Supporting work for peace and justice
in eastern Europe and former-Soviet regions

Newsletter Winter 2023

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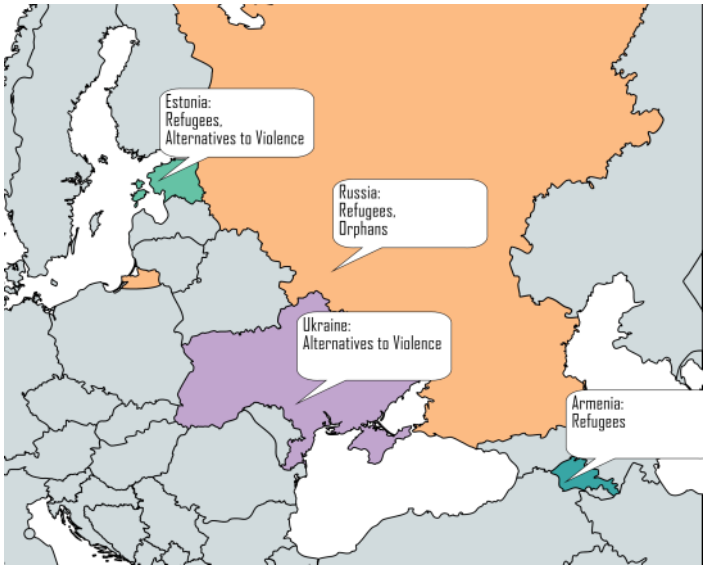
This is a little different from our usual sort of newsletter..

Normally we showcase our own work and the projects we support. But this time we are not describing these activities in detail. This is to safeguard the people who are working on them.

Instead, the map just shows countries where we are currently operating, and the kinds of activity: alternatives to violence, help for orphan children and young adults, and for refugee children and their parents.

We also conduct Quaker outreach, online and in print, in the Russian language. This work, of course, is for Russian speakers everywhere regardless of which country they live in.

This newsletter reports more generally about several things, most of which are touched in some way by ongoing war.



Refugees and migrants

We are grateful to be able to say that, despite the many dangers and difficulties, there is still a Friendly candle in the window in Russia. For example, aid to refugees (which was, more than a hundred years ago, the foundation of Friends' presence in Russia) continues with our Quaker sympathy and support.

There are new, war-time, difficulties for Moscow's community of economic refugees — migrant workers — whose families already live at risk.

Their legal standing has always been precarious, and now there are reports of how heavily-armed police accosted men as they left the "prayer houses" after prayers. They were then bussed to recruitment centers, where they were denied lawyers and offered a choice between military service and jail.

Military service comes with some sweeteners - a fast track to citizenship and pay bonuses. However, migrants are aware of the high casualties: Uzbeks who ended up on the front lines at Mariupol have not been heard of since.

One therapist reports a rise in domestic violence among migrant families; she ascribes it to anxieties induced by these terrible uncertainties. Nevertheless, there is a safe place where children from places like Uzbekistan or Cameroon still get language lessons and benefit from the joyous (and therapeutic) release that art and music can give. Their parents also get help with language lessons, with donations of winter clothes and with access to health care and legal aid.

In the diaspora

Friends and colleagues in Moscow are well-placed to hear good news in a dark time. It has been heartening to hear of how members of the Russian diaspora are working to support refugee families. In some cases we can say, with bitter irony, that they are all fleeing the same war. (A million Russians, mostly young people, many of

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them highly educated, have left their country since the invasion in 2022.)

A group in Prague sponsors a chess club for Ukrainian teenagers; they have also set up an employment bureau to help the children's mothers find work.

In Tallinn, Russian and Estonian Friends, who have been helping Ukrainian refugees, are preparing to welcome a new wave of Russians. These are Russian Jews who fled mobilization to Ukraine, only to find themselves vulnerable in a new war in Israel. Estonian Friends also stand ready to receive Palestinian refugees.

In Yerevan, in Armenia, displaced Russians have taken an active role in organizing assistance for the nearly 120,000 Armenians who have fled from the Azerbaijani take-over of what had, for generations, been their homes in the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh).

"Returning of the Names"

Memorial, with two other human rights groups, shared the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize. Uniquely, it is also an archive and a center for teaching about Russia's totalitarian past. Since 2007, Memorial has sponsored the "Returning of the Names."

On October 29, Russians would gather on Lubyanka Square, where the secret police have been headquartered since 1918. This is also the location of the the Solovetsky Stone, a huge rock transported in 1990 from the first of the Soviet camps for political prisoners. There, between powerful symbols of both oppression and liberation, a thousand or more participants would read the names of those who perished under Soviet Terror — often, the names of members of their own families.

The Solovetsky Stone (Wikipedia)

Parallel events were held in other Russian cities and, in 2020 when authorities began to forbid the gathering, Memorial went online, live streaming from all over Russia.

This year, there were readings from 76 cities in dozens of different countries. The live stream lasted for twelve hours. Cities with large communities of anti-war Russians — Prague, Tbilisi, Vienna — took part.

It was particularly moving to hear the readings in languages like Ukrainian and Estonian, the voices of cultures suppressed under Soviet totalitarianism. In Azerbaijan and Armenia, there were readings from the works of beloved national poets who died in the Terror.

In Moscow itself, despite the lack of official permission, people also gathered, read names, left the customary red roses and lighted the powerful candles of memory and of hope.

Brave souls

In Russia, NGOs may be shut down; independent news outlets may be in exile. Nevertheless, despite dangers and limitations, their web pages are still providing information about those brave souls who sturdily resist an increasingly authoritarian system and their government's war.

Not a day goes by without a few arrests, detentions, fines or imprisonments for disseminating "fake" news or "discrediting the armed forces of Russia." A 70-year old army veteran was fined 30,000 rubles ($350) for reposting a news video of the Bucha atrocities (a considerable amount in Russia, where the average old-age pension is $236.)

In 2022, a St. Petersburg artist was detained for replacing price tags in a supermarket with anti-war messages. At her recent court hearing, friends who came to show support were driven away by police with tear gas.

A priest was beaten, in his church, by FSB agents because of an article he put on his church's web page. It was titled, "A Cult of War." In it he accused the Church of replacing true doctrine with militarism. It probably won't help his case that, in the article, he scolded Russia's President for disrespecting the holy "Passion-bearers" (non-violent martyrs) Boris and Gleb by dismissing them as losers.

and public figures

The harshest prison sentences have been reserved for public figures. The opposition

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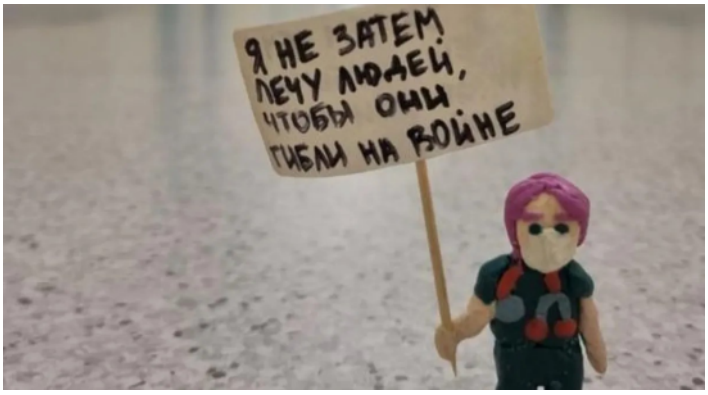
politician journalist Vladimir Kara-Murza has been sentenced to a staggering 25 years in a penal colony and Alexei Navalny has 19 more years to go. On October 11, Oleg Orlov, the co-chairman of Memorial, was fined 150,000 rubles ($1,500). The court also requested psychiatric evaluations on the grounds that Orlov's many years of activism have left him mentally "inadequate." (Orlov had already been penalized seven times for anti-war pickets.) Two weeks later, prosecutors requested a three year jail term.

The "little pickets"

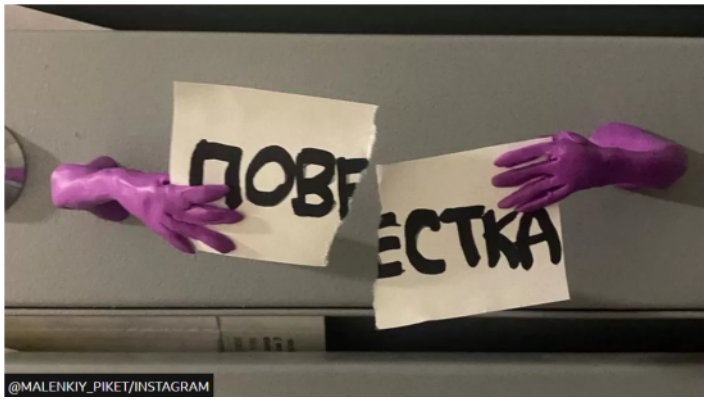
From Malenkiy_piket via BBC. The notice includes the words ""don't go to kill for the sake of a criminal regime"

In St Petersburg there arose a spontaneous form of protest which spread. Over 300 artists created "tiny protesters" ("malenkiy piketi") — figures made of various materials, roughly 4-6 inches tall, each carrying a sign or indicating their opposition to the war in another way. Some creations used a uniform or other signs of a profession to give the "speaker" a distinctive voice.



From Malenkiy_piket via BBC. The protesting doctor says "I don't want to cure people only for them to die in war"

Hundreds of these tiny figures are secretly placed on the windowsill in a Metro car, the top of a fence around a park, the curb by a no-parking sign. Officials take them down as soon as they see them, but the message has already reached many.



From Malenkiy_piket via BBC. The word "draft notice" being torn up in a letterbox

and stickers...

Printing shops are doing a good business in the commercialized new Russia, and getting a roll of personalized stickers printed is an easy task. Now, as one walks around the city, people can reach into a pocket, pull out a roll of tiny, ready-made protest signs, and put one on any bench, curb, parking meter, traffic-light post, gate, door,... as they pass. Get it ready, walk by, slowing only slightly, slap the sticker on the object, and walk away.

These actions can still be dangerous. The Moscow Times reported that Sasha Skochilenko, 33, was sentenced to seven years in prison for swapping price tags at a St. Petersburg supermarket with statements criticizing Moscow's invasion of Ukraine - the charge was that she was spreading "fake news" about the Armed Forces.

Famine and relief: books, film

Russians are a nation of readers and, in any bookstore, one of the biggest sections is always history and biography. Recently, librarians and journalists in the lower Volga region have responded with enthusiasm to publications about Quaker relief work in Russia, especially the work done during the terrible famine of 1921 - 23.

Although such books cannot be "displayed," they are quietly made available to readers. The famine was, in part, the result of the failures of the Bolshevik policy of War Communism. (Ten years later, Stalin's genocidal policies of collectivization resulted in millions of deaths in Ukraine.)

These later Ukrainian deaths were largely hidden from the rest of the world, but, in the 1920s, aid could be understood as a gift from the working class of many nations. In July of 1921, the writer Maxim Gorky wrote an open letter (apparently at Lenin's request), appealing for help from the international community, which the

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Soviets received — the bulk of it, in fact, came from the United States.

However, in the current climate of angry xenophobia and the anti-western stance encouraged by the Kremlin, such stories of international good will run against the official narrative of proud self-sufficiency in the face of encircling enemies.

Famine ("Golod"), a powerful documentary on the famine of 1921- 23, was banned from public screenings last year by the Ministry of Culture for its "shocking" content. The film's scenes of suffering and death are indeed painful to watch, but as Its director angrily and pointedly asked: what, ultimately, is so shocking about the story of people working across ideological boundaries, following the deaths of two million, to save ten million additional lives. What indeed?

The film is available on YouTube here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXi3kBXMWo8

Friends, and a welcome, in Georgia

International good will and mutual help were blessedly in evidence at a gathering of Quakers and other peace makers held in October in the Republic of Georgia.

In the fourth century, Georgia was the second nation to become Christian (following Armenia) and its distinctive culture flowered in the 11th and 12th centuries. Many churches and monasteries from that period have survived. They are examples of Byzantine architecture, but translated into local materials, sited on dramatic mountaintops and with a distinctive iconography: this imagery takes into account the oneness of humanity with all of nature.

Georgians have a long tradition of resisting empires — Russian, Ottoman and Persian alike. The biggest market in Tblisi is known as the "Deserter's Bazaar," because it is where deserters from the Tsar's army once sold their guns.

Georgians believe that a guest is a gift from God and Georgian Friends have welcomed young men fleeing mobilization into the war in Ukraine. At the October gathering, peace makers from ten different countries benefitted from the warm hospitality of Georgian Friends.

Most of those attending in Tbilisi work with refugees, some have been refugees themselves. We met, across boundaries of past and present conflict, to worship, to share meals, and to share experiences. Some were painful and hard to hear. Others gave us a hopeful glimpse of the future.

Quakers have historically been active in work with refugees. After WW II, Quakers in alliance with other faith- and non-faith-based communities sponsored reconciliation projects. These were work camps where participants from many nations worked together to rebuild the damages of war.

We heard from two activists who had taken part in such camps. One helped Serbs and Croats rebuild one another's shell-shattered houses across a UN-policed ceasefire line during the wars that broke up the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. He reminded us that presence is more important than projects and of the opportunities for work for peace that present themselves even in the darkest moments.

And, indeed, we were grateful for an opportunity to be present to each other. We were also grateful to learn that "waiting worship" in the manner of Friends is still available to seekers, both in Russia and in Russian language.

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