

Nikita Petrov's 'Amalgam' - The Prison Murders of Radek and Sokol'nikov

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Introduction

Nikita Vasil'evich Petrov is a Russian historian, the author of several influential books in the history of the USSR during the Stalin period. His articles appear frequently in the Russian mass media and he has been featured in television interviews.

Petrov is a prominent figure in public discourse about the Stalin years and about the USSR generally. The organization that employs him, the "Memorial" society, has published or aided in the publication of a number of volumes of documents from former Soviet archives. Petrov's work (with German historian Mark Jansen) on the career of Nikolai Ezhov, People's Commissar of the NKVD during the bloody "Great Terror," or Ezhovshchina, of massive extralegal executions in the USSR in 1937-1938, is a valuable source of quotations from primary documents and, to some extent, as a chronology. The same should be said for Petrov's works on the GULAG and his two biographical dictionaries on NKVD employees.

In sum: Petrov's works are useful as sources of documents and dates. But Petrov's own interpretations of these documents, and his assertions generally, show such a profound and uninterrogated anticommunist bias as to be not merely useless but harmful. The same thing is true of the article under discussion here.

In early 2012 Petrov published a book titled *Палачи. Они выполняли заказы Сталина* («Executioners. They carried out Stalin's orders.») It was published by *Novaia Gazeta*, the thrice-weekly newspaper which has frequently featured Petrov's articles. The subject of the present study is one of the chapters of this book titled «Сталинский заказ. Как убивали Сокольникова и Радека» ("Stalinist Order: How Sokol'nikov and Radek Were Murdered.") This chapter is the same as the text of an article in *Novaia Gazeta* on May 6, 2008 with two additional paragraphs and very brief biographical sketches of some of the NKVD men.

I have chosen to examine the specific article in question because it is one whose sources can be checked. In this case we are not left to either "believe" or "disbelieve" Petrov. Thanks to published documents from former Soviet archives it is possible for any careful reader to see that Petrov's article is grossly falsified.

Early in his article Petrov makes the following statement:

Было неопровержимо доказано, что за убийством стоял лично Сталин.

It has been irrefutably proven that Stalin was personally behind the murder.

"Irrefutably proven" is a bold claim. It virtually challenges the reader to try to "refute" – disprove – Petrov's thesis that Stalin was personally responsible for Radek's and Sokol'nikov's

murders. The present article does precisely that: it refutes Petrov's claim by checking the assertions Petrov makes in this article against primary sources that are now available. Doing so enables us to affirm that Petrov has deliberately misled – lied to – his readers. The claim “irrefutably proven,” as Queen Gertrude remarks in Shakespeare's Hamlet, “doth protest too much”; it exaggerates in order to cover up the truth and is itself a lie.

Petrov's article ends by reprinting a report of June 29, 1956 by General Ivan Serov, at the time the chief of the KGB. We begin our study by examining Serov's statements in the light of evidence now available. This section is followed by a close examination of Petrov's own claims. At the end we draw some basic conclusions about Petrov, his employer the “Memorial” society, the politicized nature of the study of Soviet history, and historical objectivity.

Serov's Lies

Serov's report dated June 29, 1956 is comprised of twelve paragraphs. We begin by discussing the assertions in each paragraph. Next we examine in depth those claims of Serov's concerning which we now have independent evidence. We conclude with the evidence that Serov himself, and one of those he names, Lobov, have previously been shown to have lied. In the text of this article we have reproduced quotations from Serov's report only when absolutely necessary. In other cases the reader should refer as needed to the attached translation of Serov's report.

Paragraph By Paragraph

The assertions in Serov's first paragraph are all a bluff. He cites no evidence to support them. Serov claims that “[d]ocuments in the KGB archive suggest...” But Petrov had access to this archive. If Petrov he found any such documents he would have cited them. *Something* may well exist, for Serov doesn't claim that the “documents” *prove* anything, but merely “suggest.” This constitutes an admission that he cannot prove Beria and Kobulov planned to murder Radek and Sokol'nikov.

Second paragraph: no evidence is given to support what Serov claims about Kubatkin and Sharok. Petrov gives none either.

Third paragraph: No evidence whatsoever is cited to support Serov's claims about Sokol'nikov's murder.

Fourth paragraph: According to this and the following paragraph Sokol'nikov was murdered by a fellow prisoner named P.M. Kotov. No evidence is given to support Serov's statement that Kotov was really Lobov.

The fifth paragraph is evidently a quotation from a real document, a transcript of an interrogation of Kotov, relating how he argued with and then killed Sokol'nikov.

Sixth paragraph: No evidence is cited of the involvement of Kubatkin, as Serov alleged.

Seventh paragraph: Once again we evidently have a quotation from a real document: the report of Radek's death at the hands of a Trotskyite named Varezchnikov. It says nothing about any "plan." It is of interest that Serov did not claim Varezchnikov was really "Stepanov." This elaboration was added some years later. This is logical since, as time progressed, former NKVD men spun more and more elaborate falsehoods at the request of Khrushchev-era investigators, as we shall see.

The eight paragraph is comprised of falsehoods concerning the careers of Kubatkin and Sharok. We will examine it in detail below.

Paragraph nine contains no evidence that Arnol'd or Stroilov ever "renounced their confessions." Had they done so, why would "Beria and Kobulov" have waited until September 1941, when the Nazis were closing in rather than employing "a specially designed plan" to have them killed, as they allegedly had done to Radek and Sokol'nikov 28 months earlier? Conversely, if Arnol'd and Stroilov had "renounced their confessions" and could be safely left to live, why not act the same way with Radek and Sokol'nikov?

In this same paragraph Serov lies about the shootings at the Orlov prison in September, 1941. Evidence about this incident was published in 1990. We will examine it below.

Ovchinnikov

The concluding paragraphs, ten through twelve, concern former NKVD man Ovchinnikov. We examine them in detail below in the light of primary sources now available.

Serov wrote:

Определенный интерес в этом же плане представляет и судьба быв. начальника Прокопьевского горотдела НКВД Овчинникова, у которого на связи находился Арнольд.
 Овчинников в декабре 1940 года был осужден Военным Трибуналом Западно-Сибирского округа к 10 годам лишения свободы. Находясь под стражей, он рассказывал своим сокамерникам о фальсификации дела по обвинению Арнольда и заявлял о своем намерении написать об этом заявление.
 24 марта 1941 года без наличия каких-либо дополнительных материалов дело Овчинникова было пересмотрено и приговором Военного Трибунала он был осужден к расстрелу.

The fate of the former Head of the Prokop'evsky City Department of the NKVD Ovchinnikov is of particular interest in this same plan, with whom Arnol'd was in contact.

In December 1940, Ovchinnikov was convicted by the Military Tribunal of the West Siberian District to 10 years imprisonment. While in custody, he told his cellmates about the falsification of the case against Arnol'd and announced his intention to write a statement about it.

On March 24, 1941, without the presence of any additional materials, the case of Ovchinnikov was reviewed and by verdict of the Military Tribunal, he was sentenced to death.

We now have a number of primary source documents concerning Ovchinnikov. They permit us to determine that Serov is lying here.

- a. The report of trial and death sentence of Ovchinnikov, dated March 24, 1941.
- b. A brief review of his case dated December 19, 1955.
- c. A review of Ovchinnikov's case dated January 6, 1956. This appears to be the review available to Serov himself.

In addition, we have:

- d. A memoir about Ovchinnikov's crimes from one of his victims, L.I. Medvedeva, written down in May 1989 in Tomsk.

Finally, we have a statement about Ovchinnikov in the work of two highly anticommunist and anti-Stalin researchers, Junge and Binner, in their work *Kak Terror Stal 'Bol'shim'* ("How the Terror Became 'Great'"). Junge and Binner cite repression statistics from Tomsk, where Ovchinnikov was chief of the NKVD in 1937-1938, to demonstrate the massive illegal repression and murders of which Ovchinnikov was guilty and for which he was tried and executed after Beria took over as People's Commissar of the NKVD.

As Serov reported Ovchinnikov was tried and convicted on December 2, 1940 and sentenced to 10 years (Doc. b.). Serov may have taken them from this very document, as the date and sentence are not given in Doc. a

Document a. gives the fullest details about Ovchinnikov. As chief of the Tomsk city NKVD he had been convicted of many instances of torture, forcing false confessions, false arrests, false imprisonment; and falsifying evidence leading to death sentences against innocent people. Document d. recounts one survivor's memories of Ovchinnikov's depredations more than fifty years after they took place.

Document a. relates the fact that Ovchinnikov was sentenced under article 193-17 b. of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR – "abuse of his official position under exceptionally aggravating circumstances"¹, which permitted imposition of the death sentence. Ovchinnikov was sentenced to death on March 24, 1941 and shot on May 19, 1941.

The review of Ovchinnikov's case dated January 6, 1956 details his connection with Arnol'd and Shestov, and repeats the summary of his crimes. It adds that he engaged in "anti-Soviet agitation among the other prisoners" while awaiting trial. The review document states that Ovchinnikov had confessed his guilt "in part" but that the court also possessed witness and documentary evidence against him.

¹ "Злоупотребление служебным положением при особо отягчающих обстоятельствах."

According to Document b., dated three weeks before Document c., Ovchinnikov was sentenced on December 2, 1940 to 10 years in a correctional camp and again on March 19-24, 1941, to death. This review makes it clear why there were two trials. In the first Ovchinnikov was convicted under article 58-10 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR, while on March 19-24 1941 he was convicted under article 193-17 b. Article 58-10 dealt with “espionage,” including giving or gathering state secrets to other governments, counterrevolutionary organizations, or private persons. Unless it entailed exceptionally serious consequences for the state, it required a sentence “not less than three years.”²

So Ovchinnikov was tried twice for different offenses and was executed after his second conviction. Documents a. and c. mention only the latter, death sentence. This disproves Serov's statement that

24 марта 1941 года **без наличия каких-либо дополнительных материалов** дело Овчинникова было пересмотрено и приговором Военного Трибунала он был осужден к расстрелу.

On March 24, 1941, **without the presence of any additional materials**, the case of Ovchinnikov was reviewed and by verdict of the Military Tribunal, he was sentenced to death.

[Emphasis added, GF]

Serov claims that the second trial was not in fact a trial at all but simply a “review” to punish Ovchinnikov for threatening “to write a statement” about the fact that the case against Arnol'd was supposedly “a falsification.” We've already seen that this is false. Documents b. and c. make it clear that the March 1941 court action was not a “review” but a new trial, and that “additional evidence” was indeed brought forward for the new charge.

The NKVD-KGB information about Ovchinnikov's atrocities is independently corroborated by Document d., Medvedeva's account of 1989 written during the Gorbachev years when the search was on for horrors carried out during Stalin's time, and published in Tomsk itself in 2004. No one at either time had any motive to disprove any Khrushchev-era attack on Stalin – quite the contrary.

We include Medvedeva's account here for the sake of completeness. By itself, without any corroboration, it might be considered unreliable given the passage of more than fifty years between the events described and the writing of the memoir account. But it is completely consistent with the information from the official documents we have about Ovchinnikov.

Junge and Binner have this to say about Ovchinnikov.

В насколько высокой степени операция по приказу № 00447 маркирует собой грань в истории катастрофического 1937 года, показывает следующая статистика арестов

² Article 58 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR, 1926 version, at http://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Статья_58_Уголовного_Кодекса_РСФСР/вариант_1926_года

и приговоров в Томске и его окрестностях (97) начальник НКВД которого И. В. Овчинников был одним из самых жестоких чекистов во время Большого Террора.³

The high degree to which the operation accord to order No. 00447 marks the boundary in the history of the disastrous year 1937 is shown by the following statistics of arrests and sentences in Tomsk and its environs (97) where the head of the NKVD, I.V. Ovchinnikov, was one of the most brutal security officers during the Great Terror.

We have information about Ovchinnikov from several mutually independent sources. Is it credible that a person such as Ovchinnikov would have threatened to write a report about a falsified case? And to whom would Ovchinnikov have written such a report? He himself had falsified many cases, causing the imprisonment and deaths of many innocent persons. This was the conclusion not only of the NKVD tribunal in 1941, but of the KGB review of January 1956.

The conclusion is inescapable: Serov was lying. Ovchinnikov was executed after a second trial on additional charges. It is simply not credible that he would have complained about false charges against Arnol'd.

Serov unquestionably had access to the 1941, 1955 and 1956 documents and more. Therefore, Serov deliberately lied about the Ovchinnikov – Arnol'd situation. There is also no reason to believe Serov's claim that Arnol'd had retracted his confession. We will see this confirmed again when we discuss the Orlov Prison execution of September 1941, below.

Kubatkin's and Sharok's careers

Neither Kubatkin nor Sharok "had worked up to this time as ordinary employees of the NKVD apparatus," as Serov claimed. We have our evidence for this from Nikita Petrov's own two books on the NKVD: *Who Led the NKVD 1934-1941. A Handbook*. (Moscow: "Memorial," 1999), and *Who Led the Organs of State Security 1941-1954. A Handbook*. (Moscow: "Memorial," 2010).⁴

Kubatkin is listed in the earlier volume. According to the account in Petrov's own book, by 1939 Kubatkin was a rising star in the NKVD. He had not been a "riadovoi," or rank-and-file officer of the NKVD, since 1930. In May 1939 he had already been assistant to the chief of the special division of the Odessa oblast' division of the GPU (1934-5); chief of the Frunze raion division of the NKVD (Odessa oblast'); chief of the UGB of the UNKVD of Odessa oblast' (1936 - March 1937); student at the central school of the NKVD of the USSR from March to August 15, 1937; chief of the 1st section of the 4th division of the GUGB NKVD USSR after August 15, 1937; chief of the section of the 4th division of the GUGP of the 1st directorate of the NKVD of the USSR 1938-1939; and secretary of the party committee of the GUGB of the NKVD of the USSR from 1939 until June 1939.⁵

³ Mark IUnge, Rol'f Binner. *Kak terror stal 'bol'shim'.. Sekretnyi prikaz No. 00447 i tekhnologia ego ispolnenii*. Moscow: AIRO-20, 2003, p. 36.

⁴ Кто руководил НКВД 1934-1941. Справочник. (М. «Мемориал» 1999); and Кто руководил органами госбезопасности 1941-1954. Справочник. (М.: «Мемориал» 2010).

⁵ Kubatkin, Piotr Nikolaevich. In Petrov 1999, 255. At <http://www.memo.ru/history/NKVD/kto/biogr/gb261.htm>

A short career biography of Sharok is given in the second of Petrov's volumes on NKVD personnel. Sharok was not an "ordinary employee of the NKVD apparatus" either. At the time of Sokol'nikov's and Radek's murders Sharok was assistant chief of the 1st division of the 2nd section of the GUGB of the NKVD of the USSR (November 1938 to October 5, 1939).⁶

Both Kubatkin and Sharok did receive promotions during 1939: Kubatkin to chief of the directorate of the NKVD of Moscow oblast' in June 1939; Sharok to assistant commissar of the NKVD of the Kazakh SSR (Republic) on October 5, 1939. There is no indication that these promotions had anything to do with the murders of Sokol'nikov and Radek. Moreover, strictly speaking, Serov did not in fact claim that they had! Serov wrote only that "shortly after" the murders ("вскоре после этого") they were given new appointments. This is not true either. Sharok's promotion in October 1939 cannot be described as "shortly after" the murders. And if these promotions were related, why did Sharok's come four months after Kubatkin's?

We know Serov was lying when he described Kubatkin and Sharok as "ordinary employees of the NKVD." Serov's report presents no evidence for any of his other assertions about this supposed "plan."

The Orlov Prison Executions Of 1941

In his report Serov wrote:

Другие осужденные по этому делу — Строилов и Арнольд, также отказавшиеся от своих показаний, до осени 1941 года содержались в Орловской тюрьме НКВД, а 11 сентября 1941 года по заочному приговору Военной Коллегии Верховного Суда СССР, вынесенному без каких-либо оснований, в числе других заключенных были расстреляны.

Other convicted in this case, Stroilov and Arnol'd, who also refused to testify, were kept in the Orel prison of the NKVD until the autumn of 1941, and on September 11, 1941, in absentia, by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR, issued without any justification, were shot along with other prisoners.

Arnol'd and Stroilov were not singled out at all, much less for supposedly "renouncing their confessions." They were among 170 prisoners previously convicted of serious crimes who were shot at the Orlov prison as the German armies advanced on September 11, 1941, evidently for continuing anti-Soviet activity. We know this was the charge from the documents published in an official Gorbachev-era Communist Party journal in 1990.⁷ Beria, commissar of the NKVD, had been informed by the heads of the directorate of prisons, Bashtakov and Nikol'skii, that at least 76 of the prisoners were carrying out anti-Soviet agitation and planning to escape, with the advance of German troops (Orlov was actually taken by the Germans on October 3, 1941). On

⁶ Sharok, Grigori Fiodorovich. In Petrov 2010, 919-920.

⁷ "Tragediia v medvedevskom lesu. O rasstrele politzakiuchennykh Orlovskoi tiur'my." ("The tragedy in the Medvedevsk woods. The shooting of political prisoners of the Orlov prison.") *Izvestiia TsK KPSS* No. 11, 1990, pp. 124 – 131.

September 8, 1941 the Plenum of the Soviet Supreme Court met, reconsidered Arnol'd's case in which he was charged under Article 58-10 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR (he had originally been convicted of violating Articles 58-8 and 58-11 and received a sentence of ten years), and resented him to be executed.

We can be reasonably certain that subversive activities were in fact going on because Dr. D.D. Pletnev, sentenced to 25 years imprisonment at the third Moscow Trial of March 1938, wrote about those activities in a letter, one portion of which has been published. On January 15, 1941, in a letter to Voroshilov, Pletnev complained about his prison conditions and stated:

Я коченею от окружающей меня лжи и стужи среди пигмеев и червей, ведущих свою подрывную работу.⁸

I am numb from the lies and cold that surround me among the pygmies and worms that are carrying on their subversive work

That means that Pletnev's final sentence in this letter fragment in part confirms Beria's allegation of later that same year – that some prisoners in the Orlov Prison were in fact engaging in a repetition of the “subversive” activity for which they were imprisoned in the first place.

The 1990 article confirms that Arnol'd was convicted in absentia on September 8, 1941 along with the others. It proves that there was a “basis” for their re-sentencing to death – the alleged subversive activity – and that Arnol'd and Stroilov were not executed for “retracting their confessions” or, indeed, for anything related to their trial at all. Other Moscow Trial defendants were among those executed at the same time; no one has claimed that they retracted their confessions.

Serov cites no evidence that Arnol'd or Stroilov had renounced their trial confessions, and Petrov did not find any.

Serov's Lies During Khrushchev's Time

Matthew Lenoe⁹ gained access to many documents related to the investigation of the Kirov assassination and the Khrushchev-era attempt to blame it all on Stalin. According to Lenoe:

...the Khrushchev supporters in charge of the investigation, including KGB chief Ivan Serov, sought to collect as much material as possible incriminating Stalin. This is what Khrushchev wanted, so that he could discredit his political rivals...

The 1960-1961 investigation run by the Party Control Commission (KPK) was aimed explicitly at inculpating Stalin in the Kirov murder. (7-8)

Lenoe reveals that Serov destroyed some evidence and withheld other evidence in order to construct a false scenario of Kirov's murder (591-2):

⁸ *TsK KPSS* No. 1, 1989, p. 119, col. 2.

⁹ Matthew Lenoe, *The Kirov Murder and Soviet History* New Haven: Yale U.P. 2010. Page references to Lenoe are to this text.

If the official charges in the first two trials – that former Zinoviev supporters / 592 / had conspired to murder Kirov – were entirely bogus, then the indictments in all of the succeeding show trials collapsed. ... But if there was some truth to the charge that Zinovievites conspired to kill Kirov, then that preserved the possibility of arguing that the latter charges were also valid, at least in part. Therefore Serov and Rudenko ... chose to make a clear-cut argument that Nikolaev had had no relationship at all with the ex-Zinoviev supporters convicted in the trial of the “Leningrad Center.

It appears that Serov or his boss had thought through this strategy, to deny any connection at all between Nikolaev and the Zinovievites, even before the “Secret Speech.” On January 27, 1956 the KGB destroyed central records on the case file “Svoiak,” the all-union surveillance operation against the Zinovievites. It seems likely that “Svoiak” contained more evidence than Serov wanted Molotov to see, either of counterrevolutionary talk among former Zinovievites and/or of Nikolaev’s connections with the accused in the “Leningrad Center.” Serov concealed other evidence of connections between Nikolaev and the ex-Zinovievites Kotolynov, Antonov, and Shatsky. The excerpts from Nikolaev’s diaries that he released to the Molotov commission in April 1956 contained no references to these men. But we know from later releases of data that Nikolaev did mention all three in his diaries. Serov presumably feared that Molotov would construe such connections as evidence of criminal conspiracy.

At the same time the Molotov commission was debating these issues, Rudenko, Serov, and KPK officials were already taking actions based on the assumption that the charges in the show trials were false...

Serov’s report¹⁰ (595-599) is full of outright lies. We will cite only a few of them here. Serov:

On March 13, 1938 the Military Collegium... found Bukharin, Rykov, Yagoda, and other accused... guilty in carrying out the villainous murder of S.M. Kirov....

This statement of Serov’s is a lie. The court’s verdict says nothing of the kind. Bukharin and Rykov were convicted of entirely different crimes. Yagoda was convicted only of “giving special instructions to his accomplices working in the Leningrad Administration of the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs not to hinder the perpetration of the crime.” (796-7)

Serov claimed:

Yagoda in essence recanted his earlier testimony with regard to the participation of the Rightists in the murder of Kirov... Rykov and Bukharin, who supposedly made the decision to carry out this terrorist act ... categorically denied... (598)

This is false, as Serov had to know. Yagoda did not deny but rather confirmed the role of the Rights in Kirov’s murder. Anyone who reads the trial transcript can see that Yagoda only denied

¹⁰ This report is in English translation in Leno 595-599. The original Russian text has not been released by Leno or by his publisher, Yale University Press.

that he himself had played any active role in, or had specific prior knowledge of, the plot to kill Kirov. Iagoda did insist, however, that he had given instructions to his subordinates not to hinder any such attempt as might be made. That is, Iagoda denied he was an accomplice to the murder, but agreed that he was an accessory. During the trial Prosecutor Vyshinskii and Iagoda argued at some length over precisely this issue. As for Rykov and Bukharin, neither of them was charged with making the decision to kill Kirov.

Lobov Lied

Serov's report on the Radek-Sokol'nikov murders states that P.M. Lobov was one of the participants. However, neither Serov nor Petrov offer any direct testimony by Lobov to this effect. Even if they had done so, however, that testimony could not be accepted, for Lenoe establishes that Lobov lied during the 1950s and 1960s – no doubt because Serov insisted he do so.

According to Lenoe, in 1956 Lobov's testimony was in accord with the conclusions of the March 1938 Moscow Trial. But by 1960 Lobov was giving false testimony that supported Party Control Commission member Ol'ga Shatunovskaia's preconceived idea that Stalin had been behind Kirov's murder:

Another witness deployed by Klimov was P. M. Lobov, who had murdered Grigory Sokolnikov in 1939 for Beria.¹¹ Lobov's post-Stalin testimony showed extensive embellishment and grew more florid over time. Thus, in 1956 he testified that at the Kolyma labor camp Zaporozhets had told him that Nikolaev had been taken into custody once and that Yagoda had ordered him freed... In 1960 Lobov went much farther, stating that he had personally interrogated Nikolaev, who intimated that he had high-level connections. He also claimed that at Kolyma Zaporozhets had told him that Stalin himself had ordered Nikolaev's release. This was precisely the smoking gun that Shatunovskaya and the other investigators needed to accuse Stalin of Kirov's murder. **Lobov delivered this evidence, which he had not mentioned in 1956, very conveniently for the KPK [Party Control Commission] in October 1960.** (622-3; evidence added, GF)

Lenoe concludes that Lobov's testimony is unreliable:

Against this is the unanimous testimony of credible Leningrad NKVD officers who survived the Terror (credible meaning minus P.M. Lobov and P.P. Petrovsky)...

Serov's Report: Conclusion

Serov's report is a falsification. We can confidently assert that because every statement in it that can be verified – cross-checked against other evidence we now have – is false.

The only primary source evidence quoted in Serov's report are statements from NKVD reports that Sokol'nikov was murdered by Kotov and Radek by the Trotskyist Varezhnikov. Neither

¹¹ Lenoe's "evidence" for Lobov's murder of Sokol'nikov is the same report by Serov that we are examining here.

Serov nor Petrov cites any evidence that Kotov was really Lobov. Evidently even Serov did not claim that Varezhnikov was really an NKVD man named I.I. Stepanov, as Petrov does.

With the collapse of Serov's report as evidence that Stalin had Radek and Sokol'nikov murdered the main prop supporting Petrov's article has been destroyed as well. However, Petrov adds yet more details to the story, so we will proceed to study what Petrov wrote. Most of the assertions Petrov has added himself are falsehoods as well. We will examine them next.

Petrov's Lies

Besides appending Serov's article to his chapter in his book Petrov also reprinted it in his own book on Serov in 2008. But Petrov makes additions of his own to the story. Most of them are also falsehoods, like Serov's. The rest of this article examines them.

Stalin's "Vengefulness"

Petrov states:

Но мог ли Сталин оставить в живых своих многолетних критиков и противников? Его мстительность вошла в легенду.

But could Stalin have left his perennial critics and opponents alive? His vengefulness has become legendary.

Petrov provides no evidence that Stalin was "vengeful" nor does he refer to anybody else's evidence. This appears to be an example of "weasel words," of implying something that is not actually stated, since the sentence "His vengefulness has become legendary" is not quite an assertion that Stalin was, in fact, vengeful – only that he is assumed to have been such.

A commission formed immediately after the 20th Party Congress...

Petrov states:

Расследование обстоятельств убийства Радека и Сокольников началось сразу после XX съезда, когда создали комиссию по изучению материалов «Московских процессов» 1936–1938 гг. В архиве КГБ были подняты и изучены все материалы, связанные с процессами. Вывод комиссии однозначен — все показательные процессы 1936–1938 гг. сфальсифицированы.

The investigation into the circumstances of the murder of Radek and Sokolnikov began immediately after the XX Party Congress, when a commission was set up to study the materials of the Moscow Trials of 1936–1938. All materials in the KGB archives related to the Trials were taken up and studied. The conclusion of the commission was unambiguous - all the Show Trials of 1936–1938 were falsified.

This is completely false. The first such commission was the so-called "Molotov Commission." As we have seen, Lenoë discusses in some detail how Serov, Khrushchev's man, withheld evidence from and lied to Molotov.

Despite Serov's withholding of evidence the Molotov Commission did not conclude that "all the show trials of 1936-1938 were falsified" as Petrov claims. On the contrary, its report of December 10 1956 did not reject the verdicts of any of the Moscow trials! The report refused to review the cases of the major defendants in the Moscow Trials. Though the report accepted some of the criticisms that Khrushchev's men, aided by Serov, vigorously promoted, it explicitly refused to reconsider the three Moscow Trials of 1936, 1937 and 1938. The commission's report concluded as follows:

Комиссия приходит к выводам, что оснований для пересмотра дел в отношении Бухарина, Рыкова [суд 1938-го], Зиновьева, Каменева, Евдокимова [суд 1936-го], Пятакова, Радека [суд 1937-го], Раковского, Ягоды, Крестинского [суд 1938-го], Сокольникова, Серебрякова [суд 1937-го], Залуцкого, Сафарова [осуждены в 1935-ом в связи с убийством Кирова], Бакаева и Смирнова И. Н. [суд 1936-го] не имеется, поскольку они на протяжении многих лет возглавляли антисоветскую борьбу, направленную против строительства социализма в СССР. В отношении же других осужденных по этим процессам Комиссия считает возможным дела пересмотреть персонально в отношении каждого.¹²

The Commission concludes that there are no grounds for reviewing cases against Bukharin, Rykov [the trial of 1938], Zinoviev, Kamenev, Evdokimov [the trial of 1936], Pyatakov, Radek [the trial of 1937], Rakovsky, Yagoda, Krestinsky [trial of 1938], Sokolnikov, Serebryakov [trial of 1937], Zalutsky, Safarov [convicted in 1935 in connection with the murder of Kirov], Bakayev and Smirnov I.N. [trial 1936], because for many years they headed the anti-Soviet struggle directed against the construction of socialism in the USSR. In relation to others convicted in these trials the Commission considers it possible to review cases individually for each.

It is not clear how Petrov thought he could get away with such an obvious falsehood. The Molotov Commission is well known, at least to historians of the period. Its final report is even available online.¹³

The Testimony Of Fedotov And Matusov

Petrov writes:

Как пояснили вызванные в ЦК КПСС в 1961-ом бывшие руководящие работники секретно-политического отдела ГУГБ НКВД П.В. Федотов и Я.Н. Матусов:

¹² *Reabilitatsiia. Kak Eto Bylo. Febral' 1956 – nachalo 80-kh godov. T. 2. Moskva: "Materik", 2003. (RKEB 2) 207. Identifying information in square brackets is mine.*

¹³ At http://www.perpetrator2004.narod.ru/documents/kirov/Molotov_Commission_Memo.doc

«...Оперативно-чекистские отделения при политизоляторах свои донесения о поведении Радека и Сокольникова и им подобных лиц направляли непосредственно в адрес лично Берии, который их посылал или докладывал Сталину, что было работникам отдела известно как со слов Кобулова, так и по смыслу, сколько помнится, его письменных указаний на донесениях политизоляторов.»

Причем оба, и Федотов и Матусов, утверждали, что «убийство Радека и Сокольникова было совершено по указанию Сталина.»

As the former leading officials of the secret-political department of the GUGB NKVD¹⁴, P.V. Fedotov and Ya.N. Matusov, summoned to the CPSU Central Committee in 1961, explained:

“... The operational-NKVD branches at political isolators¹⁵ sent their reports on the behavior of Radek and Sokolnikov and similar persons directly to Beria personally, who sent or reported to Stalin what the department employees knew both from the words of Kobulov and from the sense, as far as I can remember, of his written instructions on the reports of the political isolators.”

Moreover, both Fedotov and Matusov claimed that “the murder of Radek and Sokolnikov was committed under the orders of Stalin.”

Perhaps Fedotov and Matusov did say something like this. But we know that Serov and the Shvernik Commission were not looking for the truth, but to support Khrushchev's preconceived position that everybody was innocent. (We discuss the Shvernik Commission briefly below).

Even if genuine, this is hearsay at best. In any case, no testimony should simply be “believed” even if it is not hearsay, as this is. Would Petrov advocate “believing” the testimony of the defendants at the Moscow Trials?

Furthermore, neither Fedotov nor Matusov was in a position to know what Beria did with any reports sent to him or what Stalin did or did not order.

Fedotov, Matusov, and other former NKVD-KGB employees had plenty of motive to say whatever Serov wanted them to. Khrushchev had overseen the trial and execution of a number of KGB men who had worked under Beria and had refused to tell Khrushchev's investigators what they wanted to hear.

Stalin's Inscription On A Drawing

Petrov writes:

Позднее, в 1940-е, Сталин сделал косвенное признание и даже указал мотивы убийства Радека.

¹⁴ Main Directorate of State Security of the NKVD (NKVD = People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs).

¹⁵ Prisons for prisoners convicted of crimes against the State.

Later, in the 1940s, Stalin indirectly confessed to and even indicated the motive for Radek's murder.

The inscription, apparently in Stalin's hand, says:

«Рыжий паршивый Радек. Не сцал бы против ветра, не был бы злой, был бы живой. И. Сталин.»

“Radek, the lousy redhead. If he had not pissed against the wind, if he had not been unkind, he would be alive. J. Stalin”

Objectively speaking, Stalin's words here could never be interpreted as an admission of anything except, perhaps, some lingering affection for Radek. They could just as easily be evidence that Stalin regretted Radek's death! This inscription only demonstrates that Stalin knew Radek was dead and blamed it at least partly on Radek himself.

Radek's alleged denunciation of the Moscow Trials

According to Petrov

Конечно, Радек вел с сокамерниками разговоры о том, что все «московские процессы» -- выдумка.

Of course, Radek talked with his cellmates about how all the “Moscow Trials” were fabrications.

Petrov cites no evidence, even of a hearsay nature, to support this statement. Even if he did, that would not mean that Radek really did so, much less that the Trials were actually a fiction.

Evidence from the Trotsky Archive and other sources make it clear that the trials were not a fabrication by the Stalin leadership at all. A few examples:

* We know that the “bloc of Rights and Trotskyites” really did exist, because Trotsky and Sedov wrote to each other about it (Harvard Trotsky Archive).

Not incidentally, this also proves that the Gorbachev-era “rehabilitation” reports and related documents are false, since they deny the existence of the “bloc of Rights and Trotskyites” which we know did exist.

Moreover, the Gorbachev-era Soviet party leadership knew this too. We know this for certain because Arch Getty's article noting the proof of the bloc's existence was actually translated into Russian and published in the Communist Party journal *Voprosy Istorii KPSS* in 1991.

* At the 1937 Moscow Trial Radek told the precise truth about the letter he claimed he had received from Trotsky in the early months of 1932. We know this because the return receipt of

this letter to Radek noting the date of delivery is preserved in the Harvard Trotsky Archive. Getty's article notes this fact too.

It would be a great coincidence if the only true statements made by trial defendants were precisely those we can now verify independently. This suggests that other statements made during that trial by Radek, at least, may also be true as well.

* Thanks to the work of the late American researcher Alvin Coox we have other non-Soviet evidence of the Right-Trotskyite and the military conspiracies. Coox interviewed former officers of the Japanese army who had been assigned to work with NKVD defector General Genrikh S. Liushkov, who deserted to the Japanese army across the Manchurian border on June 13, 1938. In his published articles, written while he was working for the propaganda section of the Japanese army, Liushkov denied the existence of the conspiracies. But he confirmed the existence of these same conspiracies privately to his Japanese handlers. They in turn reported this to Coox, who was baffled by it.

It is possible that former NKVD men may have told Serov's men that Radek denounced the trials as fabrications. But that would only mean that they were telling Serov what he wanted to hear.

“A Document From The Archive Of The Shvernik Commission”

This document basically only adds to Serov's report the detail that, supposedly, the Trotskyist Varezchnikov was really

... Степанов И.И., бывший комендант НКВД Чечено-Ингушской АССР, арестованный в феврале 1939 года за серьезные должностные преступления. В ноябре того же года по указанию Берия Степанов освобожден из-под стражи. В постановлении о прекращении дела указано, что он выполнил «специальное задание», имеющее важное государственное значение.”

... I.I. Stepanov, former commandant of the NKVD of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, arrested in February 1939 for serious misconduct in office. In November of the same year, at the direction of Beria, Stepanov was released from custody. The order to dismiss the case stated that he had fulfilled “special assignment of great importance to the State.”

There is no evidence – not even hearsay evidence -- to support any of the statements here.

The Shvernik Report itself contained false information designed to help Khrushchev blame Stalin for various crimes. For example, it states:

Никакого «Антисоветского право-троцкистского блока» в действительности не существовало...

In reality, no “Anti-Soviet Right-Trotskyite Bloc” existed. ...

But thanks to the Trotsky-Sedov correspondence in the Harvard Trotsky Archive we know that such a bloc did indeed exist.¹⁶ The Shvernik Commission does not mention Varezhnikov – Stepanov in its brief discussion of the Radek-Sokol'nikov murders but only refers to unnamed

... специально подосланными лицами из числа бывших сотрудников НКВД, отбывавших наказания за политические и должностные преступления.¹⁷

... persons -- former NKVD officials -- specially sent, who had served sentences for political and official crimes.

Petrov states:

Рядовым исполнителям — Степанову и Лобову — в награду даровали свободу.

The rank-and-file perpetrators, Stepanov and Lobov, were granted their freedom as a reward.

Once again Petrov gives no evidence to support this statement. According to a report by employees of the Soviet Procuracy dated June 14, 1990 Lobov was sentenced in 1939 to 3 years exile in Kazakhstan. This is a penal sentence, not “freedom.”¹⁸

There is no entry for either Lobov or Stepanov in either of Petrov's lengthy books on the personnel of the NKVD. According to Petrov Stepanov had been commandant of the NKVD of the Checheno-Ingush ASSR. This position was prominent enough to qualify him for an entry in these large volumes. Lobov's role in the Kirov case should have qualified him for an entry too. Petrov also omitted Ovchinnikov from these works. Yet Ovchinnikov had been head of the Tomsk NKVD.

The very brief biographical note on Stepanov that Petrov gives on page 53 simply states that

с февраля по ноября 1939 г. находился в заключении.

He was in custody from February to November 1939.

Petrov gives no source for this information. Nor does he give any reason for excluding Stepanov's biographical sketch from his two volumes.

As for Lobov, Petrov's short biography of him on the same page stops at his two-year sentence in 1935 and then skips to 1961:

В 1961 г. Лобов был еще жив и вызывался в ЦК КПСС для дачи объяснений.

¹⁶ RKEB 2, 630.

¹⁷ RKEB 2, 568.

¹⁸ RKEB 3, 468.

In 1961 Lobov was still alive and was summoned to the Central Committee of the CPSU in order to give his explanation.

A two-year sentence in January 1935 would mean that Lobov was free by 1937 and so could not have been "rewarded by his freedom" in 1939. In any case we already know that Lobov was not rewarded but exiled in 1939. Petrov's story falls apart at every turn.

Petrov obviously had some source for this biographical information on Stepanov and Lobov. So why did he not include them in one of his two books? We have already determined that the available information about Ovchinnikov disproves Serov's report. Therefore it cannot be an accident that Petrov omits Ovchinnikov, a significant figure in the NKVD, from his two bulky volumes while Petrov's short biographic note on Ovchinnikov (also on page 53) stops with 1938, the year before the murders of Radek and Sokol'nikov. Might it also be the case that the full details of Stepanov's and Lobov's biographies contradict Petrov's story, as in the case of Ovchinnikov?

Petrov's False Conclusion

As we have seen, in both his *Novaia Gazeta* article and his more recent book Petrov makes the bold claim:

Было неопровержимо доказано, что за убийством стоял лично Сталин.

It has been irrefutably proven that Stalin was personally behind the murder.

The present article has established that Petrov's statement is false. In reality the opposite is true: there is no evidence whatever to support Petrov's claim. A statement that is unsupported by any evidence must be considered unproven. A statement that is based on falsified evidence must itself be considered false.

Our conclusion is therefore inevitable: Stalin was *not* guilty of the murders of Sokol'nikov and Radek. This tale is a fabrication by Khrushchev-era investigators, led by Serov, who were constructing this and many other false accusations against Stalin. This falsehood has been perpetuated by Petrov for the same purpose: to slander Stalin.

In this article we have exposed the falsehoods in Serov's report. Petrov could have done the same thing. Indeed, had he so chosen Petrov could have done it quicker and better, since he has much better access to archives and primary sources. But rather than perform the historian's function of verification Petrov chose to compound Serov's lies with yet more falsehoods of his own invention.

Conclusions – Nikita Petrov

Petrov has knowingly falsified evidence to blame a person – in this case, Joseph Stalin – for two murders of which he was not guilty. It is ironic that Petrov, a leading representative and

researcher for a self-styled "human rights" organization, is guilty of what he and other anticommunists accuse Stalin of doing.

The goal of historiography and historians is to discover the truth about the past, as established by the best evidence and reasoning. But some historians do not try to discover the truth. These dishonest historians begin with a preconceived conclusion and then search for anything that might pass as evidence in support of that preconceived conclusion. People who do this are not really historians at all. They are propagandists attempting to disguise themselves as historians so their readers will wrongly believe that what they are reading is an attempt to discover the truth.

Those who call themselves historians but do not strive to be objective: to question their own preconceived ideas; to remain devoted to discovering and reporting the truth even when that truth contradicts their own cherished ideas -- they are not really historians at all. They are publicists for some cause who have adopted the disguise of a historian, the better to deceive their readers. What they write is not history but "propaganda with footnotes."

Petrov is one of these. This has important consequences for all of us who read what he writes.

* Nothing Petrov writes can be accepted, even provisionally, as true. On the contrary: we must see his work for what it really is: a strained attempt to shore up his own preconceived ideas while disguising this attempt as historiography -- that is, as an attempt to discover the truth -- which it most definitely is not.

* We should never assume that Petrov is using his evidence honestly. His work is useless as a source of reliable historical information. Everything Petrov writes, every statement and footnote, must be checked and verified, because he cannot be trusted to use them honestly. Since this is impossible for all but specialists, it means that there is no reason for most people to read Petrov's work at all.

The "Memorial" Society

There are many so-called historians who falsely claims to be discovering the truth while in fact writing anticommunist propaganda. Often these fraudulent historians are based at prestigious institutions such as Oxford University, Yale University, the Humboldt University (Berlin), the Hoover Institution (Stanford, CA), and many others. Petrov is a top official in the Russian Memorial Society and has been its vice-chair since 1990. It is his prominence as a leader of the Memorial Society that accounts for his frequent appearance in the news media and his columns in *Novaia Gazeta*, a newspaper jointly owned by Mikhail Gorbachev and billionaire "entrepreneur" Aleksandr Lebedev.

"Memorial" presents itself as "an international historical, educational, human rights, and charitable organization." This self-description is false. In reality "Memorial" is an organization devoted to the spread of anticommunist falsehoods. It is funded by organizations such as the Soros, Ford, Jackson, and Guggenheim Foundations. Explicitly ideological anticommunist organizations funding "Memorial" include the National Endowment for Democracy (USA) and

the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. It also receives funds from the Russian government through the Social Chamber of the Russian Federation (*Obshchestvennaia Palata R.F.*).

An example of "Memorial's" dishonesty is its long list "Victims of Political Terror in the USSR."¹⁹ Here is one entry, found after only a minute or two of searching:

Ваганов Александр Михайлович
Родился в 1886 г., Пермская губ.; русский; Проживал: г. Пермь.
Арестован 3 октября 1919 г.
Приговорен: 31 октября 1919 г.
Приговор: Дело прекращено за отсутствием улик
Источник: Книга памяти Пермской обл.

Vaganov Alexander Mikhailovich
Born in 1886, Perm Province; Russian; Resided in: Perm.
Arrested on October 3, 1919
Sentenced: October 31, 1919
Verdict: Case dismissed for lack of evidence
Source: Perm Region Memory Book.

Mr A.V. Vaganov was arrested during the bloody Civil War, held in jail for four weeks, and then acquitted. What makes him a "victim of political terror"? By this standard a huge number of people are "victims of American government political terror." Where is THAT list of "victims"?

What's more, the list of "victims" does not bother to ascertain whether or not the individual arrested was guilty of the charges against him (or her). Persons found guilty of a crime are not normally called "victims."

"Memorial's" list is useless as a source of information. It seems clear that it is intended to be as large a list as possible, enabling anticommunists to impress others by telling them of this huge list of "victims of communist terror."

"Memorial" Proposes An Anticommunist "Purge"

In early 2011 "Memorial" posted a proposal on its website for a program to "de-Stalinize" Russia. In true Orwellian language the proposal is titled "A proposal for the establishment of a society-wide state-society program 'Concerning the commemoration of victims of the totalitarian regime and national reconciliation.'"²⁰ This proposal is an attempt to take a far right-wing, anticommunist position on Soviet history -- in some respects more extreme than that of the Cold War years in the United States -- and make it into official state policy. It is an attempt to politicize history in an extreme right-wing direction; to impose a far right-wing, anticommunist orthodoxy on the whole country of Russia.

¹⁹ «Жертвы политического террора в СССР,» at <http://lists.memo.ru/>

²⁰ Предложения об учреждении общенациональной государственно-общественной программы «Об увековечении памяти жертв тоталитарного режима и о национальном примирении.» At <http://www.memo.ru/2011/03/29/perpetuation.htm>

Here is one of the provisions in this proposal:

«Приложение 8»

8.2. Принять официальное постановление о том, что публичные выступления государственных служащих любого ранга, содержащие отрицание или оправдание преступлений тоталитарного режима, несовместимы с пребыванием на государственной службе.

“Appendix 8”

8.2. Adopt a formal decree that public statements by civil servants of any rank, denying or justifying the crimes of the totalitarian regime, are incompatible with being in public service.

The Memorial Society “lovers of freedom” want all Russian civil servants to be “free” only to repeat Memorial's version of history! And they blame the USSR for “totalitarianism” while they demand that every public employee in Russia call the USSR “totalitarian” or lose their jobs!

The Memorial version of history is a falsification. The truth doesn't need this kind of imposition. Only falsehood requires the indoctrination and policing of opinions. ”Memorial” is very far from the ideals stated in its inflated self-description. It's a right-wing anticommunist pro-capitalist group masquerading as a “human rights” group.

Their recent proposal to the Duma is useful insofar as it has exposed them for what they are. Few liberal capitalist organizations would propose the kind of restrictions on free speech that “Memorial” unblushingly proposes. During the height of the Red Scare in the USA in the late '40s and '50s one had to take a loyalty oath. “Memorial's” proposed legislation goes far beyond “loyalty oaths” to police one's statements while off the job. What happened to “human rights”?

If “Memorial” were an honest organization it would not number persons arrested and then released for lack of evidence against them among the “victims of political terror.” Nor would it propose that all government employees who made any public statement that disagreed with its, “Memorial's,” view of the Soviet past, or anybody's view of history, be fired.

If “Memorial” were an honest organization it would not have a falsifier like Nikita Petrov as one of its officers and leading researchers.

“Memorial” is similar to other ideological anticommunist, pro-capitalist organizations, in that none of them are interested in the least in the truth, but rather in producing propaganda to falsely smear the communist movement. Nothing published by or under the auspices of the “Memorial” society should be believed in any way.

Why Do Anticommunists Lie?

Why tell lies when the truth is on your side? If the "Memorial" society were truly interested in human rights, they would also be concerned with the rights of those who do not agree with their, "Memorial's," interpretation of the Soviet past, and would defend the rights of those persons rather than trying to silence them with the fear of losing their jobs.

If anticommunists – and, it must be said, some who consider themselves communists, like Trotskyists – had honorable goals they would not repeat Nazi lies like that of the "Katyn massacre" and the "Holodomor." They would not claim that the Moscow Trials and the Tukhachevsky Affair were all frame-ups against innocent men, when all the evidence we possess today points in precisely the opposite direction – that the defendants were guilty of at least those crimes to which they confessed.

Petrov wants Stalin to "look bad." But Petrov is unable to find evidence that Stalin was, in fact, "bad." We can state this with confidence because he had such evidence Petrov would not have to resort to the kind of lies and fabrications that we have exposed in the article under discussion here. This practice is the rule, not the exception, in the field of Soviet history.

Notes

1. Nikita Petrov. Сталинский заказ. Как убивали Сокольникова и Радека
2. Ivan Serov, «Из Справки Председателя КГБ при СМ СССР И.А. Серова»
3. Копия приговора в отношении И.В. Овчинникова (1941)
4. Справка Управления КГБ Томской области о бывших сотрудниках НКВД ... 19.12.1955
5. Обзорная Справка Управления КГБ Томской области по архивно-следственному делу И. В. Овчинникова 6 января 1956 г.
6. Ovchinnikov, I.V., in Junge, Binner. *Kak Terror Stal Bol'shim*, p. 36
7. Из Воспоминаний бывшей заключенной Л. И. Медведевой о начальнике Томского горотдела НКВД И. Овчинникове май 1989 г.
8. Kubatkin, biography from Petrov & Skorkin, *Kto rukovodil NKVD 1934-1941*.
9. Sharok, from N.V. Petrov, *Kto rukovodil organami gosbezopasnosti 1941-1954. Spravochnik*.
10. Fedotov and Matusov statements 1961 from Petrov.
11. Fedotov, P.V. biography from Petrov & Skorkin, *Kto rukovodil NKVD. 1934-1941*.
12. Shvernik Report materials on Radek-Sokol'nikov murder 1961, from Petrov.

13. «Трагедия в медведевском лесу. О расстреле политзаключенных Орловской тюрьмы.»
Известия ЦК КПСС № 11 (1990) 124-131.