

WHAT IS THE COST OF LIES?

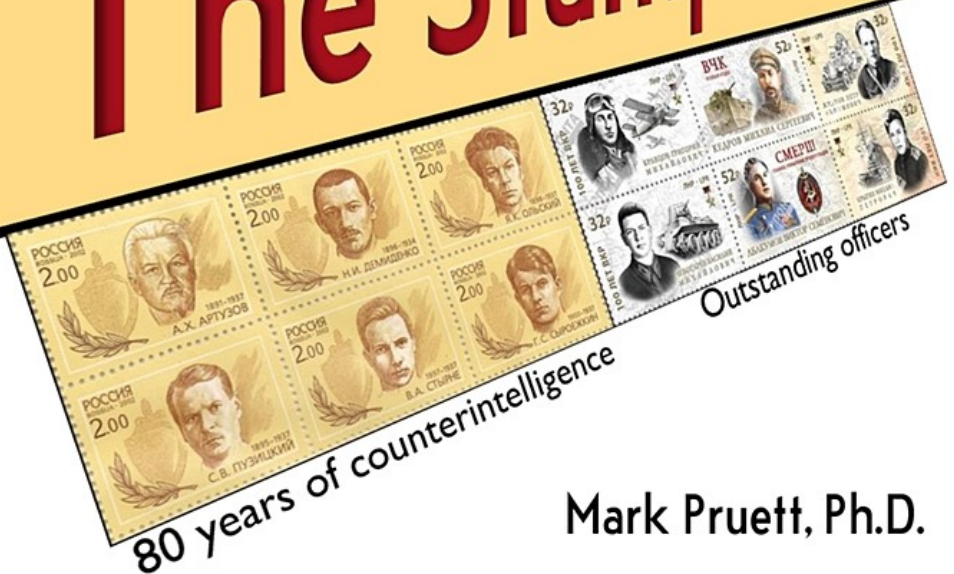
”Fascinating and frightening,
told with power and precision.”

— PAUL REID, New York Times bestselling author

PUTIN'S BOYS

PREVIEW
Full print/Kindle at Amazon

The Stamp Men



Mark Pruett, Ph.D.

“LET THERE BE FLOODS OF BLOOD.”

“Mark Pruett has uncovered a story both fascinating and frightening, and he tells it with power and precision. If we are heading into a post-truth world, Vladimir Putin is leading the way.”

— PAUL REID, *New York Times* bestselling co-author with William Manchester of the Winston Churchill biography *The Last Lion: Defender of the Realm*

This book is about truth—and lies. For the truth about KGB agent Vladimir Putin’s world, explore the lies of his stamp men.

A doctor and his nephew co-founded the Gulag. A father was a kidnapper, a mathematician was a murderer. A cafeteria manager tortured teachers, a lawyer ran a slave-labor camp, and a circus performer burned villages.

Celebrated as counterintelligence heroes, the stamp men were killers. They were Chekists, secret policemen who flooded a nation with fear, who enabled the Soviet Union but then destroyed it. Their tales reveal how the Soviet police state moves into our present with two decades of Putin’s governance.

Uncover the stamp men’s hidden lives—their families, their deeds, their doom. Discover the Chekists who ran the Soviet Union and now Russia for more than a century. See a flood of propaganda from today’s top Chekist, Vladimir Putin, meant to wash over history but which is tinted with blood.

The stamp men are blood-red warning lights telling us of dangerous weaknesses—suspicion and self-deception. This book calculates in blunt terms the staggering price that has been paid.

Mark Pruett (PhD, University of Illinois; MBA and BS, University of North Carolina) is an experienced university teacher and scholar in strategic management, international business, creativity, entrepreneurship and innovation. His academic publications cover subjects like leadership character, education, competitive strategy, and technological change. He began as an international consultant writing research studies for dozens of overseas companies, and he has a life-long love of travel and history. One of his ancestors was the famous adventurer Moritz Benyovszky. American’s national anthem, The Star Spangled Banner, was first performed in 1814 at a theatrical play about Benyovszky, who escaped a Siberian prison in 1771 by stealing a Russian government ship.

Putin’s Boys: The Stamp Men

Mark Pruett

ARTICLE 58

Tryon, North Carolina USA

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Patrol boat “Chekist” on the Moscow-Volga Canal.
Tens of thousands of forced laborers died digging the canal.
(Photo: Alexander Egorov, army chief of staff, shot in 1939) [235]



Patrol boat “Chekist II” at Solovki camp,
birthplace of the Gulag forced-labor system. [236]

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One must sometimes correct history.
Joseph Stalin [155]

Gulag co-founder

Kidnapper

Rebellion crusher



Mass exiler

Inquisitor

The human plague

Enforcer

Gulag co-founder

Enforcer



Enforcer

Torturer

Enforcer

1. They were killers

Иди и смотри (Idi i smotri) – Come and see.

Book of Revelation 6:1 [178]

And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.

John VIII - XXXII [180]

Wall engraving, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency

THEY WERE KILLERS, these men on postage stamps. They killed men, women, children. They arrested, tortured, and exiled them. They beat, shot, gassed, starved, and froze them. They worked them to death. They threw them out windows. They spilled torrents of blood and in the end they were killed, too.

Less than two years after former KGB officer Vladimir Putin's first election as president, the Russian post office issued in 2002 a sheet of stamps to commemorate Soviet-era counterintelligence agents.

The sheet does not name the stamp men's employer. There is no need. Any present-day Russian, or any person from any part of the former Soviet Union, is a person whose very *existence* has been shaped by these and other stamp men. Their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents were intimately acquainted with such men, whether as onlookers, victims, or participants—or in all three roles.

Can we say it is a waste of time to study faces on stamps?

We cannot. Business executives, intelligence analysts, news correspondents and officials must learn about people and places, and assess what it would be like to work with, for, or against them.

The 2002 stamps were issued one week before the 80th anniversary of a 6 May 1922 meeting to create a new internal unit in the secret police to house long-running efforts against “the subversive activities of foreign intelligence services, foreign émigré centers, smuggling, illegal border crossing and political banditry”. [22]

Can the stamp men explain a century of politics, economics, and foreign relations? Indeed, stamps send messages to a nation and the world. They deliver more than letters: they convey perceptions, aspirations, and the atmosphere in which official decisions are made.

The stamp men’s employer is Vladimir Putin’s long-time employer, the state security apparatus, now known as the FSB and foreign intelligence SVR, previously known in Soviet times by a bewildering, ever-changing series of acronyms: KGB, MVD, MGB, NKGB, NKVD, OGPU, GPU and, before that, the VCheka or Cheka, the All-Russia Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution [etc.], founded in 1917 during the Russian Revolution and Civil War.

The Cheka’s founder and leader was “Iron” Felix Dzerzhinsky, working to fulfill the mandate given him by Vladimir Lenin. Employees were Chekists, their emblem an unsheathed sword and shield. Official structures and names change, but the song remains the same. The emblem and nickname survive. State security agencies are intuitively understood as the Cheka, and state security employees are still Chekists. Dzerzhinsky was a Chekist. Putin is a Chekist.

Does a passing thunderstorm matter once a surging current has carried its load of organic debris under a bridge?

Should we seek what was washed away, find the high water mark, inspect the bridge’s footings, and watch the stream and sky for evidence of the storm’s return?

How do we deal with complicated, painful memories?

For people unfamiliar with the stamp men or their agency, the stamps mean nothing. For some, the stamps convey an admirable but hazy past. For others, the stamps are reminders of a complex history revealed by diving into bloody depths.

We—individuals, groups, societies—want and need happiness, confidence, stability, and a sense of a positive future. How should we find and develop such things when the past is awash with blood? Some argue that remembrance can help heal deep wounds, others that laying things to rest is better. Regardless, we need honesty and knowledge—a better understanding of historical fact—before we can make wise and healthy choices about remembrance and forgetfulness.

So, let us glide down history's currents and find the 2002 stamp men. Later, we will find a new set of stamp men commemorated at the very end of 2018. At the end of our journey, we will arrive at the utterly bleak central irony of the stamp men.

The stamp men are part of a pattern. As the Appendix of this book shows, post-Soviet Russia has issued more than 160 stamps that have connections, direct or indirect, to the Cheka.

The 2002 and 2018 stamp men are not about an increasingly distant and irrelevant past. Although they are tied most directly to two specific periods of Soviet and Russian history—1918 to 1938 and World War II (the Great Patriotic War)—they illuminate a fearful and fearsome century which leads inexorably into our present.

By suggesting that the stamp men are heroes, the history of the 20th century is being deliberately and profoundly distorted by the government of Vladimir Putin.

The stamp men were not heroes. They were killers.

Come and see.

2. The cost of lies

No great culture can be based on a crooked relationship to the truth.

Robert Musil, 1935 [69]

TO KNOW THE COST of lies, we must recognize that postage stamps both depend on and influence a sense of self and a sense of dignity. This seems healthy...unless the stamps are based on a crime.

Sense of self

At first glance, the 2002 stamp men are a nice gesture toward Vladimir Putin to honor the place where the new president built his career. Had Putin been a cosmonaut instead of a spy, we might have seen new stamps at that time for Laika the dog, Yuri Gagarin and Valentina Tereshkova. After university, Putin started working in KGB counterintelligence. He worked for the KGB for sixteen years. In the late 1990s, he briefly ran its successor, the FSB.

A second look is more telling. The stamp men show that the Soviet Union may be gone, but the Cheka's sword and shield continue to protect Russia. In the Soviet Union, police and intelligence agents were part of popular mythology. Putin and the rest of the Union grew up with such stories in books and movies. A rough parallel in America is FBI agent Eliot Ness's work to bring the gangster Al Capone to justice.

Stories like these create positive images and may help focus public perception on important issues, whether foreign interference or

5. The stamp men

Человек человеку волк—Chelovek cheloveku volk.

Man is wolf to man.

IN THE CENTER of the 2002 stamp sheet are six young agents in the early history of Soviet counterintelligence—the stamp men:

Artur Artuzov, counterintelligence chief and Gulag co-founder

Nikolai Demidenko, kidnapper

Jan Olsky, rebellion crusher

Sergei Puzitsky, mass deporter and slave camp commander

Vladimir Styrne, inquisitor of starving peasants

Grigory Syroezhkin, the human plague

Artuzov, Puzitsky, and Syroezhkin have brief biographies on the website of present-day Russia's foreign intelligence service, the SVR, which in administrative shuffling is now separate from the federal security service, the FSB. Olsky is commemorated in the leaders section of the website of Belarus's secret police. As of 2020, Belarus still chooses to call its agency the KGB. [23, 2]

The 2002 stamp men emerged during the Russian Revolution and Civil War. Puzitsky may be the only one with significant “normal”

military front-line service—after he graduated from military school, he commanded an artillery unit. Syroezhkin was in the Red Army but quickly moved to tribunal work, and Artuzov apparently ran a unit of conscripted soldiers for several months before moving to “liquidating” traitors. The others—Demidenko, Olsky, Styrne—joined military tribunals before moving to the Cheka’s tribunals. Finding Soviet enemies may have been more interesting work, and it certainly offered more safety, comfort, food, and opportunity than being a regular front-line Red Army soldier.

The stamp men soon found an unending supply of spies and counter-revolutionaries. Certainly, some were genuine military opponents and spies. Most were ordinary people who did not want Soviet freedom and were appalled by its violent imposition.

As youths, the stamp men came from different places and backgrounds, but together they formed a young cohort in a new organization, the Cheka. The lure was irresistible—they would be part of a secret and unfettered agency, the sword and shield, the armed political enforcer and defender of a new government struggling to impose its will on an enormous territory. Opportunity, excitement, even family ties drew them to the Cheka.

Each of the stamp men found a different door into the Cheka, the agency which would define them for two decades. Artuzov was a cheese-maker’s son. He was multilingual, well-educated, and a noted planner and organizer. Demidenko was from Ukraine and boldly staged a daytime street kidnapping in France. Olsky was a Polish doctor’s son who ended his career managing cafeterias. Puzitsky graduated law school and wrote a detailed report about weaknesses in Cheka operations. Styrne began his career as a census mathematician. Syroezhkin started as a circus performer in Georgia before traveling the Soviet Union and Europe for almost two decades.

As part of the initial Cheka cohort, the stamp men often worked together at the core of the GPU's new counter-intelligence department. Artuzov, the eldest, became chief. They were all quite young at the outset—Artuzov barely thirty, the rest in their twenties.

When the Cheka became the GPU, they each received the previously mentioned 5-year Cheka-GPU sword-and-shield service badge. The badge numbers reflected one's importance. The Cheka's founder Felix Dzerzhinsky received badge number 1. Artuzov was number 33, Syroezhkin 120, Demidenko 121, Puzitsky 122, Styryne 353, and Olsky 369. Artuzov's uncle Mikhail Kedrov was number 52, and Kedrov's foster son Johann Tubala was 354. [175]

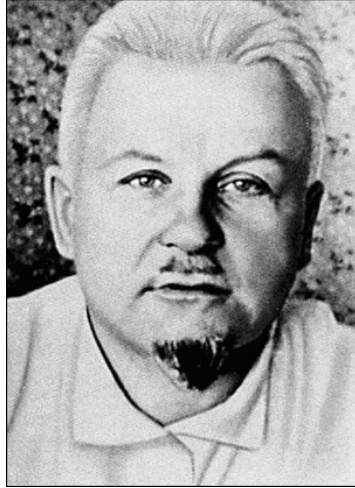
Eventually, each of the 2002 stamp men found the same exit out of the Cheka. Demidenko died first, likely by murder. The other five were shot and cremated, their remains dumped with thousands more in a large ash pit for executed prisoners known as Donskoye cemetery's Common Grave Number 1, only several miles from the Cheka's headquarters.

Execution, cremation, and a common grave provided a distinctly Soviet and communal end for these early enforcers of Bolshevik communism. Before they were killed, the stamp men were killers. Their arms were, in the self-descriptive words of the Soviet Union's future leader Nikita Khrushchev, "up to the elbows in blood."

Artur Khristianovich Artuzov

18 February 1891 - 21 August 1937

Counterintelligence chief, co-founder of the Gulag



Artuzov's bland SVR biography says he earned a degree in metallurgy, joined in 1918 "a commission that established Soviet power in the north of Russia", then rose in the Cheka to manage counter-intelligence operations, including Trust and Syndicate-2. [23]

Artuzov was born Frauchi but changed his name to sound more Russian. He was born in the Kashin district a hundred-odd miles north of Moscow. His parents were from Switzerland, and his father a cheese-maker. In 1917, Artuzov was recruited by his uncle Mikhail Sergeyeich Kedrov, who was married to a sister of Artuzov's mother. As commissar for the Demobilization of the Old Army (Demob), Kedrov's job was to seize Imperial Army matériel and facilities for the Bolsheviks' new Red Army. [6]

Chanel No. 5 and the Gulag

During and after the Russian Civil War, the city of Arkhangelsk, whose name and symbol were of a defender of good against evil, became both a nexus of horror and a womb that soon would yield two singular births, one sweeter-smelling than the other, but both born of spilled blood.

The city was founded where the Dvina River meets the White Sea, 120 miles south of the Arctic Circle and 250 miles east of the modern Russian-Finnish border. It is named for the Archangel Michael, one of the most important heavenly figures in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—in each, he is a crucial defender of good against evil. It is an old city. The first recorded inhabitation is more than a thousand years ago. In the eleventh century, a monastery dedicated to Michael was built in the river's estuary. Several centuries later the nearby city was Arkhangelsk and grew into a significant trade and naval port.

When World War One's Allied forces (mostly British, American, and French) occupied the city and surroundings early in the Civil War, they imprisoned more than a thousand Bolsheviks in a concentration camp on Mudyug Island, a 27 mile boat ride into the river's estuary from the city center. Hundreds of prisoners died from hunger, cold, disease, and deliberate cruelty. Archived reports make clear that Mudyug was a terrible place. *[131]*

One of the camp commanders was an officer in the French forces in his late thirties named Ernest Beaux, who was of French descent but from Russia. Bolsheviks were anathema to Beaux—he had been on the board of directors of Russia's preeminent perfume company. The Revolution put an end to the business of selling scents to the aristocracy and forced Beaux's young family to flee Russia.

In his new role, Beaux interrogated Bolsheviks and sympathizers and imprisoned them on Mudyug. He authorized multiple transfers of typhus victims from the island to prison hospitals in Arkhangelsk, which led to an epidemic in the city. His reputation was sufficiently bad that a local Bolshevik newspaper Our War could exploit it with an article titled “The French Pig Bo”, by one Nikandr Plastinin (whom we will meet as the first husband of Rebekka Plastinin, the Arkhangelsk lover/partner of Artuzov’s uncle Kedrov).

Beaux claimed to have a remarkably sensitive nose—Mudyug’s miasma must have left an indelible impression on him when he returned to France and the perfume trade. Despite his olfactory abilities, we can say that his memory proved breathtakingly selective.

Inspired (in his own words) by the crisp Russian air “beyond the Arctic Circle, at the time of the midnight sun, when the lakes and rivers release a perfume of extreme freshness”, concentration camp officer Ernest Beaux returned to France where he gave birth to a new scent, the world’s most famous fragrance—Chanel Number 5. [158]

Artuzov and his uncle Kedrov also knew of Mudyug. When they regained control of Arkhangelsk, it only reinforced their violent hatred of anti-Bolsheviks. [42, 43]

Soon, Artuzov would undertake his single most significant act in the distant North. Lenin and Dzherzhinsky telegraphed Kedrov, and Artuzov helped his uncle organize primitive concentration camps on the White Sea monastery islands of Solovetski (Solovki), the coastal village of Pertominsk, and the up-river village of Kholmogory and town of Shenkursk, places we will meet again.

All were a day or two by boat from Arkhangelsk and had Orthodox monastery-church complexes to serve as sturdy prison walls. The Solovki monastery closed in May 1920 and became a forced labor camp. Soon, countless thousands of people, some from

the Arkhangelsk region, some from the 1920-1921 Tambov Rebellion, some from the 1921 Kronstadt Rebellion, and many from other parts of the Soviet Union, would enter these early camps. Some would survive, some would die.

One might die dragging enormous logs out of bitterly cold waters, or cutting trees in snow-covered swamps, or digging peat from a bog, or carrying stones, or harnessed to a plough.

One might die standing naked on a stump in a cloud of mosquitos, or shivering in an unheated punishment cell, or fighting over a piece of bread, or defecating uncontrollably during a typhoid epidemic, or being tied to a log and tossed down the hundreds of steps of Solovki's Sekirnaya Hill. And, of course, one might die from a bullet.

There were many ways to die.

Northern camp conditions were so bad that a 1922 investigative commission in Arkhangelsk took note. Artuzov and his uncle may have already left, but this is unclear, since the commission made notes about his uncle's wife Rebekka Plastinina. Some camp personnel were shot, and the senior ones (perhaps following Kedrov and his retinue) were transferred to southern Russia. *[160, 166]*

The Kholmogory site in particular is wrapped in incomprehensible irony. The village's name comes from the Finnish name Kalmomäki, which translates roughly as "corpse hill".

In the 1600s, Kholmogory developed a famous craft of elaborate carvings made from the ivory and bones of walrus, unearthed mammoth skeletons, and other creatures. The craft faded by the late 1800s but was revived in 1934 by decree of the Soviet Central Committee. Kholmogory bone carvings earned a gold medal at the 1937 International Exposition in Paris, and for decades the Soviet government handed out Kholmogory carvings as gifts to foreign dignitaries and diplomats. *[161]*

Aunt Rebekka

Rebekka Akibovna Meisel (or Maisel), better known as Rebekka Plastinina, became Kedrov's co-worker, lover and second wife when he came with his nephew Artuzov to Arkhangelsk. Her story reveals a lot about the early world of the stamp men.

Rebekka was born in 1886 to Akiba Maisel, a notary or lawyer, and his wife Olga (Palkina) in the heavily Jewish city of Grodno, on the border of western Belarus-eastern Poland. By her early twenties she had moved to Paris.

Nikandr Fedorovich Plastinin, her first husband, was from Padenga village by Shenkursk, the site of a 1919 bloody Bolshevik-Allies battle and a hundred miles southeast (upriver) of Arkhangelsk.

We don't know whether Rebekka's family was patriarchal and traditional or the type to raise her as a well-educated modern woman. It is hard to imagine that her parents would have been especially happy with their daughter joining a Russian revolutionary from sub-Arctic Russia. Using a different lens, though, we can speculate that they might have been pleased for her to begin a twentieth-century life in France with the bookish son of a Russian merchant.

It seems they may have met in St. Petersburg. Russia forcibly moved many Jews eastward from her hometown of Grodno, and her parents died in St. Petersburg sometime during World War I.

One version says Rebekka helped Nikandr in revolutionary activities and that they spent years in exile in Paris, where Nikandr took on various jobs, even cleaning shop windows at night. Certainly, life was difficult for many foreign-born residents of the city. [174]

Pre-war Paris had many Russian émigrés, both pro and anti-Tsarist. Eventually the young family moved to Switzerland to join Lenin and others, like Mikhail Kedrov and Anna Driesenstock, whom Rebekka and Nikandr would later re-marry.

They returned to Russia, possibly with Lenin to St. Petersburg, and headed north to Shenkursk, where Nikandr began writing for the town's newspaper, which still recalls him as a prolific contributor. He also wrote propaganda for the regional Red Army paper Our War (Наша война) with fiery titles like “The hero and the bastard”, “Go on, take a bite!!”, and the previously mentioned “French pig” article about the Mudyug camp officer Ernest Beaux. Incendiary language with the righteousness of youth came easily to Nikandr. [105, 106]

There are three publicly-known photos of Rebekka. The first is a family portrait in Switzerland—a high-quality studio photo of a stylish young family.



*Nikandr Plastinin, Rebekka Meisel & son Vladimir
Switzerland, 1916*

In her second photo, Rebekka stands to the side of a Shenkursk Bolshevik group. The photo probably is from spring of 1919 since the Red Army had pushed out the foreign Allied forces in January. The winter snow has melted—men's shoes and Rebekka's coattails are spattered with mud. Her stylish hat and coat mark her as an outsider, and she seems to have no warm link to the group.



Nikandr Plastinin (arms crossed) and Rebekka Meisel (far right) with Bolshevik group in Shenkursk, probably spring 1919

Her husband Nikandr is in the photo, too. The seated man with light-colored clothing and no hat has Nikandr's small build and the same shoulders, ears, eyebrows, and hairline. Arms crossed, he stares into the distance, away from Rebekka and the camera. We should not be surprised that he appears tense—unexpected plot twists in the Bolshevik revolution were tearing his families apart.

His wife was preparing to leave him and would take their son. His Shenkursk family was shattered by his "Bolshevik maximalism". We can assume that his family's money probably helped him to move to

France and Switzerland and avoid the brunt of World War I. When Nikandr came home he wrote propaganda for a violent political movement which defined his parents and relatives as class enemies.

Nikandr's little sister Vera was already traumatized—the previous summer in July 1918 her husband Yakov Petrovich Levanidov was seized by her brother's beloved Bolsheviks. Yakov never returned. More than seven decades later, family descendants learned he had been shot and thrown into the Dvina River in September. [167]

In modern lists, there are a variety of Shenkurst and Arkhangelsk Plastinins who in the '20s and '30s were sent to the camps or shot.

Rebekka's third photo must be from the mid-to-late 1920s. Her youthful attractiveness and French fashion are long gone, traded for coarse Bolshevik looks. Husband Nikandr is out of the picture as well, replaced by Mikhail Kedrov. Some sources misidentify the boy as Kedrov's son Igor. Compare the light eyes, wide ears, small mouth and distinctive chin to the 1916 photo—the young man is Rebekka's son Vladimir, now on his way to a Chekist career.



*Chekist family:
Rebekka Meisel, son Vladimir Plastinin, and Mikhail Kedrov*

Grigori Sergeevich Syroezhkin

25 January 1900 - 1939

The human plague



Syroezhkin's stamp contains either a lie or a mistake. It says he died in 1937. Actually, he is number 111 on a 20 August 1938 kill list of former NKVD employees and was shot in early 1939. [21, 25]

The author of a 2009 Russian book about the Cheka, when seeking a chapter title for Syroezhkin, settled on what can be translated as "Man's Plague" or "The Plague of Humanity". [25]

That epithet seems to fit, but we must dig deep to ponder his real life. He was the most traveled, the most hands-on, and perhaps the most intriguing of the 2002 stamp men. The most personally brutal of the 2002 stamp men, he is in an odd way also the most tragic one.

Syroezhkin was born on 25 January 1900, to peasants in Volkovo, a tiny village in rural Balashov (Elan) district of Saratov province in southern Russia, which had been devastated by a horrific famine only eight years earlier. [30]

In 1905, the young family sought a better life and moved to Tbilisi, Georgia. His father found work in the local Russian Army garrison.

Syroezhkin's early life was a series of traumas and personal disappointments. Uprooted from his tiny Russian village at the age of five, he grew up as a poor foreigner in a big city under the yoke of the Russian Empire and in the turmoil of World War I. His father's low-level garrison job helped pay for an education as the way to a better life. Syroezhkin did well and passed multiple exams but seems to have been bullied by his better-off Tbilisi classmates. A physically energetic teenager, he tried to join the Russian Army at age 14 or 15 out of excitement or necessity but was sent home for being too young. He studied wrestling and tried to join a circus doing dramatic Cossack Dzhigitovka horse-riding stunts, but an injury ended that dream.

He found a stable job as a railway clerk but the Russian Revolution arrived and the Empire died. The Syroezhkins were now foreigners in Georgia. Somehow they made their way back to Volkovo, but life in southern Russia during the Civil War was extremely dangerous and profoundly difficult. Syroezhkin entered the Red Army (allegedly a volunteer, but very possibly a conscript), then moved into the Cheka. His Georgian schooling meant he was literate, a rarity among rural peasants and a big advantage. It seems he was a voracious reader.

Present-day Russia's SVR gives him a positive but innocuous biography. He served briefly as a Red Army soldier before becoming a tribunal commandant. By age 18 he had joined the Cheka, where he stood out as "completely satisfied...physically strong...impressed that the results of his operational work were immediate". [23]

Something in young Grisha's psychology led him to enjoy hurting people. His childhood seems to be the root of it all.

His 1924 file photo suggests a fighter and drinker, with a dark scar at the inside corner of his eye, baggy eyes, and maybe a broken nose. He appears much older than he is, and the photo is heavily edited. The unnatural sharp edges of very white areas suggest that details have been painted out.



Syroezhkin at age 23 or 24



A 1937 photo hints at discolorations on the dark side of his face, and scars around his eye, on his lip and chin. These may be the elements edited out of his 1924 photo.



Syroezhkin, Spain, 1937 [32]

Moving from youth to adulthood, Syroezhkin continued his “operational” work, always as a busy hands-on enforcer. *[23, 25, 66]*

For two decades he traveled Asia and Europe, ranging as far east as China, Mongolia, and Kolyma, and as far west as Finland, Sweden, Germany, and Spain. Sometimes he traveled by choice, sometimes due to demotions for drinking. A severe alcoholic even by Soviet standards, by now he probably was not completely satisfied and guilt-free. His youthful injuries and the brutal nature of his “operational” Cheka work imply significant physical and emotional damage.

In Georgia and Chechnya in 1918-1920, he may have repressed bandits, anti-Soviets and kulaks. At age 20 or 21, back in Saratov oblast, Syroezhkin helped repress thousands in the “Popov gang”. With hundreds of other “antibanditry” Chekists, he then helped repress the enormous Antonovshchina (Tambov Rebellion). Tens of thousands of peasants and army deserters fought against Bolshevik rule and grain confiscations. In return, the Red Army and Kedrov’s Chekists used summary executions and poison gas. Up to 250,000 people may have died in the rebellion. [13, 19]



Bolsheviks release poison gas downwind against Tambov peasants, 1921

In Belarus in 1924 he eliminated the Ivanov and other gangs. Dzerzhinsky gave Syroezhkin a gold watch for this Belarus “work”.

In Operation Trust he put a bullet in Sidney Reilly’s chest. In Operation Syndicate-2 he interrogated Boris Savinkov and helped Puzitsky throw him out a Lubyanka window.

In Chechnya in 1925 he helped identify and eliminate bandits. In Yakutia in 1928 he eliminated a rebel group, then went to the Arctic and killed “spy” Yuri Schmidt, who was planning a major rebellion in

the middle of nowhere with the help of wicked Americans—Syroezhkin got Schmidt drunk, took him outside, and killed him.

In 1928-29 he eliminated rebels and gangs in Buryatia, Kolyma and Mongolia. He crossed the border into China and killed anti-Soviet “nests” of hapless Russian refugees. In Novosibirsk he broke up the “Black” organization, arrested 300 peasants, and sentenced 73 to death. In Kamen-na-Obi and Chumakovsky, he was involved in torture, summary killings, and the burning of a village.

In Leningrad he lived in an exclusive central section of the city (Apt, 10, No. 8 Perovskaya St, now returned to its original name of Malaya Konyushennaya (Little Stable) Street), only a ten-minute walk from the Cheka’s offices on Gorokhovaya, the base from which he “crushed” more than 136 Leningrad espionage and terrorist groups supposedly connected to General Kutepov, an anti-Soviet expatriate in Paris. Perhaps this means he hurt 136 people. [185]

To learn the identities of Kutepov’s local plotters, it is claimed that handsome Syroezhkin used his Chekist charm to seduce an anti-Soviet former noblewoman so she would surrender the names of her allies. Considering that Syroezhkin was a violent young man of low education with an inferiority complex who spoke Russian with a rural or Georgian accent, seduction seems unlikely. We can conclude that he simply beat and/or raped a woman to extort information. [31]

He returned to Belarus to uncover, uproot, and liquidate enemies. In the 1932 Union of the Liberation of Belarus case, he helped jail or kill more than a hundred dangerous conspirators who had disguised themselves for decades as leading teachers, scientists, and writers.

In the mid-1930s, Syroezhkin traveled to Spain, where he “repeatedly personally participated in the implementation of special tasks” in the Spanish Civil War. One of his subordinates there was a translator from Paris, Lev Borisovich Savinkov (1912-1987), the son

of Boris Savinkov, the man Syroezhkin threw out a window. Young Lev probably never knew his boss killed his father. Lev clearly bought into the party line—after World War II he helped rounded up Russians in France to be sent back to the camps. [29, 55]

A group photo in Spain is interesting. Among other things, these men helped evacuate (steal) 500 tons of Spanish gold to the Soviet Union for “safekeeping”. Vasilevsky later was involved in the murder of Leon Trotsky in Mexico. Rabtsevich was from Belarus—he helped enforce Soviet power there by deportations and other methods until his retirement in 1952. Orlovsky was Belarusian as well—he killed farmers and had been an NKVD overseer of the Moscow-Volga Canal alongside stamp man Puzitsky.



Soviet spies, Madrid, August 1937. Front: L.P. Vasilevsky. Rear left to right: A.M. Rabtsevich, G.S. Syroezhkin, K.P. Orlovsky. [32]

There is no known record of Syroezhkin having a wife or children. We do not know if his father Sergei Lavrentyevich Syroezhkin, mother Agafya Kirillovna, or younger brother Konstantin Sergeevich Syroezhkin survived the Civil War and the subsequent famines and ravages of the young Soviet Union.

Syroezhkin's time in the Madrid NKVD residency was his last significant assignment. He committed the sin of honesty—he told friends that he believed in the innocence of certain senior Red Army officers who had been shot. Someone betrayed his confidence. He was number 111 on the kill list for 20 August 1938, but being in Spain gave him a little extra time. [21]

In late 1938, Moscow ordered him to return. Syroezhkin knew by then that many of his colleagues had been killed and that people were being shot or sent to the camps in prodigious numbers. The Soviet Union had always been a dangerous place for its citizens, but this current frenzy of bloodletting had lasted more than two years.

Syroezhkin was more than a thousand miles from the USSR. He was an experienced international traveler who could avoid Soviet foreign agents. There is no evidence of a wife or children to protect. He knew well that the Soviet Union was brutal and dysfunctional.

He was the only stamp man who had some real freedom to determine his fate once the walls began to close in. He certainly knew what was happening, and he was well-positioned to escape. He had a very real chance to survive. Still, he chose to follow orders rather than disappear or defect.

Did he fear for his parents, brother, unknown loved ones, or Chekist friends in Moscow? Did he fear for hometown relatives and their friends? Numerous Syroezhkings and others from his hometown were being deported to Kazakhstan and Tomsk region. [234]

Was he after all these terrible years a dedicated loyalist blind to his likely fate? He knew that many of his colleagues with greater rank, education, and influence were dead. He had known the other stamp men for two decades and watched as they rose to high levels in the Cheka, but he was doing the same rough work he began twenty years earlier. By his late thirties, he must have understood that a cynical bureaucracy viewed him merely as a tool to be used. His life experience and habitual drinking suggest he was deeply unhappy..

Syroezhkin's return to Moscow seems foolish, but perhaps was driven by family concerns. One source says he registered at the Hotel Moscow, where some unnamed-but-not-yet-dead friend supposedly phoned him about a new decree to recognize the work of outstanding intelligence officers in Spain. Syroezhkin certainly would have seen this for the lie it was. Perhaps he wore his Belarus gold watch when he went downstairs, bought a bottle of liquor to share with his friend, and found three agents who held out his arrest warrant. [29]

During the infamously cold winter of 1938-39 he was convicted as a Polish spy. According to NKVD records, he lost his job on 21 January 1939 and was arrested 8 February. On 26 February 1939, barely 39 years old, he was convicted and shot. [29, 30, 64]

He was the last of the 2002 stamp men. It must have been a strange feeling, knowing that his colleagues were gone. Never again would they meet for lunch or enjoy drinks after a long day. Never more could they share travel stories or throw someone out a window.

It should come as no surprise that Syroezhkin was cremated and joined his colleagues in Donskoye's Common Grave Number 1.

Think back to Syroezhkin as a child. That strong little boy, with some luck or kindness, could have become someone completely different. Instead, shaped by poverty, war, and Russia's new Bolshevik overlords, he hurt and destroyed people for two decades.

9. 2016-17: New gardener, new elephant

“Is it hard for you here?”

“It’s hard everywhere”, she answered cautiously...

M. Gorky, “Solovki” [179]

VLADIMIR PUTIN took office yet again as Russian president in 2016, replacing his placeholder Dmitri Medvedev.

On Christmas Eve 2016, Arkhangelsk installed a bust of Stalin, the Man of Steel and Gardener of Human Happiness, not in a public space but in a private car park behind the BUM shopping center, two blocks from Dzherzhinsky Prospect and a quarter-mile from the city’s monument to victims of political repression. *[89, 90]*

As Arkhangelsk’s new gardener mounted his modest pedestal, the city’s waterfront witnessed the rebirth of Solzhenitsyn’s mother tumor (see page 35) on Red Pier. Recall the Solovki camp acronym SLON (elephant). After trampling the city nearly a century ago, Slon was resurrected in late 2016-early 2017 as a 26-foot-high (8 meter) elephant made of discarded plastic bottles to promote a new restaurant with the same name. Internal lights illuminated it during the long winter nights.

Moscow’s new gardener was not amused. Inspectors closed Slon Restaurant, the plastic bottle elephant sculpture was removed before the upcoming Arctic Forum biennial international conference, and Moscow decreed that the next Forum would move to St. Petersburg. *[84, 85, 86, 87, 88]*

10. 1992-2019: New flood, new stamp men

It is not heroes that make history, but history that makes heroes.

J.V. Stalin, Short Course, Ch. 1

SCIENTISTS IMPRISONED in laboratories. Murdered relatives. Deadly camps and prison construction projects. Young men who fought and died to preserve a system of fear.

First, we will note the many stamps from 1992-2019 related to the secret police. Second, we will take a close look at six new stamp men who appeared on 19 December 2018, one hundred years to the day after the Cheka created its counterintelligence Special Department.

A postal tsunami

This book's Appendix shows that post-Soviet Russia has issued more than 160 postage stamps with Chekist links, dozens in the last couple of years alone. Most are not directly about the secret police but have easily-uncovered connections to the agency's various incarnations from the Cheka to the present day. Stamps memorialize people, places, and events important in Soviet and Russian history. The fact that so many stamps have Chekist facets shows the pervasive and enduring influence of the police state, and the extensive yet often hidden or forgotten role of Chekists in history. Just beneath the surface of the present, the past still lies.

The new stamp men

Kravtsov

Kedrov

Zhidkov



Chebotarev

Abakumov

Krygin

The new stamp men

On 19 December 2018 (Chekists Day in Russia), the generally unknown Lugansk (Luhansk, in Ukrainian) People's Republic issued a rather limited edition (300) sheet of stamps to commemorate a century of military counterintelligence agencies. The LPR is a Russian-controlled proto-state which declared a disputed independence from Ukraine in 2014. The sheet features six new Soviet stamp men. It is from the LPR in name only. Russia provided the content, complex design, and high-quality production. [83]

The two center characters are Mikhail Kedrov, whom we already met, and Viktor Abakumov, who ran SMERSH (*Smert shpionem*—“death to spies”), the World War II counterintelligence agency designed to engage in counterintelligence and to watch the Red Army.

In 21st century Russia, SMERSH enjoys renewed celebration (without many details) for brilliance against the German enemy.

SMERSH was designed to work with the NKVD and also bypass it to provide Stalin with a bureaucratic counterweight. Abakumov rose through Beria's patronage but now he would report to Stalin.

SMERSH's purpose was inherently Chekist. SMERSH was intended to infiltrate its own country's military—the Red Army—to ensure loyalty to the Kremlin overlords.

These were the same Kremlin overlords who lobotomized the Red Army in the 1930s by killing tens of thousands of officers.

The same Kremlin overlords who aimed guns at the backs of Red Army soldiers to force them forward (Stalin's infamous Order 227, best known for its blunt “Not one step back”).

The same Kremlin overlords who refused to sign the Geneva War Convention, who would not seek help for Soviet soldiers languishing

Vasily Mikhailovich Chebotarev (1918-44) was born 25 June 1918, during the Bolshevik takeover of Kazakhstan, in tiny Gavrilovka, two hundred miles east of fellow stamp man Grigory Kravtsov's village.

Chebotarev's stamp isn't a lie, but it is deceptive.

He survived the repeated Kazakh famines. He began working as a teenager, first on the Khleborob (Breadman) state farm then in a mine. At twenty, he entered the army, became a sniper, and spent more than a year near Leningrad (including two horrific winters). After NKVD training, he was sent to the front again, this time as a counterintelligence officer in Belarus.

He was a strong young man, and we can believe that he was a brave soldier. Many of his fellow troops died, and so did he. At the Bobr River, his unit was ordered to advance into heavily armed German positions. There were tanks, but Chebotarev was part of an infantry group moving on foot toward German guns.

As with many Soviet advances, the results were predictable—an outnumbered and ill-protected unit was thrown forward and wiped out, to be replaced by another unit, and yet another. Perhaps we could refer to this standard Soviet cannon-fodder approach to offensive operations as the “Red Wave” style of warfare.

His official stories hint at the Kremlin's disregard for the lives of individual troops. Chebotarev inspired his tank unit, he held a hilltop for a day, he killed many Germans, he captured the turncoat SS Lieutenant Ryaglikov, he tried to save 18-year-old field nurse Maria Inkina. The retreating Nazis even took time to defile his corpse with numerous stab wounds and a Soviet star cut into his chest (just like stamp man Krygin, whom we will meet below).

Rails of remembrance

It is hard to feel sympathy for 2018's stamp men Kedrov and Abakumov. They were mature, politically powerful men. Kedrov was born well-off, Abakumov poor, but both spent years rising to high levels by enabling the Cheka's "merciless fight". They used positional power to inflict their operational and administrative decisions on people with little power to fight back—civilians, prisoners, soldiers.

In contrast, Kravtsov, Chebotarev, Krygin, and Zhidkov deserve sympathetic remembrance for dismal childhoods and violent deaths.

Their official stories may or may not be true. Their stamps do not honor their human individuality. The four Heroes mattered to the Cheka and the Soviet government as propaganda. They died truly terrible deaths, but became faces and names for posters, monuments, and tales of the country's salvation by a heroic army and the secret police. They died, their brief lives were briefly noted, and then they were mostly forgotten until their postal resurrection

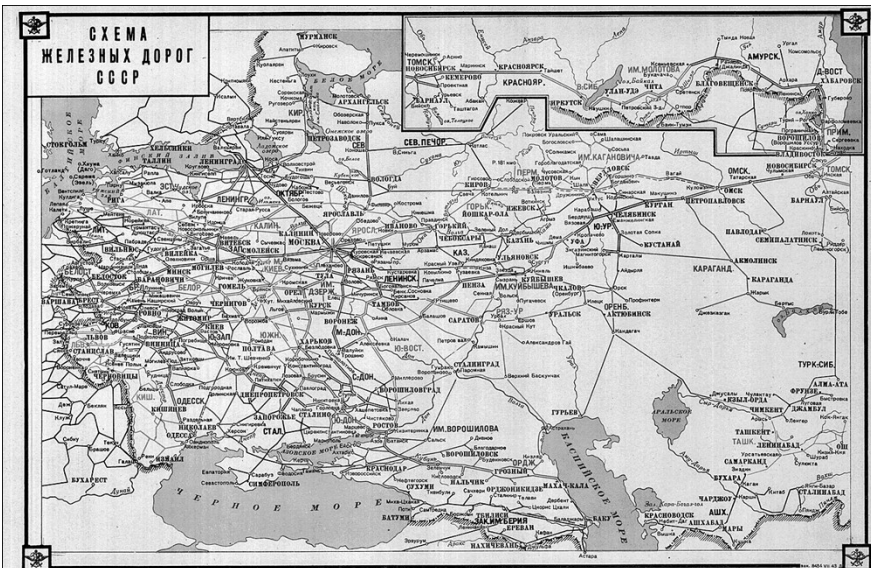
We don't know how they lived and behaved or what they felt and believed. They may have become good men or bad, and may have acted with dignity or ignobility. We do know that they grew up in a nation washed again and again by red waves of famine and terror. In the end they had little choice but to fight and die for the rulers who had spawned such misery. They spent their entire lives in a cruel system, and were made to die to preserve it.

Whatever they believed or did or became, they once were children, and children are fascinated by trains.

Railroads were quite literally the Bolsheviks' circulatory system. Trains moved the nutritional energy of grain and industrial materials throughout the Soviet empire. Trains moved boxcars of red blood



*Railroad winter work: Prisoners laying wooden “sleepers”.
(Contemporary uncoprighted photo)*



*Diagram of railways of the USSR, early 1940s.
(Contemporary uncoprighted photo)*

Pages 147-158 omitted

Russia today: 160+ Chekist stamps

IN ADDITION TO the 2002 and 2018 stamp men, post-Soviet Russia has a flood of stamps with Chekist secret police connections. Our non-exhaustive list *excludes* many stamps about weapons and wars, regions and political relationships. These 1992-2019 stamps illustrate the pervasive yet often hidden or forgotten role of the secret police, and are organized into five categories:

Infrastructure and projects—built by or related to prisoners

Bureaucracy—agencies and units connected to the secret police

Chekists—employees and agents

Victims—individuals, or their relatives or colleagues

Miscellaneous

Before moving to the stamps themselves, we should note that the issue rate of new Cheka-connected stamps is rising, from a couple per year in the early 1990s, to dozens in 2018-2019.



2017 Procurator General of the Russian Federation. The office of the nation's top prosecutor, notable mostly for its century of Chekists, terror and, more recently, corruption.

We can review the history of Soviet and Russian chief prosecutors. Peter Krasikov (in office 1924-33) previously helped run the Red Terror as co-chairman of the Petrograd Cheka, and ran an anti-religion campaign which included killing priests and seizing church valuables. Ivan Akulov (1933-35) was previously deputy chair of the OGPU; he was shot in 1937. Andrei Vyshinsky (1935-39) purged Moscow University, ran show trials of innocents, and created the “no evidence is necessary” legal foundation for the Great Purge. Mikhail I. Pankratiev (1939-40) signed endless execution orders but was pushed out after butting heads with Beria.

Viktor Bochkov (1940-43) before becoming procurator worked almost 17 years for the OGPU/NKVD, including running the prison division and the secret division; after the procurator job he helped run the 1944 mass deportations of Chechens and others, and was deputy chief of GULAG. Bochkov also is the official who fabricated post-mortem paperwork to authorize the 1941 execution of Mikhail Kedrov and two dozen others., and who used tanks to suppress the 1954 Kengir/Steplog camp rebellion. [233]

Konstantin Gorshenin (1943-48) secretly approved death sentences and participated in the notorious Gulag imprisonment of German POWs. Grigory Savonov (1948-53) began as a prosecutor under Vyshinsky and was removed from office four days after Beria's arrest. Roman Rudenko (1953-81) has a personal 2015 stamp. He condemned thousands in the Great Terror, ran the NKVD Special Camp No. 7 where more than 12,000 died, and shot a Vorkuta mine inmate in the head. Alexander Rekunkov (1981-88) entered the Tbilisi Artillery School as a youth in 1939, presumably to help enforce Soviet order after 40,000 Georgians had been killed in the preceding two years. Alexander Sukharev (1988-90) had worked for more than a decade at Komsomol, which had close ties to the secret police and

Pages 166-177 omitted



2009 Andrei Gromyko, diplomat and foreign minister, got his first Foreign Affairs job due to numerous sudden vacancies caused by purges. Later he and KGB chief Andropov ran the nation during Brezhnev's long decline. Gromyko's best known words are "Better ten years of negotiation than one day of war". Two of his brothers died fighting in World War II.

As with many senior Soviets, we must piece stitch together an overview of his family. Gromyko and his wife Lydia Dmitrievna Grinevich were from Belarus. His last name derives from his birthplace, the village of Starye Gromyki (now part of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone). His father Andrei Matveevich apparently spent time in Canada, learned English (which explains how son Andrei began his excellent English), and returned before World War I. It seems he died in Minsk in 1933 during the famine. Andrei Gromyko's 1988 memoirs bypass the 1930s. There are multiple repressed Gromykos from Belarus—some are very likely his relatives. For example, a Mikhail Matveevich Gromyko, perhaps an uncle, was killed in Magadan region in 1938; other Gromykos died in Kazakhstan. [230]

As for his wife Lydia, there are many repressed Grineviches in Belarus and Ukraine, and in the deportee zones of Kazakhstan and the Tomsk oblast north of Novosibirsk. Dmitri I. Grinevich was a victim in Kazakhstan—this may be Lydia's father. Unsurprisingly, all the Kazakh Grineviches are male with no data, and all the Tomsk ones are female with no data. Tomsk was a camp destination for wives of enemies of the state in the late 1930s. The male and female ages are similar for marriage or parenting—we conclude that several family generations, possibly related to Andrei Gromyko's wife Lidia, were separated and deported, probably in or soon after 1937; the youngest was an infant girl born that year. [207]



2017 Fazul Gamzatovna Alieva, famous Dagestani poet. Born in 1932 in the tiny village of Genichutl in the mountainous Khunzakh district near Chechnya and Georgia. Life was hard—in 1926 the district population was over 29,000; by 1939 it had dropped almost 25%. Khunzakh was in the midst of the 1920-21 Dagestan rebellion—Soviet re-conquest took its toll. Scarce information on her family and early life implies an unhappy story. One of her poems begins: “What am I afraid of? I do not know. All the worst has already happened to me.”



2017 Maya Plisetskaya, ballerina, raised by relatives when her parents were repressed. Her father Mikhail ran the Arktikugol Trust (2006 stamp) Gulag coal mine in Svalbard 1932-36, was arrested in 1937 and shot January 1938 at Moscow’s Kommunarka shooting ground. Her mother Rakhil was arrested March 1938 with an infant son and sentenced to 8 years in Alzhir (camp of wives of traitors) in the Karaganda mine complex in Kazakhstan. As a dancer, Maya endured with low-paying tours and denial to go abroad. [227]



2017 Sergei Alekseev, lawyer and constitutional scholar who helped write the post-Soviet Russian constitution. His father Sergei Nikolaevich, a statistician, was arrested in 1937 and given a “10-year sentence”. In the mid-1990s, Alekseev quit a presidential council and a human rights commission when Russian troops expanded fighting in Chechnya.



2018 Yuri Novitsky, lawyer, professor, and church official. In 1922 the Cheka shot him at night on a roadside along with the Petrograd church leader Metropolitan Veniamin and two others, and buried them in an unmarked grave.

END OF PREVIEW
pages 187-227 not included