

Stalinism Forever

By Anna Politkovskaya
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MOSCOW -- We are using Stalin's methods again, this time to fight terrorism. I am writing for this American newspaper on a subject that one can no longer write about in Russia -- islamskiy terrorism, or Islamic terrorism cases. There are hundreds of such cases going through the courts in our country. Most of them have been fabricated by the government so that the special services can demonstrate how "effective" Russia is in fighting terrorism and so that President Vladimir Putin has something with which to impress the West.

Close examination of these cases shows that many interrogation records have been tampered with and that the documents containing so-called honest confessions were obtained through the torture of innocent suspects who are being punished for the crimes of Chechen separatist Shamil Basayev.

Here is one example of how it's done. Recently two young college students from the Chechen capital of Grozny -- Musa Lomayev and Mikhail Vladovskikh -- were accused by the police and the prosecutor's office of all small, previously unsolved acts of terrorism that had occurred about six months before in one of Grozny's residential areas. As a result, Vladovskikh is now severely disabled: Both his legs were broken under torture; his kneecaps were shattered; his kidneys badly damaged by beating; his genitalia mutilated; his eyesight lost; his eardrums torn; and all of his front teeth sawed off. That is how he appeared before the court.

To get Lomayev to sign -- and he did sign confessions for five acts of terrorism -- they inserted electrical wires in his anus and applied current. He would lose consciousness, and they would pour water on him, show him the wires again, turn him around backward -- and he would sign confessions that he belonged to a gang with Vladovskikh. This despite the fact that the two defendants were first introduced to one another by their prison torturers.

Yet another young man who was pulled into this case is Muslim Chudalov, a neighbor of the Vladovskikh family before the war. Within 48 hours of being jailed, he produced confessions to 15 crimes, after which the torturers dragged him as a witness to testify at the Lomayev-Vladovskikh trial. The left side of his face was burned, his arms and legs were swollen, and he had bruises and bloodstains all over his body. He could neither walk nor stand -- security personnel had to carry him in. Responding to the prosecutor's demand, his tongue faltering, Chudalov confirmed all of his testimony against Lomayev and Vladovskikh. And certainly against himself.

Approximately a month later Chudalov was able to send a message from jail: "I could not endure all those tortures. I am scared even now when someone simply opens my door. . . . I did not participate personally in any one of those crimes. The investigators would themselves state the date of a particular crime, then they would tell me: 'This is what you participated in,' and beat me up. Then they made me learn the text of my statement by heart."

This is how we create our "Islamic terrorists" -- but we are no longer allowed to write openly about it in Russia. It is forbidden for the press to express sympathy with those sentenced for "terrorism," even if a judicial mistake is suspected.

During the perestroika years we fought so persistently for the right to appeal and the right for clemency, knowing how many judicial mistakes are made in the country, and a special state committee on pardons was established.

Now, under Putin, the committee has been disbanded, executions have been tacitly restored, and judicial mistakes are again viewed as permissible and tolerable. The flow of "Islamic terrorism" cases has engulfed hundreds of innocent people, while Basayev continues to walk free. And there is no end in sight.

The plight of those sentenced for "Islamic terrorism" today is the same as that of the political prisoners of the Gulag Archipelago. They receive long terms -- 18 to 25 years in strict security camps in Siberian swamps and woods, with virtually all communication with the outside forbidden. Even the Red Cross is not admitted.

Russia continues to be infected by Stalinism. But it seems to me that the rest of the world has been infected along with it, a world shrunken and frightened before the threat of terrorism. I recall the words of one torture victim at his trial: "What will become of me? How will I be able to live in this country if you sentence me to such a long prison term for a crime that I did not commit, and without any proof of my guilt?"

He never received an answer to his question. Indeed, what will become of all the rest of us, who tolerate this? What has become of us already?

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