

Under the shadow of the foreign agent law


An interview with an activist

Text - Anna Koryukova

Pictures - Anna Koryukova and Emma Haney

*The photos shown are a part of an upcoming
photo book project created by @hny.emma.*





As Cicero famously stated, “Historia Magistra Vitae est”, suggesting that history should serve as a lesson for the future. However, Michel Foucault would likely add, that history is also an exercise of power.

In 2022, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation officially dissolved an important NGO that specialized in historical preservation under the “Foreign Agent Law”. The NGO was established to document the victims of Soviet political repression and to advocate for human rights.

However, while the NGO has been shut down, the work of the organization is still alive. Several local departments and enthusiasts of the NGO remain active despite the growing pressure from the government. One such enthusiast is the protagonist of our story. For the sake of anonymity, the person’s name and location have been concealed, but we shall call him Semyon.

This is not merely a story about a significant human rights organization and the growing political battle over legacy in Russia, but also about a local activist, whose passion for his home region’s history and justice drives him despite the restrictions he faces. This is a story of the past, present and future.



In the beginning

Before Perestroika, nobody dared to speak about Stalin’s repressions, and even the slightest mention of ‘The Great Terror’ was stigmatized. In 1988 under the light of Glasnost, a new community of activists was born in Moscow with a mission to collect materials and memories about Stalin’s incalculable violations of human rights. One year later, the NGO’s mission expanded to monitoring human rights violations in contemporary Russia. The organization became one of the most significant symbols of the late

Soviet era and one of the first NGOs in the USSR.

Yeltsin’s liberal and pro-Western attitude in the 1990s gave way to Putin’s revisionist, autonomous and patriotic agenda of the 2000s. NGOs were restricted, forced to leave or dissolved, especially those sponsored from abroad and those that contradicted the dominant agenda.

Since the enactment of the “Foreign Agent Law” in 2012, the NGO would become one of the first targets of the law. Officially, the law was aimed at safeguarding national sovereignty, preventing undue foreign influence

on domestic affairs and ensuring transparency of organizations regarding their foreign funding. The “Foreign Agent Law” in Russia is not unique. The first known law in the world, concerning restrictions on foreign influence, is the American FARA (Foreign Agents Registration Act) and similar laws exist in China and Israel to monitor foreign organizations. However, the law would later be expanded to impede the activities, add extra expenses for those registered as “foreign agents”, and limit their funding or donation sources.

While the organization plays a crucial role in advocating for the remembrance of repressions, its voice often pales in comparison to other historical narratives. The government appears inclined to monopolize historical memory, primarily favoring narratives that glorify the Soviet Union, specifically those centered around World War II.

A lesson to remember

As a professional historian in his 60s, Semyon has dedicated his life to teaching history and preserving the memories of his home region of Russia. As the head of the regional branch of the NGO, he leads projects to preserve the memory of political repressed and maintain the NGO’s complexes and archives. However, since being labeled as a foreign agent in 2015, the organization faces

several hurdles. Despite these challenges, Semyon remains passionate about continuing the work. Inspired by the legacy of his great-great-grandfather, himself a victim of repressions during the 1930s, he strives to make an impact for the common good. He has contributed several books and materials on how to study family genealogy, which were distributed throughout the town.

*“They
prepare the
upcoming
generation
for the
replacement,
and it is very
hard to
influence.
However, as
long as there
is still
memory...”*

“One teacher told me, that when she was graduating from school, she got one of my books,” Semyon shows the book, which was written specifically for students in Russian schools several years ago – “She said, how interesting it was to research on family’s history and then decided to become a historian. Can you imagine how important it is to see that you are not doing something in vain and that something helped a person to choose their life path?”

The tone of our conversation changed from inspirational to melancholic, as Semyon added: “But as you can see, it has become more and more difficult”.

The law states that “foreign agents” are not allowed to educate children or distribute any educational materials. When I asked him why it is significant to educate children and students about the history of their family, he responded passionately about what he thinks of state narratives in schools:

“Children are our future. My grandchild started in the first grade this year. I saw his schedule. Every Monday the first lesson is “the conversation about important things”. Already in the first grade, they mess up with children’s minds. Talking about the war in Ukraine and all that stuff. They prepare the upcoming generation for the replacement, and it is very hard to influence. However, as long as there is still memory...”

Fighting for memory

The main task of the regional branch of the NGO is to preserve the memory of political repressions in the region. One of their projects involves maintaining the organization’s complex, located on the spot where thousands of victims of state repression were buried. Every year the NGO organizes actions at the site to remember the past and avoid repeating mistakes in the future. However, the site of the complex is not protected by law, and there are plans to build a stadium for a state-owned football club, threatening its preservation: “We are trying to build a dialogue with the authorities” - Semyon says, “but the authorities are hiding from us in every way possible. [...] Right now the organization’s complex is in poor condition. It’s embarrassing to show it to anybody and I feel ashamed in front of the fallen.”


Remembrance of political repressions from the Stalin era has been considered at the state level. In 2015, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev approved a state policy for an unspecified period, aimed at increasing non-governmental engagement in activities related to the history of political repressions. However, Semyon notes that while the NGO works on issues of national importance, they don’t receive any financial support from the state, only stigma, ignorance and pressure from the legal system.

Future of legacy?

Foreign agents face strict reporting requirements, leading to increased administrative burdens, extra expenses, and pressure on their activities. The situation is not getting better, when Semyon endured denunciations from anonymous senders and frequent visits to the police station to draw up another protocol: “There are people, who put it mildly, don’t like us and they would like to cease us to exist... But we can’t give them such pleasure”.

Semyon and his team fight back by going through several courts per month to cancel fines and generally to remove the label of foreign agents, but it is not easy. Semyon understands it as well. The purpose of his fight is to clean the name of the organization and to secure the evidence for the future:

“We understand that what we are doing is important, therefore all that peel, which covered everything here, will be gone one day. All those court decisions are unjust and will be revised in the future and all those court materials are already gathered.”

Semyon remains convinced in his belief that justice is on his side, facing the future with a mixture of optimism and melancholy. 

Note: Names and places have been changed/left ambiguous to protect the identity of the interviewee. In light of possible ethical/safety concerns, the name of the NGO described will remain anonymous.

