LEVASHOVO MEMORIAL CEMETERY

I'd like to call them all by name
Anna Akhmatova

A corner of sylvan quiet surrounded by a high fence topped with barbed wire. Well-tended paths. The occasional sound of a bell. Small "graves" marked by visitors but not at all as in an ordinary cemetery: on the trees, portraits of the executed; on the ground, mounds decorated with pine cones and small stones. Of no one here may it be said with certainty that he is buried in exactly this place.

The history of the secret NKVD burial site not far from the village of Levashovo began in 1937, the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution and the activities of the Cheka–Vcheka–OGPU–NKVD and the year when "free elections" to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR were announced in accordance with Stalin's new Constitution.

On July 2, 1937, the Politburo of the Central committee of Communist Party of the Soviet Union resolved to undertake a large-scale "operation for the repression of former kulaks, active anti-Soviet elements, and criminals". On July 31, 1937, L. M. Zakovsky, chief of the Leningrad and Leningrad Region NKVD Directorate, received from Moscow a copy of Secret Administrative Order No. 00447 from N. I. Yezhov, the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs, for immediate commencement of the operation. According to the plan for the Leningrad region described in the order, a "threesome" (troika) consisting of the chief of the regional NKVD Directorate, the regional prosecutor, and the second secretary of the District Committee of the Communist Party was required within four months of August 5 to sentence 4,000 people to execution by shooting (First Category) and to send another 10,000 to camps and prisons (Second Category).

At the same time, a mass campaign against "spies and saboteurs" was loosed in the country. The so-called "German", "Polish", and "Kharbin" secret administrative orders of the NKVD called for the compilation of local execution lists of "spies" for subsequent approval by a Moscow "twosome" (dvoika)—the Commission of the NKVD and the Office of the Prosecutor of the USSR.

An NKVD order for the repression of "wives of the betrayers of the Motherland" and their children was also implemented. A separate execution plan was sent to Leningrad for the Solovetsky Prison. The Yezhovshchina of 1937–38 had begun.

At the time, the Leningrad region also included the present-day Murmansk, Novgorod, and Pskov regions, as well as part of the Vologda region. The operations of the Leningrad NKVD were carried out there too under the supervision of the deputy chief of the Directorate, V. N. Garin.
People were arrested for their biographical particulars—for their political past or their social or national origin—and on the basis of denunciations and spurious interrogation reports. Savage torture became a routine interrogation practice. By December 1937, the quotas for arrest and sentencing had all been met or exceeded. Show trials of "enemies of the people" took place in the region. In 1938, the terror continued with renewed force.

The executions ordered by the special "threesome" of the Leningrad regional NKVD Directorate, the NKVD Commission and Office of the Prosecutor of the USSR, and military tribunals, the Military Board of the Supreme Court of the USSR, and a special board of the Leningrad Regional Court were of incomparably greater scale than the political terror previously engaged in by the Soviet regime. In 1937 19,350 citizens were secretly executed in Leningrad, according to recent research, and in 1938 20,769 were, according to official data. Among the victims were well-known scholars: the Japanese specialists N. A. Nevsky and D. P. Zhukov, the Byzantinist V. N. Beneshevich, the theoretical physicist M. P. Bronstein, the poets Nikolai Oleinikov and Boris Kornilov, and the religious philosopher Fr. Pavel Florensky. Included as well were workers and peasants, teachers and students, clergymen, physicians, military officers, railroad workers, factory directors, and janitors. All were accounted "enemies of the people".

Those doomed to execution were brought to Leningrad, where the sentences were carried out by officers of the commandant's office of the Directorate of the Leningrad and Leningrad Region NKVD. Executions also took place in other cities of the region (Novgorod, Borovichi, Pskov, Lodeinoe Pole, Belozersk) and in the camps. Convicts of the Solovetsky Prison were executed as well, according to documents preserved in the Sandarmokh district near Medvezhegorsk, in Leningrad, and in the Solovetsky Islands.

It is clear that it had been realized even before the start of mass operations that a new burial site near Leningrad would be required for the interment of unprecedented numbers of executed people. For that purpose, the NKVD Directorate began to use in the summer of 1937 a lightly wooded area surrounded by a solid fence under strict guard in the Pargolovsky Dacha of the Pargolovsky forestry district near the village of Levashovo. In February 1938 the area was officially transferred to the NKVD Directorate.

It is presumed that the bodies of the executed were transported to Levshovo by vehicle from August 1937 to 1954. According to official data, 46,771 people were executed in Leningrad during that period, 40,485 of them on political charges, including the victims of the "Leningrad Affair".

∗ According to extant evidence, the municipal cemeteries of Petrograd—Leningrad and the Rzhevka artillery range near the villages of Staroe Kovalevo, Berngardovka, and Toksovo were also used during the Soviet period as burial sites for the executed.
There is also evidence that shots were fired inside the fence of Levashovo cemetery.

In the post-Stalin period the Leningrad KGB Directorate created on the basis of first-hand recollections a so-called Diagram of the Dacha with Times and Numbers of Interments indicating the burial places of 19,450 people. The Diagram has an approximate, provisional character, however, necessitating further research.

The cemetery remained secret until 1989 and was maintained in virtually pristine form by the Leningrad KGB Directorate. The guard building and barns were preserved, along with tracks left in the earth by vehicles. To be sure, over the half century a tall forest had grown up, and from time to time the guards had covered the common graves with sand brought in for the purpose. In 1975–76 the fence and entrance gate were repaired.

On January 5, 1989, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union passed a resolution "concerning additional measures for the restoration of justice in relation to the victims of the repressions that took place during the period of the 1930s and 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s". A half century after the Yezhovshchina, those citizens who had been executed by the extralegal "twosomes" and "threesomes" were to be rehabilitated and their burial places put in order. By the spring of 1989, V. T. Muravsky, head of the "Search" group of the Leningrad society Memorial, became aware of evidence of the existence of Levashovo and several similar sites, although that same spring the Leningrad and Leningrad Region KGB Directorate, after conducting a special survey of its own archives and the classified holdings of other municipal archives, declared that no documentary data concerning the existence of other sites had been found. On July 18, 1989, by Decision No. 544 of the Executive Committee of the Leningrad Municipal Council, the Levashovo burial site was recognized as a memorial cemetery and soon afterward, in the very first responses of the press, it became known as "Levashovo Wilderness".

In 1989–90, the territory of the cemetery was studied by the Trust for Geodesic Work and Engineering Research and by a working group of the All-Russia Geological Research Institute, in order to establish the boundaries of the burial pits. The Trust made a survey of the area and in several places drilled holes that confirmed assumptions about the interments in the central and northern parts of the cemetery.

In May 1990 Levashovo Memorial Cemetery was transferred to the city administration. The same spring the Ninth Architectural Studio of the LENNIIPROEKT headed by A. G. Lelyakov was asked to design a renovation of the memorial, including the erection of a bell tower and chapel.
Reconstruction by the community had begun even earlier. On October 21, 1989, and April 14, 1990, the first funeral services for the victims were conducted at the fork in the road in the center of the cemetery. A memorial stone was placed and an Orthodox cross was affixed to a tree. Relatives of the victims left ribbons on the trees with inscriptions and photographs. Surface grave markers appeared: metal tablets with portraits, slabs placed in the earth, crosses and other memorial tokens, many of them brought from afar.

Levashovo Wilderness became a true national memorial, a symbolic place of remembrance for those fellow countrymen and women who had perished without a trace in a time of peace. On May 7, 1992, the cemetery worker A. N. Volchenkov, a local resident and an eyewitness of the building of the fence with the barbed wire, installed a memorial cross.

Architects, city societies of the repressed, and the city administration have all supported subsequent initiatives to improve Levashovo Memorial Cemetery. Belorussian, Russian, Polish, Ingermanland, Jewish, German, Pskovian, Norwegian, Vologdan, Estonian, Assyrian, Ukrainian, Lettish, and Lithuanian memorial plaques have been put up. Requiems for the victims have been conducted in many languages on the days of commemoration. And there will be other monuments, as well.

On June 6, 1993, the bell in the bell tower erected by the workers of the cemetery under the direction of V. M. Tabachnikov was heard for the first time.

On October 30, 1993, the day of the solemn unveiling of the Russian Orthodox and Polish Catholic monuments, an exhibition on the Great Terror, prepared by L. A. Bartashevich, a member of the Association of Victims of Illegal Repressions, was opened. Since then, visitors have left their comments in the Guest Book.

In September 1995 and the spring of 1996 the cemetery's roads were put in order. Among the first to contribute to that work was Lydia Chukovskaya, who provided funds from her State Prize for Notes on Anna Akhmatova. A group of architects under the direction of I. G. Uralov, the city's chief artist, completed the improvements to the cemetery. On May 16, 1996, A. A. Sobchak, the mayor of St. Petersburg, unveiled the monument The Moloch of Totalitarianism at the cemetery's entrance.

So does Levashovo Wilderness look in our own time: a cemetery similar to Butovo and Kommunarka near Moscow, Kuropaty near Minsk, and Bykovnya near Kiev—a cemetery similar to the many burial places of those who were executed, both the known and the unknown.
FROM THE GUEST BOOK OF LEVASHOVO MEMORIAL CEMETERY

July 1, 1994

A terrible, tragic page in our history. May the Lord help Russia atone for those years and take wing. I. Roginskaya.

July 28, 1996

A Temple is lacking. Sergei Gubachev, Saratov.

June 18, 1998

Father, once again I have visited this place of your burial, and it will be so to the end of my days until my health fails or my heart stops beating! I am more than twice your age, my poor dear papa. You could have lived longer! Your contemporaries still walk our mother earth. They are few, but still there are some. Sleep peacefully, Vasily Vasilievich Priemyshev, born in 1903 and shot on December 5, 1937 (the day of the 1st anniversary of the "Stalin Constitution"). Your son, Alexei, born in 1927 (Moscow–St.-Petersburg–Moscow)

August 5, 1999

We have no next of kin in this burial place, but we too are shaken by the common tragedy. Thanks to the staff of the museum for the possibility of remembering all that happened.

The Egorov family, Moscow

January 29, 2001

My father, Pavlovich, Franz Yosifovich, was shot in September 1937. We are grateful to those who tend this cemetery with such love and care.

May 4, 2001

We, the students of class 9-A of School No. 58, Primorsky District, visited your museum and cemetery and were shaken. Thank you very much for preserving the memory of the innocent who perished.

And we too from class 6-A of School No. 58.

And I, Andreeva, Lena, broke into tears beside the grave of Stepanov where these lines were written: "I looked for you everywhere and found you close by. Your daughter".

Together with all the others we shall grieve and remember. Yulya and Anya.

We were so sorry and shall remember the deeds of the people buried here.

August 29, 2001

Möge dieser Friedhof mithelfen, daß immer Frieden zwischen Russen und Deutschen herrscht.

Martin Schulz, München

[May this cemetery help secure lasting peace between Russians and Germans. Martin Schulz, Munich, Germany]
September 4, 2001

Every summer I come home to my beloved Leningrad. And of course each time I visit "Levashovo Wilderness", the place where I can pay my respects to the remains of my father, Barmin, Mikhail Mikhailovich (arrested and shot in November 1937). I wander from "grave to grave" and memorial to memorial. How many innocently condemned and ruthlessly annihilated lie here?!

Enormous thanks to the people who protect the repose of "Levashovo Wilderness"!

Lucia Mikhailovna Ulyakina, Leningrad—Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk

September 16, 2001

Thanks to all who have helped people to hold on to the memory of the past, to forgive, to visit relatives, and to pray for the living and the dead.

Thank God, none of my kin are here. But the history of my clan is no sweeter for that.

Thank you again for the tears evoked by this place.

May the Lord keep you all!

Natalia Yemelyanenko, 29 years old, St.-Petersburg

July 17, 2002

We, guests from Khakasia, have visited the cemetery for the first time and of course were shaken by what we saw. Our hearts were very heavy after seeing it. We (Zhanna and Ivan) thank the entire staff of the museum and cemetery for their toil and patience in organizing such a good deed. Thanks to all who honor the memory of those innocent people who perished.

[Two signatures]

August 3, 2002

Many thanks and deep respect to all who safeguard the memory of the past of our long-suffering people. Strength to you and health. The great-grand-daughters of Sychev, Ivan Petrovich, born in 1887 and shot in 1937, 18 days after his arrest. 9 children were left after his undeserved death, and their privations and sufferings are impossible to describe.

[Two signatures], Cherepovets, Moscow

August 8, 2002

Un gruppo da Roma che vuole ricordare, insieme ai Russi, la loro storia, la loro sofferenza.

[A group from Rome that wishes to commemorate with the Russian people their history and their sufferings.] [Ten signatures]

November 3, 2002

This is my first time in Levashovo Wilderness. We spoke more than once in history classes about the monstrousness of the political repressions in Soviet times. I couldn’t believe it, but seeing that those
buried here number in the thousands, I was horrified. Unhappy people! Unhappy relatives of those people, their wives and children. May they rest in peace! Deep appreciation to all those who keep the cemetery in order.

Larisa Vladimirovna Kozhemyakina

May 10–13, 2003

From Yekaterinburg.

A daughter, Tatiana Georgievna Slatyukhina (maiden name, Zolotnitskaya). Kind people including D. L. Ginzburgsky, determined the fates of 54 deaf people, including my father, Georgy Semenovich Zolotnitsky, shot on October 14, 1937, and buried here. Enormous thanks to you for your care and attention and for remembering those who perished.

I am here once again, Papa! Good-bye till next time. I am alone now, Papa. Mama is no more. She died in 1991, without learning that you had been executed. Yura visited you. He died in 1996. I am holding on! I rang the bell for you to hear. I know that you are deaf, but you will feel it. So long.

May 10, 2003

Lord, help me to remember all the good that was given to my ancestors by Thee. Mother waited 40 years for you, Father. She died in 1977. I rang the bell. You heard me.

Sergei Karpenko (Vasileostrovsky)

May 24, 2003

I sincerely thank the staff of the memorial cemetery for their sacred cause and for their care, solicitude, and excellent maintenance of the territory and organization of the museum. With very best wishes for health, happiness, success, and prosperity. With deep appreciation,

V. Lozhkin, chairman of Abez Memorial (Komi Republic)

September 3, 2004

Sunku ramiai žiūrėti į tokius žiaurumus. Tikiuosi, kad daugiau nekada tas nebepasikartos. Alma Adamkienė.

[It is hard to look quietly upon such ferocities. I hope that it will never happen again. Alma Adamkienė (wife of the president of Lithuania, Valdas Adamkus).]

November 2, 2003

Thank you for safeguarding the memory of the Estonians who perished.

Paul-Eerik Rummo,

Minister of Population Affairs of the Republic of Estonia.

Viiu Hārm Rummo

November 27, 2003

Eternal memory and honor to my great-grandfather and grandfather Brekkan, Norwegians from the Murmansk region.
Laury Fedorovich Brekkan

December 11, 2004

We, the grandchildren of Ivanovsky, Albin Ivanovich, shot on January 21, 1938, learned for the first time of the place and date of the shooting of our grandfather and have come here. The link between generations has been restored. Thank you for the memory.

P. Ivanovsky, O. Ivanovskaya, S. Ivanovsky, and their children, Moscow

February 1, 2005

Here lie the best people, shot and destroyed by Soviet power. Here too lie their executioners and those who created that accursed regime. O Lord, if only it has taught us something!

Daniil Granin.

July 24, 2005

Pascal Maubert, Consul General of France in St. Petersburg.

I am a French woman. I am writing in French: Le temps passe, mais le souvenir reste [Time passes, but memory remains].

Margarite Maubert

October 3, 2005

Russians. From Moldavia.

Thank you for the bitter truth. Miroshnichenko.

Forgive us, people, and we shall all be forgiven. V. Miroshnichenko

The cemetery is open to visitors every day from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Contact by post: Gorskoe 143, Levashovo, St. Petersburg, 194361, Russia
Phone: (812) 594-95-14

Travel in St. Petersburg by train: from the Finland Railway Station to Levashovo Station, then by bus 75 or 84 to Gorskoe 143, or by bus 75 or route taxi (marshrutka) 455 from the Prospect Prosveshchenia metro stop.

Every year on October 30, the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repressions, the city of St. Petersburg organizes bus tours to Levashovo and takes part in wreath-laying ceremonies at the memorials.

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Text by A. Razumov
English translation by A. Staviskaya