

# Pictorial essay: Death trenches bear witness to Stalin's purges

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[SANDERMAKH, Russia](#) (CNN) -- Amid the low hills and picturesque streams of Karelia, a republic in northwest Russia, excavators unearthed more than 9,000 bodies of political prisoners -- a horrific reminder of the nation's past.

The bodies were found earlier this month by members of a Russian historical society known as Memorial. The victims were the result of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's purges of the 1930s, carried out by the NKVD, later known as the KGB.



Written execution orders found in the secret police archives (CNN)

The victims were shot between October and November of 1937. Graves at Sandermakh in the Karelian woods were discovered after Memorial members and local authorities found written execution orders in the secret police archives.

Memorial members found 130 trenches -- each containing 50 to 60 skeletons. The victims were stripped to their underwear, bound hand and foot and lined up along the trench edges. Each was then shot in the back of the head.



Victims were shot in the head by Stalin's NKVD

Memorial believes that the Karelian discovery sheds new light on Stalin's purges when an estimated 14 million Soviets died. And as the closed chapters of Soviet history are revealed, historians believe, many more graves like these will be found.

Following a memorial service in Sandermakh, the graves here were closed. The Russian historical plans to build a monument to honor the victims, but for now only surveyors' stakes remain to mark the graves.