

**2013 -2014 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM
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The Bolshevik Afterlife: Rehabilitation in the Post-Stalin Soviet Union, 1953-1970

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Research Abstract

My dissertation, entitled “The Bolshevik Afterlife: Rehabilitation in the Post-Stalin Soviet Union, 1953-1970,” explores the Soviet party-state’s efforts to posthumously exonerate leading individuals who were purged in the 1930s and early 1940s. Drawing upon sources generated by the Communist Party, state bodies, and individual Soviet citizens, my research foregrounds the official intentions that underpinned the decision to implement rehabilitation policy alongside efforts by the families of the repressed to obtain recognition of and restitution for losses and torment endured during the era of High Stalinism. Posthumous rehabilitation thus merged a symbolic “resurrection” of the dead – through distinct but intertwined legal and political processes – with tangible socio-economic benefits for their survivors. It is my contention that posthumous rehabilitation, though initially conceived as a means of legitimizing and insulating the new ruling clique from responsibility for Stalinist repressions, came to represent a sort of secular ritual that aided in the formulation of new, politically expedient accounts of the rise of Soviet power, as well as its descent into near self-destruction

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Research Goals

In the course of my five-month Title VIII research fellowship I sought to explore the rationale behind Stalin’s successors’ decision to open tens of thousands of politically charged cases for review, and the ways in which the survivors of the repressed engaged with and challenged representatives of the party-state in order to see their various objectives met. In confronting the Soviet Union’s extraordinary history of violence by acknowledging the innocence of select individuals who had been executed in previous decades, Stalin’s successors ran the risk of delegitimizing the entire Soviet enterprise. Given the fact that the vast majority of the post-Stalin ruling clique had a hand in, or were direct beneficiaries of the destruction of the old Communist Party cadres, it seemingly would have run counter to their interests to revisit the legal cases against supposed “enemies of the people.” My primary goal, then, was to determine why the Party’s inner circle considered it prudent, and perhaps even necessary to clear the names of so many who had been erased from Soviet history. Despite the lofty principles supposedly underlying the process, the prospect of rehabilitation was not open to all “repressed persons” at the same time, and I was therefore very much concerned with the question of who was seen as deserving of rehabilitation at various points in the decade and a half following Stalin’s death. While issues of high-level decision-making are critical to grasping the course of posthumous rehabilitation, they were not the sole focus of my study.

Beyond the objectives of the Party elite, I also hoped to gain an appreciation for the investigative and legal work that went into posthumous rehabilitations, which has been largely unexplored in previous treatments of the topic. Once a case file was reopened, it fell to the

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Procuracy and its functionaries to review and digest hundreds, if not thousands of pages of interrogation transcripts, witness testimony, indictments, and sentences in order to ascertain whether or not the individual in question was wrongfully convicted; if the Procuracy found that there were grounds for dismissing a case, it was then submitted to the court that handed down the original conviction for final ruling. By reading the materials prepared by judicial bodies I hoped to discern the standard of proof that was applied to rehabilitation cases, as well as the ways in which the Soviet authorities recast the information they uncovered in case files from the 1930s, thereby absolving those accused of participation in anti-Soviet conspiracies.

My third major focal point was the issue of how family members and other survivors of the repressed became involved in the rehabilitation process, and what – if anything – they expected to receive in return. The Soviet government did not generally solicit cases for rehabilitation; rather, the onus lay with prisoners themselves, or, in the instance of posthumous rehabilitation, with their friends and relatives to initiate the review of their convictions by filing an appeal. This arrangement required persons who had already suffered tremendous loss at the hands of the Soviet regime to resubmit themselves and their loved ones to state scrutiny; the willingness of so many to do just that speaks to the benefits promised by rehabilitation beyond the symbolic restoration of individuals' good names. Though the Soviet authorities promised rehabilitees and their survivors housing, pensions, and other entitlements, I intended to establish how closely these aligned with families' needs and expectations, as well as how successfully the government was able to live up to the obligations it set for itself.

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Research Activities

I divided my time in Moscow between four major repositories: the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), and the Russian State Archives of Contemporary History, Socio-Political History, and Art and Literature (RGANI, RGASPI, and RGALI, respectively). I usually spent two or three days of any given week at GARF, which, as home to the records of Soviet state institutions and many individuals' papers, was where the collections most relevant to my topic were to be found. The three main *fondy* (corpus) at GARF that I examined were those of the Procuracy (fond R-8131), Council of Ministers (fond R-5446), and Supreme Soviet (fond 7523) of the USSR, and of these I devoted my fullest attention to the Procuracy files. The General and Military Procurators' Offices generated the greatest amount of paperwork related to the rehabilitation process, as they were tasked with determining an individuals' eligibility for legal rehabilitation, and presenting their findings before the court that had passed the original sentence; these materials, along with appeals from family members and related documents, are frequently preserved in the Procuracy's so-called "supervisory review" (*nadzornoe proizvodstvo*) files. Recent improvements in the functionality of GARF's digital catalog system made the location and ordering of such files far easier than it had been in previous years, which in turn helped to make my research far more productive.

I had already planned on working with the Council of Ministers' *fond* prior to arriving in Moscow, but once there I uncovered new additions to the collection that made it indispensable to my project. As Vice Chairman of the Council of Ministers much of the correspondence that Anastas Mikoian received in the 1950s was preserved in that body's *fond*, but until earlier this

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year none of these materials were accessible to researchers because archivists were still in the process of organizing them. A search of GARF's catalog for different documents accidentally alerted me to these files' existence, and upon reading them I discovered dozens of letters from relatives of purged Old Bolsheviks, along with Mikoian's instructions to his subordinates and other Soviet officials on how to handle the requests. Likewise, Kliment Voroshilov's papers from his time as Chairman of the Supreme Soviet offered impassioned appeals on behalf of onetime Party notables from their families and friends, as well as several lists comprised of the names of Central Executive Committee (*TsIK*) members who had been posthumously rehabilitated between 1954 and 1957. The richness of such documents and the relative ease with which I was able to order them helped to make GARF my most consistently profitable research venue.

As the current homes of the massive, bifurcated archive of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), RGASPI and RGANI house a great deal of material relevant to my work, though obtaining it proved to be somewhat more difficult than I had initially hoped. RGASPI, which preserves the Party's papers from its founding through 1953, maintains a small but important selection of documents pertaining to the post-Stalin period, including the personal files of thousands of Bolsheviks who were restored to the Party posthumously (fond 589). However, this collection remained unavailable to me due to concerns over the potential existence of "compromising material" (*kompromat*) within. Despite this setback, I was able to work undisturbed with the papers of Elena Stasova (fond 356), one of the longest-lived Old Bolsheviks who was a frequent recourse of those seeking rehabilitation for themselves or their loved ones, as

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well as a collection of personal testimonies of repressed Party members assembled by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism beginning in the 1960s (fond 560). At RGANI, I was particularly anxious to explore the minutes of the Presidium of the Central Committee (fond 3; the Politburo was known as the Presidium for much of the 1950s and 1960s), which was closed to scholars when I made my preliminary research trip. I had no trouble accessing the relevant *opisi* (finding aids), though I was slightly hampered by the fact that they offered no substantive information about what was to be found within the files they listed. Working at RGANI can also be something of an archaic experience given the standing prohibition on using computers in the reading room. Despite such minor frustrations, I was ultimately able to secure most the documents I required.

When I first arrived at RGALI and explained my topic I was met with incredulity by the reading room staff, who were disinclined to believe that anything of interest to me was to be found there. Fortunately many of RGALI's finding aids have already been digitized and made available on the archive's website, and I was able to provide the skeptical staff with references that I had made note of prior to my trip. RGALI preserves the papers of thousands of writers, artists, and other luminaries from the world of Soviet culture, a considerable number of whom were purged and subsequently rehabilitated. Their personal *fondy*, along with those of writers to whom survivors turned when in need of help, made up the majority of the materials I consulted at RGALI. I also tried to examine individual files from the Soviet Writers' Union *fond*, but was prevented from doing so by privacy-related restrictions. On the whole, though, I was extremely pleased with the amount of material I was able to collect at the repositories in which I worked.

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Important Research Findings

Though many of the documents I uncovered served to substantiate my preliminary impressions of how posthumous rehabilitation functioned in the post-Stalin USSR, I was often confronted with files that defied my expectations and compelled me to reframe my study. Prior to embarking on this latest research trip I planned on examining the spate of rehabilitations that almost immediately followed Stalin's death – including those of individuals implicated in the Doctors' Plot and the Mingrelian Affair – but once I began researching in earnest it quickly became evident that I had to adjust the parameters of my project. I initially conceptualized these early rehabilitations – which overwhelmingly involved still-living persons who had yet to be convicted on any charges – as having laid the groundwork for later posthumous rehabilitations of Old Bolsheviks. However, archival sources suggest that the execution of and objectives behind these processes differed significantly enough for them to be treated as discrete objects of analysis. The first round of public rehabilitations were enacted by Party fiat, and were undertaken largely as a means of undoing Stalin's attempts to limit Lavrentii Beria's influence, whereas posthumous rehabilitation – as it was initially implemented – served to discredit Beria and his clique following the former's deposal and arrest in July 1953.

As the Soviet judiciary assembled its case against Beria and his closest accomplices in the organs of state security it also launched the first posthumous rehabilitations in the country's history. Beginning with Papuliia Ordzhonikidze – the older brother of close Stalin ally Sergo Ordzhonikidze– and Mikhail Kedrov – a onetime leader of the Soviet secret police – the Procuracy argued for the exoneration of Bolsheviks who had run afoul of Beria during his rise to

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prominence. These cases were then invoked during the proceedings that resulted in Beria and his lieutenants being sentenced to death as proof of their longstanding perfidious, anti-Soviet behavior. Once news of Beria's fall spread among the survivors of the Great Terror the bolder among them started writing appeals to their former friends and intimates still within the Soviet government requesting news of the fates of their husbands, fathers, and brothers; most families had been fallaciously informed in the 1930s that their relatives had been sentenced to "10 years without the right of correspondence" when in actuality they had been summarily executed, and some of the former therefore held out hope that the latter might still be found alive in the Gulag camp system over 15 years after their arrests.

The chief recipient of such supplications was Mikoian, who by 1953 was the last high-ranking Old Bolshevik still at work inside the Kremlin. Although Mikoian has long been recognized as one of the few apparently "repentant" Stalinists within the post-1953 Soviet government thanks to individual accounts of his largesse and concern for the families of his fallen comrades, never before has the extent of his personal involvement in the rehabilitation process been detailed through archival sources. Not only did Mikoian ensure that Procurator General Roman Rudenko and other responsible parties at the Procuracy reopened the case files of many of his former cohorts from the revolutionary underground in Baku, but he also furnished their families with material aid in the form of apartments, pensions, and other privileges meant to help facilitate their social rehabilitation; no other Soviet leader's files evince such strong, personal engagement with the rehabilitation process, as well as investment in the outcome of such investigations.

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In the weeks following Beria's arrest the new Soviet leadership set about purging his clients in Tbilisi, Baku, and Moscow, among other Soviet centers. However, rather than immediately doing away with Beria's cronies, the new government opted to keep many of these disgraced secret policemen alive in captivity, presumably for purposes of interrogation, and in the years between their having been arrested and their trials scores of Party notables in whose repression they had participated were posthumously rehabilitated. One again, as documents prepared by the Procuracy evince, the issue of the purged Party members' fates became a centerpiece in the Soviet state's case against the remnants of Beria's personal network. Thus, at the September 1955 trial in Tbilisi of former the Georgian Ministers of State Control and State Security Avksentii Rapava and Nikolai Rukhadze, respectively, Procurator General Rudenko invoked over twenty fallen figures from Georgia's Communist Party and cultural elite, including Mamiia Orakhelashvili, Mikhail Kakhiani, Samson Mamuliia, and Levan Gogoberidze. Likewise, during the proceedings against Boris Rodos – one of the NKVD's most notorious interrogators – in March 1956, Central Committee members Vlas Chubar' and Pavel Postyshev, Komsomol head Aleksandr Kosarev, and author Isaak Babel' were among those mentioned as having suffered wrongfully at Rodos' hands; the following month Beria's client in Baku, Mir Jafar Bagirov, was confronted in court by Kosarev's widow, Nina Naneishvili, for having supposedly denounced her husband to Beria in the late 1930s. All of the main defendants in these trials were sentenced to die – at least in part – for their roles in the destruction of Old Bolshevik cadres. This instrumentalization of the first instances of posthumous rehabilitation is indicative of the party-state's decision to use judicial revisionism as a means of curtailing the

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security services' influence, and also demonstrates the dynamism that marked the rehabilitation process well before Khrushchev drew back the curtain on Stalin's crimes during his "Secret Speech" to the 20th Party Congress in February 1956.

While much of the archival material I uncovered speaks to the tactical applications of posthumous rehabilitation as part of the internecine struggle that followed Stalin's death, I also encountered several collections dealing with the aspirations of the surviving family members of rehabilitees. In letters written to the Procuracy, Supreme Soviet, and individual Party leaders the wives (or, on occasion, ex-wives), sons, daughters, and siblings of Bolsheviks who had disappeared into the clutches of the NKVD sought information, validation, and relief. As mentioned previously, most had received a steady stream of misinformation regarding their loved ones' whereabouts from the moment of their arrests, and their most frequent request was for some indication of where and in what state the repressed were to be found. There was a general awareness among the petitioners of the harsh conditions within the camps of the Gulag system, as many had "sat" long sentences as "family members of an enemy of the people," so although they were not aware of the true fates that had befallen so many of the Party faithful, few held out much hope that they would be found alive. Even with this knowledge, the supplicants issued pointed calls for the return of their relatives' good names, both in the interest of posterity and to facilitate their own reentry into Soviet society. Appeals to Soviet ruling circles consistently detailed the decades of material, physical, and "moral" hardship that the writers had faced due to their pariah status, and demonstrated their awareness that the only path to recourse was through representatives of the party state.

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Initially, as archival documents reveal, the Soviet government compensated families of the rehabilitated through piecemeal, occasionally informal arrangements. Based on resolutions by the Presidium of the Central Committee or at the urging of the Procurator General the widows of various onetime Party leaders were granted pensions and stipends were allocated to allow their children to complete their higher educations. Other survivors managed to rekindle patronage relationships that dated to the 1920s and 30s, and through figures such as Mikoian were afforded preferential access to housing and other luxuries at a time when most Soviet citizens were hard-pressed to find a suitable living space. However, as the ranks of the rehabilitated – both living and dead – began to swell in 1954 and 1955, the Soviet government was compelled to officially enumerate its obligations to the wrongfully convicted and their intimates. In September 1955 the Council of Ministers issued a decree entitling rehabilitees to two months of back pay, regardless of the length or severity of their sentences, as well as pensions, housing, and other rights to which they had been entitled prior to their arrests. The administration of the “House on the Embankment,” the storied building across the Moscow River from the Kremlin constructed in the 1930s to house the new Soviet elite, was quickly overwhelmed with demands from survivors for the restitution of apartments and property that had been seized; elsewhere in Moscow lawsuits were initiated against the current occupants of homes that had previously belonged to purged officials. The appeals and conflicts over housing and property that accompanied posthumous rehabilitation demonstrate the social significance that this legal-political process – originally with quite limited aims – came to hold during the so-called “Thaw” years and beyond.

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Policy Implications and Recommendations

My research has direct bearing on issues that animate policy debates both within the post-Soviet world and in US relations with the region. As with many, if not most former Soviet republics, Russia has yet to divest its major institutions of traces of their Soviet heritage, which has exacerbated an already-tortured relationship with the country's recent past. While Russia-watchers and liberal elements within Russian society frequently warn of Stalin's symbolic rehabilitation alongside the reintroduction of Stalinist phraseology such as "fifth column" and "enemy of the people" into Russian parlance, the legal rehabilitation those repressed over seven decades ago remains an ongoing and fraught concern. For example, during my time in Moscow the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation received – and quickly rejected – a request from an unnamed party for the exoneration of Genrikh Iagoda, one of Beria's predecessors at the NKVD, who was sentenced to death in March 1938. By continuing to rule on cases dating to the 1930s, the Russian Supreme Court has positioned itself as the inheritor of the problematic legacy of its Soviet analogue. In a somewhat related vein, several years ago the Ukrainian Court of Appeals attempted to "dehabilitate" Postyshev and Stanislav Kosior for their roles in the Holodomor – the devastating famine that gripped the Ukrainian SSR in the early 1930s. Although this effort did not proceed past the initial hearings stage, it attests to the fact that the logic and practice of posthumous rehabilitation, as established in the 1950s, still animate the post-Soviet dialogue on responsibility for historic crimes. Any American policymaker hoping to grasp how the continuities between the Soviet Union and its successor states express themselves would undoubtedly find the example of posthumous rehabilitation eye opening.

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On a broader level, my project speaks to the close interplay between politics and justice in the post-Soviet sphere, a phenomenon that has served to inflame tensions between the US and Russia. This can be most readily observed through the international reaction to Sergei Magnitsky's conviction for tax evasion, which is only the most recent link in a chain of posthumous legal decisions that can be traced back to policies introduced in the 1950s. Congress' decision to bar those involved in Magnitsky's imprisonment from entering the United States demonstrates the ways in which US interests can become entangled with the fraught legacies of post-Stalinism, and in order to grasp the intentions and implications of a case such as that of Magnitsky, US policymakers must be apprised of historical precedents that continue to shape judicial norms and thought in the former Soviet Union.

Co-Curricular Activity

While in Moscow I was a regular attendee at seminars hosted by the International Center for the History and Sociology of World War II and Its Consequences at the Higher School of Economics. These occasional lectures provided a forum for Western and local scholars to share and discuss cutting edge research on Russian and Soviet history, and offered me the opportunity to interact with – among others – the Center's director and its leading affiliate, Oleg Budnitskii and Oleg Khlevniuk, respectively. The latter recently authored a biography of Stalin, and in connection with the publication of this work he delivered a month-long series of talks on various aspects of Stalinism at a public library that I also attended. Such interactions with leading figures in my field allowed me not only to familiarize myself with current trends in Russian historiography, but also to introduce Russian and other international scholars to my research,

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which resulted in many productive conversations. I was also present at a town hall meeting organized by the US Embassy in Moscow and held at the historic Spaso House where expatriates were able to discuss major issues and voice their concerns. Following the event I was able to speak briefly with Ambassador John Tefft – himself a onetime aspiring historian – who expressed interest in my work along with the continued viability of the Title VIII program writ large.

Conclusions

The American Councils’ generous support was indispensable to the successful completion of my research goals. Having been afforded the opportunity to focus all my energies on archival work, I was able to accomplish far more in the time I had than anticipated. The visa support that the American Councils staff provided helped me to navigate the pitfalls of what can be a labyrinthine process, and ensure that my work was able to proceed uninterrupted once I arrived in Russia. I am confident that the invaluable contributions of the American Councils will be reflected in the quality and impact of my eventual dissertation.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/Presentations and Publications

During the course of my Title VIII fellowship I was able to complete the bulk of the research necessary for my dissertation. The one outstanding collection that I have yet to examine in depth – that of the Party Control Committee (RGANI fond 6), which served as the arbiter of reinstatement into the CPSU – is available on microfilm at the Hoover Institution and Harvard, both of which offer considerably more favorable working conditions than any repository in Russia. In addition to consulting these remaining sources, over the course of the coming

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academic year I will begin transforming the materials I uncovered into dissertation chapters as a writer-in-residence at New York University's Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia. This position will afford me access to much-needed academic resources and will also serve as a platform through which I can expose a wide audience of specialists in the field to my project. Additionally, I will be presenting a paper based on my research at the upcoming annual convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies in Philadelphia as part of a panel I organized on the judiciary in the postwar Soviet Union; I further intend to submit a version of this paper for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

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Figure 1: In the library at Spaso House, the US ambassador's residence in Moscow.

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Memorial plaques for two recipients of posthumous rehabilitation, Pavel Postyshev (figure 2) and Aleksandr Kosarev (figure 3), and an advocate of the rehabilitated, Elena Stasova (figure 4), on the wall of their former residence, Moscow’s storied “House on the Embankment.”

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