

Profiles in Decency

Benjamin Nathans

Pravo na Pamiat [The Right to Memory]

a documentary film directed
by Ludmila Gordon; viewable at
therighttomemoryfilm.com

Meeting Gorbachev

a documentary film directed by
Werner Herzog and André Singer

Arseny Roginsky was that rarest of creatures: a Soviet dissident whose influence on his country waxed rather than waned after the collapse of the USSR. From 1998 until his death in 2017 at age seventy-one, Roginsky led the Memorial Society, a Moscow-based nongovernmental organization with a dual mission: to document and increase public awareness of mass repressions during the Soviet era, and to promote human rights and civil society in contemporary Russia. Memorial's staff has done pathbreaking research on the arrest, imprisonment, and execution of millions of Soviet citizens, a grim task that has taken them to countless archives as well as previously unidentified sites of mass killing across the former USSR.

"Half the country doesn't know where their great-grandfathers are buried," Roginsky laments in Ludmila Gordon's eloquent and absorbing film *The Right to Memory*. If one takes into account the tens of millions of deaths associated with the two world wars, Russia's civil war, the various famines and deportations, along with the Great Terror and the Gulag, then Roginsky is probably right. Memorial has focused on deaths intentionally caused by the Soviet state, bringing them to public consciousness through exhibitions, monuments, websites, books, and high school essay contests. Its databases made possible the "Last Address" initiative, in which some two thousand palm-sized plaques have been mounted on the façades of apartment buildings, each indicating the name, occupation, and dates of birth, arrest, and execution of a former resident of that building. Many include the date of official rehabilitation—proof, if anyone needs it, that an innocent life was destroyed.

Memorial's approach to Russia's past is unabashedly present-minded, designed to foster what the cultural historian Alexander Etkind called "the return of the repressed" to contemporary public discourse.¹ By the same token, its advocacy on behalf of current victims of human rights violations draws on that past, positioning human rights as a means of "preventing a return to totalitarianism," according to its mission statement. Memorial's lawyers and activists have worked to document human rights violations in war zones, including the conflict in

Chechnya and Russia's wars against Georgia and Ukraine. They advocate on behalf of refugees, migrant workers, ethnic and religious minorities, and a new generation of political prisoners.

Either aspect of Memorial's work—on the history of Soviet repressions or on contemporary human rights violations—would guarantee close scrutiny by the Kremlin. Together these missions have ensured a crescendo of efforts to stigmatize or silence the organization and its affiliates in some fifty Russian cities. Those efforts accelerated in 2012 with the passage of a law requiring Russian NGOs to re-

to be brought against our state, but serves as a consolidating factor for anti-government forces in Russia." Dmitriev, arrested on what are widely viewed as bogus child pornography charges, is himself now part of Memorial's database of sixty-three current political prisoners.

The Right to Memory, Gordon's directorial debut, was filmed almost entirely inside Roginsky's office at Memorial's headquarters, a pre-revolutionary mansion on a quiet side street in downtown Moscow. Punctuated by occasional

cabin at the perimeter of the camp. Despite being a free woman, his mother nonetheless decided to give birth in the camp's infirmary, because the imprisoned doctors there were better than those in the town's hospital. Ber Roginsky was rearrested for the same crime in 1951 and died in prison three months later. In 1955, two years after Stalin's death, when Arseny Roginsky was nine years old, his family received two notices. One informed them that his father had been officially rehabilitated. The other indicated the place and cause of death, both of which were false. "It was my first encounter,"

Roginsky notes, "with a lie in an official document." He would never learn where his father was buried.

In the 1960s Roginsky studied history and philology with Yuri Lotman at Tartu University in Soviet Estonia. Lotman was trying to do for culture what linguists had done for language: to identify the symbolic sign systems that constitute the grammar of cultural communication, making it possible to convey sense and meaning. By what methods have certain literary characters or historical figures—Pushkin's Eugene Onegin, for example, or the Decembrist army officers who launched a failed coup against Tsar Nicholas I—captured modes of thought and feeling that then take on an independent existence, becoming templates in the lives of readers? Part of the postwar wave of European structuralism, Lotman's "Tartu School" of semiotic analysis would become one



Supporters of the Memorial Society taking part in an International Workers' Day march, Moscow, May 1990

nounce all funding from abroad or else to register themselves as *inostrannye agenty*, "foreign agents," a term that in Russian is virtually synonymous with "spy." Since potential donors in Russia who sympathize with Memorial—including wealthy oligarchs—fear the consequences of financially supporting it, Roginsky chose to accept the toxic label rather than give up vital funding from foundations in Europe and the United States.

The Federal Security Service, successor to the KGB, has recently begun contacting students and teachers who have taken part in Memorial's essay contests. This past August, a group under the aegis of Russia's minister of culture, Vladimir Medinsky, criticized Memorial's investigation of a mass grave in the Sandarmokh forest near the Finnish border, where roughly nine thousand victims of Stalin's terror were executed in 1937 and 1938 and buried in communal pits. To date, thanks to the work of the Memorial historians Yuri Dmitriev, Irina Flige, and the late Venyamin Iofe, the identities of 6,241 victims have been established, along with the exact location of the killing fields. Hundreds of monuments to the dead now stand there. A Ministry of Culture official condemned what he called "speculation around events in the Sandarmokh forest" that "not only causes harm to Russia's international image and allows unfounded claims

black-and-white family photographs and archival clips from the Soviet era, as well as by the haunting minimalist music of the composers Lev Zhurbin and Per Nørgård, the film is essentially an extended monologue by a master raconteur. Gordon, who grew up in the USSR and worked as a researcher for Memorial in the late 1980s and early 1990s before emigrating to the United States, uses neither a narrator nor an interviewer to propel the film. This is a one-man performance. The camera occasionally follows the smoke curling up from Roginsky's cigarette or the steam rising from his tea—eternal accoutrements of Russia's intelligentsia—but its visual center of gravity is his round, extraordinarily expressive face, which, to paraphrase David Remnick's eulogy, seems to capture what decency itself looks like.²

Roginsky was born in 1946 in a forced labor camp deep in the Russian north. His father, Ber (Boris), an engineer, had been imprisoned there following his arrest in 1938 on charges of participating in a conspiracy against Stalin. In 1945, toward the end of the war, Roginsky's mother and two older siblings settled in the town of Velsk, near the camp, and shortly thereafter his father was allowed to join them in a

²"The Historical Truth-Telling of Arseny Roginsky," *The New Yorker*, December 19, 2017.

¹Alexander Etkind, "A Parable of Misrecognition: 'Anagnorisis' and the Return of the Repressed from the Gulag," *The Russian Review*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (October 2009).

mass terror had either been destroyed or were hopelessly locked away in state archives, *Memory* was designed as a counterarchive, a repository of unofficial, first-person accounts of the history of Stalinism, drawn from private letters, autobiographical manuscripts, and, where possible, interviews with survivors. “It’s a paradox, but nonetheless true,” the editors noted, “that any [Soviet] person over the age of seventy has astonishing information to transmit. Information, moreover, that has never been written down anywhere.”

As issue after issue of *Memory* circulated in the Soviet Union (and was then published in Paris), the KGB conducted multiple searches of Roginsky’s apartment, looking for incriminating material. In 1979 he was fired from his job and barred from entering the State Public Library. In the meantime, Roginsky had discovered that government records on mass terror had not been destroyed; they were silently waiting for researchers in multiple archives in Moscow, Leningrad, and other cities. Unable to resist the forbidden fruit, he forged a document allowing him access to one such archive and was soon arrested. At his trial, rather than comment on the charge of forgery he condemned the injustice of denying citizens access to historical records. He spent the next four years in prison.

Following his release in 1985, Roginsky returned to dissident circles, or what was left of them after a devastating wave of arrests and forced emigration. One of the emotional high points of *The Right to Memory* is Roginsky’s recounting of the burial service for Anatoly Marchenko, who died on December 8, 1986, at age forty-eight in Chistopol Prison, during a hunger strike demanding the release of all Soviet political prisoners. In a field outside the prison, as Roginsky and several others lowered the casket into the earth, Marchenko’s widow, Larisa Bogoraz, who had spent several years in Siberian exile for demonstrating in Red Square against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, leaned over the grave and cried out, “Tolya, they will be free!” It was difficult to hear these words as anything other than an anguished attempt by a grieving widow to find some purpose in her husband’s martyrdom. No one, least of all Marchenko, expected his hunger strike to actually bring about the release of political prisoners, just as Bogoraz, two decades earlier, had been under no illusion that the demonstration on Red Square would induce the Kremlin to withdraw its tanks from Prague. These were acts conceived beyond the realm of political calculus. They were symbolic, meant to register the possibility, and the fact, of moral resistance to Soviet power.

Imagine Roginsky’s astonishment, then, when less than two weeks later Mikhail Gorbachev, the new Soviet general secretary, released the physicist Andrei Sakharov, who had spent seven years of exile in the city of Gorky for

protesting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Sakharov, too, had engaged in hunger strikes, and Marchenko’s death evidently catalyzed Gorbachev’s decision to free not just him but, over the next few years, virtually all Soviet political prisoners.³ Bogoraz’s desperate hope that her husband’s death not be in vain had come true. In Gordon’s documentary, Roginsky describes himself as “haunted” by the idea that a purely symbolic act could trigger tangible, previously unthinkable effects. Suddenly Yuri Lotman’s theory that symbolic languages or literary models organize our thinking and behavior took on a new meaning. After years of bittersweet toasts “to the success of our hopeless cause,” Roginsky and other Soviet dissidents could now entertain the idea that the rewards of their struggle for human rights and the rule of law might not be endlessly deferred to a distant future.

That an organization like Memorial exists in today’s Russia, carrying on *Memory*’s mission on an incomparably greater scale, is a sign of how much has changed since the Soviet collapse. That it operates under siege-like conditions is a sign of how much has not. For all the Western attention to the Kremlin’s campaign against the institutions of civil society, however, Roginsky makes clear in *The Right to Memory* that his greatest concern lay elsewhere, with Russia’s people. “Why do we suffer defeat,” he asks near the end of the film, “in the most important arena—the minds of our fellow citizens?” To be sure, many ordinary Russians sympathize with the victims of mass terror. Mayors and governors express sympathy for them too, as does President Vladimir Putin, who in October 2017 presided over the dedication of “The Wall of Sorrow,” a national monument to victims of Soviet terror (Roginsky served on the jury that selected the winning design).⁴ “But no one asks,” Roginsky continues, “Whose terror was this? Who perpetrated this terror?”

Ask Russians: Who is to blame for the death of your grandfather, your father, or your great-grandfather? They will mention the neighbor who denounced him, the interrogator who beat and tortured him, the executioner who pulled the trigger in the basement of the prison. But not the state itself. . . . Memorial’s answer is simple: the state is to blame. It was the terror of the state against the individual. The state needed mass terror to remain in power. And it is here that our

³See the prescient piece by David Satter, “A Test Case,” *The New York Review*, February 12, 1987.

⁴On the monument’s genesis and the public controversies it inspired, see Kathleen E. Smith, “A Monument for Our Times? Commemorating Victims of Repression in Putin’s Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 71, No. 8 (2019).

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understanding of the terror absolutely clashes with that embedded in popular consciousness.

For a thousand years, he argues, Russians have treated their state as something sacred. That view was nourished by decades of Soviet propaganda and immeasurably strengthened by victory over “absolute evil” in what Russians call the Great Fatherland War. It continues to be nourished by Putin’s propaganda. The result, according to Roginsky, is a kind of cognitive dissonance: Russians cannot reconcile the glory of their state—which united an enormous and diverse territory, successfully defended its population against repeated assaults from abroad, modernized its economy in record time, and sent the first human being into space—with the idea that it was also a criminal enterprise responsible for murdering millions of its own citizens.

That is indeed a difficult task—perhaps even more difficult than reconciling chattel slavery with the idea of human beings as created equal and endowed with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Roginsky’s efforts to desacralize the Russian state in the minds of his fellow citizens did not make him popular in Russia. The awards he received for his work on behalf of human rights and historical memory all came from abroad—from the governments of Estonia, Germany, and Poland. Following his death, Memorial continues its Sisyphean struggle.

Mikhail Gorbachev is an even grander prophet without honor in his own country. Perhaps that’s what inspired the German filmmaker Werner Herzog to sit down with the former Soviet leader for an extended interview. There haven’t been many former Soviet leaders to talk to over the years; apart from Nikita Khrushchev and Gorbachev, they all died in office. After being toppled in a palace coup in 1964, Khrushchev spent his remaining seven years under surveillance at a dacha outside Moscow, deeply depressed and cut off from the outside world, apart from smuggling his memoirs to the West, where they became a publishing sensation.⁵

Gorbachev’s involuntary retirement has been longer and more active. In addition to publishing his memoirs and other books, he has been the subject of dozens of biographies and films and showered with over a hundred awards and honorary degrees—almost all of them, like Roginsky’s, from outside Russia. *Meeting Gorbachev* includes interviews with people who interacted with him during his years in power—including former US secretary of state George P. Shultz and former Hungarian prime minister Miklós Németh—not a single Russian among them. The effect, intended or not, is to highlight Gorbachev’s isolation in his own country.

Herzog’s most memorable films have centered on doomed visionaries: Lope de Aguirre navigating the Amazon in search of El Dorado; or Brian Fitzgerald (aka Fitzcarraldo), who dreamed of building an opera house in the Peruvian Amazon; or Timothy Treadwell (aka

⁵*Khrushchev Remembers* (Little, Brown, 1970).

Grizzly Man), who communed with bears until one killed him. Gorbachev dreamed of turning his country into a genuine social democracy, ending the cold war, ridding the world of nuclear weapons, and building what he called a “common European home.” These were fantastically ambitious goals, and he was partially successful: he did end the cold war and he negotiated drastic reductions in nuclear weapons with his American counterparts. But he did so at the cost of the breakup of the USSR and the destruction of its welfare system, consequences he tells Herzog he still regrets.

Foreign leaders who met Gorbachev quickly realized that he was unlike previous Soviet premiers. He had a



Russian president Mikhail Gorbachev and the human rights activist and physicist Andrei Sakharov during a session of the Congress of People’s Deputies, Moscow, January 1989

university degree. He was frequently accompanied by, and consulted with, his wife, Raisa, who had even more degrees. According to Németh, he asked good questions. The same cannot be said for Herzog, whose mostly fawning questions to Gorbachev elicit little beyond what is already familiar from existing biographies and documentaries. Hardly known for timidity, Herzog is so grateful to Gorbachev for allowing the Germans to reunite (“I love you in particular because [of] reunification,” he gushes at one point) that he seems to have abandoned the idea of pushing him out of his comfort zone. Even the archival footage sprinkled across *Meeting Gorbachev* is mostly familiar, borrowed from previous documentaries by CNN and others. This includes footage illustrating the Soviet gerontocracy in action. A doddering Leonid Brezhnev is shown struggling to put together a coherent sentence while handing the Order of the October Revolution medal to the much younger Gorbachev, then a provincial party official. Konstantin Chernenko, Gorbachev’s immediate predecessor as general secretary of the Communist Party, can barely stand up long enough to cast his ballot as he is filmed at a fake polling station set up inside a hospital. Against such a backdrop, Gorbachev appeared like a burst of youthful energy.

But it was not just his relative youth (he joined the Politburo at age forty-nine) that stood out. The most extraor-

inary thing about Gorbachev was his enduring idealism, specifically his vision of what socialism could be and what it could do for the world. The Soviet Union in the 1980s was a country saturated with cynicism, where most people, certainly most adults, understood that the Marxist-Leninist clichés mouthed by Communist Party officials were little more than lip service to an ossified ideology. Gorbachev somehow remained a true believer. In one of the most dramatic press conferences of his career, having just returned to Moscow after being held hostage in Crimea during the attempted coup d’état of August 1991, he delivered the closest thing to a credo one was likely to hear from a Soviet leader: “I am a staunch adherent of the socialist idea... an idea that contains values worked out over the course of centuries, that draws on the achievements of Christianity, the idea of a just society, a better world.”

It’s a pity that Herzog didn’t see fit to ask Gorbachev how he held on to such idealism as he ascended the rungs of the Communist Party, a world of backstabbing, back-scratching, patronage-seeking careerists. Gorbachev’s biographer William Taubman, who served as a consultant for the film, has argued that his idealism was innate to his character and preserved by his rural upbringing against the pervasive disenchantment of the USSR’s double-speaking urban sophisticates. That’s a good start but hardly resolves the mystery. Taubman goes on to note that “Gorbachev made it to the top by seeming to be an ideal product of the Soviet system... What [he] concealed was that the Communism he believed in wasn’t the carcass of Stalinism over which [Brezhnev and other leaders] presided.” His dream was to make the Soviet system “live up to what he deemed its original ideals.”⁶ The attempt to realize that dream instead triggered the system’s disintegration.

Gorbachev made Memorial’s founding possible, and not just in the broad sense of opening up Soviet society to a more honest reckoning with its history. At Sakharov’s funeral in December 1989, the Soviet leader turned to Elena Bonner, his widow and fellow dissident, and said what statesmen are supposed to say in such situations: “What can I do for you?” Bonner asked him to allow Memorial to register as an independent citizens’ organization or, as we would say, an NGO—a category that did not then exist in the USSR. Gorbachev said he would, and he kept his word.

At eighty-nine, Gorbachev now physically resembles the elderly Politburo members whom he joined as a relatively young man four decades ago. He suffers from diabetes, needs help walking, and occasionally slurs his words, often slipping back into the southern lilt of his birthplace in Stravropol. An unrepentant idealist, he urges the world to embrace disarmament, social democracy, and environmental protection. When Herzog asks him what he would like to be written on his gravestone, he mentions the inscription chosen by a friend: “We tried.” Like Arseny Roginsky, but in his own way, Gorbachev too radiates decency. □

⁶William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (Norton, 2017), pp. 689–690.