media campaign in the Finnish and American press, mostly in the notorious anti-Russian Finnish newspapers “Helsingin Sanomat” and “Ilta-Sanomat”, and also in the “New York Times”. They claimed the exhumation plan

is a plot orchestrated by the Putin regime to forge history, deny Stalinist terror and falsely accuse Finns of the executions. The anti-Putin campaign was mainly concentrated in “Ilta-Sanomat” which published several large materials on the issue, quoting the hypothesis and the exhumation project as “insane” claims from “Stalinist reality” and “KGB-bubble”. This anti-Putin campaign was also a clear example of an anti-scientific propaganda, while the goal was to ridicule and prevent independent scientific research and exhumation procedure.

Interestingly enough, the most active part of the anti-Putin campaign was carried out by the popular tabloid “Ilta-Sanomat”, owned by the Finnish media holding “Sanoma Corporation”. For a long time, the “Sanoma” is known as the heritage of the Erkkö family, the patron of which, Mr. Eljas Erkkö, during the second world war, served as the director of the war prisoner office of the Finnish army, being thus responsible of the fate of the Soviet prisoners of war in the Finnish hands, including the ones buried at Sandarmokh. This is the possible reason why the media holding “Sanoma” put lots of efforts to prevent the scientific investigation of the Sandarmokh graves.

Thus the history of the Sandarmokh issue can be divided in three episodes: the anti-Stalin cult-building, the scientific denial of the cult, and the fierce anti-Putin an anti-scientific propaganda campaign to reject any scientific findings, in order to preserve the anti-Stalin cult. This process, which mostly happened between Finland and Russia, is clearly a new element in history-writing of Soviet era and the second world war.

One can say that executions at Sandarmokh are a gross human tragedy but not the less tragic is the abuse of these victims for anti-Stalin campaign and later for anti-Putin and anti-scientific propaganda. Unfortunately, the victims were victimized again.

ПРИМЕЧАНИЯ

¹ *Веригин С. Г., Машин А.* Загадки Сандармоха. Часть I: Что скрывает лесное урочище. Хельсинки, 2019.

² *Gessen M.* Never Remember: Searching for Stalin’s Gulags in Putin’s Russia // Columbia Global Reports. 2018. С. 42–54.

³ Место расстрела Сандармох. Петрозаводск. 1999. С. 3.

⁴ *Bäckman J.* Sandarmohin arvoitus // *Kanava.* 2020. N 5. S. 61–62.

⁵ *Веригин С. Г., Машин А.* Загадки Сандармоха.

⁶ *Verigin S., Mashin A.* Sandarmohin arvoitus. Osa I: Hiekkakankaan salatut vainajat. Helsinki. 2019.

⁷ Quotations retrieved from «Ilta-Sanomat» online archive is.fi.

⁸ *Bäckman J.* Sandarmohin arvoitus. S. 61–62.

ЛИТЕРАТУРА

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