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**SANDARMOKH — FACTS INSTEAD OF POLITICKING.**

**REVIEW OF: Sergei Verigin and Armas Mashin, *Sandarmohin arvoitus*, vol. I, *Hiekkakankaiden salatut vainajat*, (S. l.: Johan Bäckman Publications, 2019), 94 p.**

**САНДАРМОХ — ФАКТЫ ВМЕСТО ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИХ ИГР.**

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Sandarmokh in Russian Karelia is the burial-ground and graveyard of thousands of Russians, Finns and members of other nationalities who were secretly executed there in the late 1930s by the NKVD. Until 2016, the representatives of the government of the Karelian Republic participated in the annual commemoration of the victims of Stalin’s Great Terror alongside *Memorial*, the organization recording the Soviet Union’s totalitarian past and monitoring human rights in contemporary Russia. Since then, the government has, however, not been represented in the annual commemoration on 5 August.

In contemporary Russia, there are people who regard the annual reminder of Stalin’s mass murders and the existence of *Memorial* as undesirable. A couple of years ago, two Petrozavodsk historians, Sergei Verigin and Iurii Kilin, came up with a “scientific hypothesis” according to which Sandarmokh was also a secret burial-ground for Soviet prisoners-of-war shot by the Finnish army occupying Soviet Karelia in 1941–1944. The Finnish army allegedly discovered the graves in Sandarmokh and used the place as the final destination of executed POWs. The “hypothesis” is backed up by Verigin’s and Armas Mashin’s Finnish-language booklet mentioned above. Publishing the booklet under the auspices of Johan Bäckman, a Finn engaged in various “information campaigns”, does not increase the credibility of the booklet in the eyes of its target, the Finnish readership. The booklet has indeed aroused very little attention in Finland. In it, Verigin presents the genesis and basic ideas of his “hypothesis” and I shall examine them below. Mashin is not a historian but a journalist and his contribution is an attack on *Memorial* and to the people who have been participated in the organization or have dealt with Stalin’s Great Terror of the late 1930s. The booklet is not an academic work but a pamphlet. It is a sideline of the excavations that the Russian Military Historical Society has carried out in Sandarmokh. The aim of the excavations is to find evidence supporting Verigin’s and Kilin’s “hypothesis”.

There were indeed Finnish POW camps in Medvezhegorsk some ten kilometres west of Sandarmokh. Sandarmokh was situated very close to the frontline. Based on international conventions, the POWs in Finnish custody were closely monitored by the Finnish Red Cross. Every POW had a Red Cross card. The date and cause of death were recorded there and often — but certainly not in all cases — also the place of his burial. In 2008, the Finnish National Archives compiled an online database<sup>1</sup> on all 19,000 Soviet POWs who perished in Finnish captivity. This database is also at the disposal of Russians but so far Verigin and Kilin have not made use of it. Why? *This database should be the starting-point of any meaningful study on the POWs.* There are registered burials in Medvezhegorsk but none in Sandarmokh, where there was no prison camp at all. According to well-established procedure, the perished POWs were buried in burial-grounds in the immediate vicinity of the camp. The circumstances related to the death and burial of the POWs were monitored by the Red Cross. *The idea of a secret burial-ground is somewhat absurd and makes sense only in a closed NKVD reality.* The possibility of the burial of a few Soviet soldiers killed in combat circumstances in Sandarmokh cannot be completely excluded but I regard it as fairly unlikely.

The treaty ending the hostilities in September 1944 obliged Finland to bring to justice its citizens who had committed war crimes. I have studied the judicial cases of 500 POWs who were shot by Finns, most of them illegally.<sup>2</sup> The identity of 332 could be established. In the Red Cross cards, only nine of them were reported to have died of disease although I know on the basis of postwar court records that they had been shot. In minor camps, the cause of death was often established by someone who had no medical education but only in very few cases a POW who had gunshot wounds was recorded to have died of disease, that was something other than lethal violence. Any large-scale forgery of the POW cards to downplay the volume of gunshot violence must be ruled out.

I estimated that of the 500 killed POWs whose cases I studied, approximately one hundred remained unidentified. They must have perished before they had been registered. The remaining ca. 70 must have been registered but due to insufficient

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<sup>1</sup> Prisoner-of-War Deaths During the Continuation War, last accessed 29 December 2019. <http://kronos.narc.fi/cwar/cwar.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Antti Kujala, *Vankisurmat. Neuvostotavankien laittomat ampumiset jatkosodassa* (Helsinki: WSOY, 2008); Antti Kujala, "Illegal Killing of Soviet Prisoners of War by Finns during the Finno-Soviet Continuation War of 1941–44," in *Slavonic and East European Review* 87, no. 3 (2009): 429–451; Antti Kujala, "Sovetskie voennoplennye v Finliandii i finskie voennoplennye v SSSR vo vremia sovetsko-finskoi voiny 1941–1944 gg.," in *Russkii sbornik XVII* (Moscow: Modest Kolerov, 2015), 312–319, <http://nlr.ru/domplekhanova/dep/artupload/dp/article/70/NA1927.pdf>. See also: Arja Paananen, "Finskii istorik o raskopkakh v Sandarmokhe: 'Sfabrikovannye obvineniia, politicheskii proekt' (Ilta-Sanomat, Finliandiia)," Inosmi.Ru, published 7 September 2018, <https://inosmi.ru/social/20180907/243183737.html>; Galina Dudina and Anastasiia Kurilova, "'Situatsiia v finskikh lageriakh otlichalas ot nemetskikh' Finskii istorik prokomentiroval 'Ъ' gipotezu o massovykh rasstrelakh sovetskikh voennoplennykh," *Kommersant*, 18 September 2018, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3744434>.

information in postwar court records (for ex. no exact date of their death) it is impossible to connect the person in question to any POW in the Red Cross cards.

According to the Red Cross cards and military hospital records etc., 1019 registered and identified POWs were shot in Finnish captivity in 1941–1944. On the basis of my case studies of the 500 POWs, of whom ca. 100 were unregistered, approximately 200 must be added to the figure of 1019. They were shot before they had been registered as POWs. In 1941–1942, the registration lagged months behind the capture of the prisoners. No figures are mentioned in the pamphlet but it has been reported in the press that Verigin and Kilin have previously come up with much higher numbers of POW killings, for ex. up to 500 or even 1,000 or 2,000. These allegations are groundless. In the prison camps there were no mass killings. Only one or a few (up to ten or twelve) POWs were shot at the same time. Some of them were shot legally when trying to escape or to ward off an attack by them, but most of them were killed illegally, usually in order to maintain discipline. International conventions provided only very lenient means for punishing POWs' transgressions. That is why guards took the law in their own hands and their immediate superiors turned a blind eye on it.

In the prison camps of one army corps serving on the Karelian Isthmus (i. e. not in Soviet Karelia) there were over 100 killings from late 1941 until the summer of 1942. The General Headquarters investigated the killings already during the war and of course finally suppressed the case instead of submitting it to judicial procedure (during the war, charges were seldom brought for shooting a POW), but since the beginning of the investigation the number of the killings dwindled in the army corps. If there had been similar larger cases in other army units or camps, they would also have caught the attention of the GHQ or we would know of them on the basis of the Red Cross cards.

As said above, the number of Soviet POWs who perished in Finnish prisoner camps was 19,000 but I have estimated that probably 3,000 more perished before they had been registered and we do not know their names. The estimation is based on the POW numbers reported by the army divisions during the war. There is much confusion in these figures but there must have been at least 3,000 POWs in addition to the official postwar number of 64,000. The 1,200 POWs who were shot accounted for 5.5 per cent of the 22,000 who perished in Finnish captivity. Most of the unregistered 3,000 must have died in diseases related to undernourishment, which was the case also with regard to the 19,000. To imagine that all or most of the unregistered 3,000 were shot is nonsense. It should be emphasized that the majority of Soviet POWs were transferred to the territory of Finland to minimize the chances of successful escape. To imagine that most of them were in Medvezhegorsk or somewhere in Soviet Karelia is idle fantasy, not to mention the absurd idea of Medvezhegorsk-Sandarmokh as a secret Finnish Katyn.

One third of the POWs perished in Finnish camps. Although there was no policy of extermination (premeditated systematic killing or starving) in Finland, the mortality in POW camps during the Second World War was higher only in Nazi Germany (with regard to the Soviet POWs) and the Soviet Union. As anybody can see, I am not trying to whitewash the record of the Finnish army but it would be desirable to stick to well-established facts. In other words, to use my figures correctly instead of distorting the overall picture.

The answer to the question whether the Finnish army knew of the graves in Sandarmokh during the war can be established only from Finnish materials located in Finnish archives. Neither I nor anybody else in Finland has never seen any indication of it. I have been told that Verigin and Kilin have never worked in Finnish archives (it was stated in the press that the Finnish National Archives welcomed them to study there; there are no classified wartime materials whatsoever). In addition, Verigin does not even know Finnish. How can they know better than we? If the Finnish army had discovered the graves in Sandarmokh, they would have made similar anti-Soviet propaganda as the Germans did with regard to Katyn. This is the conclusion of the distinguished Petrozavodsk historian, Irina Takala, a scholar of the Great Terror, and it really makes sense. Besides, why would anybody go to so much extra trouble to transport the bodies of POWs ten kilometres away from Medvezhegorsk to Sandarmokh when there were established burial-grounds near the camps in Medvezhegorsk and people were expected to use them?

With regard to the excavations of the Russian Military Historical Society, I would like to remind that the British greatcoats handed over to POWs were brown, not green. In September 2018, the Society found pieces of green cloth. It is wrong colour and does not serve as evidence of Soviet POW executions. It should also be remembered that in legal executions based on the death sentence of a court-martial the sentenced and the death squad looked each other in the eyes. Only few POWs were, however, sentenced to death. In most illegal killings the victim had been told to walk ahead of the guard who shot him in the back and then reported that the POW had allegedly tried to escape because it was legal to stop an attempt to escape in this manner. A bullet in the neck with the victim's hands tied behind his back sound like a NKVD execution. If a creature walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it is most likely a duck.

I am an outsider who cannot know what is going on in Russia. It seems, however, to me that Verigin's and Kilin's "hypothesis", the excavations in Sandarmokh and the well-known case of putting some people under arrest are an attempt to belittle and downplay Stalin's mass murders, to rouse suspicion about the work of *Memorial* and also to intimidate and silence the people who have been active in the organization. With regard to the Soviet POWs the Finnish army did not indeed have a clean record but the attempt to shoulder part of the guilt of Stalin's crimes on it is a flagrant distortion of facts (it is also

an unfriendly gesture vis-à-vis Russia's western neighbour Finland). Every nation should face the dark sides of its own history without trying to whitewash them by contending that also others have sinned — which by the way resembles the logic of a five-year old child.

It is to be hoped that people ultimately responsible for the matters relating to Sandarmokh are reasonable enough to grasp the absurdity of the “scientific hypothesis”. Sad to say, Verigin and his companions are third-class historians who obviously believe in the validity of their ideas. They are living more or less in a Stalinist reality where foreign countries and foreigners constantly threaten Russia. Their conclusions are based on this assumption. I sincerely hope that meaningful Russian-Finnish cooperation in matters related to the Great Terror and WW2 will be possible but any political agenda must then be entirely absent. There has been too much politicking and “enemy-building” in our mutual relations. The Russians and Finns deserve something better.

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