
ARMENIA: ACTIVISTS CRY CENSORSHIP AS GOVERNMENT SHUTS DOWN STALINISM EXHIBIT

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The Armenian government has shut down a museum exhibition devoted to the Stalin-era purges, prompting accusations of censorship and reviving political debates over Armenias Soviet legacy.

The exhibit, in Yerevans Tumanyan Museum, opened in early August to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the 1937 wave of state terror in the Soviet Union. At least 15 million people around the Soviet Union, and an estimated 45,000 in Armenia, were believed to have been killed in what is known as the Yezhovshchina, named after the secret police chief Nikolai Yezhov who implemented Stalins directive.

But after less than a month on display, the Ministry of Culture asked the Tumanyan museum to shutter the exhibit. The museums director, Narine Tukhikyan, said the ministry appeared to be acting under pressure from circles which might include communists, or representatives of a generation with an ancient, stereotypical way of thinking.

Tukhikyan said in a television interview that shortly before the exhibit was closed, she received a threatening phone call from an unidentified person who, judging from the manner of speaking, could easily be the leader of the Communist Party, and complained that the exhibition reeked of Dashnaks, the nationalist political party.

The ministry has said that the exhibit can open again after it undergoes some alterations. The exhibition was somewhat politicized, deputy minister of culture Arev Samuelyan told RFE/RLs Armenian service. Society should have probably been prepared for it beforehand. The exhibition will be opened again once it undergoes some minor changes, she said, without elaborating on what those changes should be.

The legacy of the Soviet Union remains a sensitive topic in its successor states, and the way that history is interpreted often tracks with a countrys present-day relations with Russia. Russian influence continues to be strong in Armenia, which relies heavily on military aid from Moscow. Armenias close relationship with Russia has caused some Armenian public intellectuals to suspect a Russian hand in the exhibitions closure.

Hayk Demoyan, who from 2006-17 served as director of the Armenian Genocide Museum Institute in Yerevan, noted that in Vladimir Putins recent interviews with American filmmaker Oliver Stone, the Russian leader complained that the excessive demonization of Stalin was a backhanded way of attacking the Soviet Union and Russia.

I assume that the decision of stopping the [Yerevan] exhibition condemning Stalin-period purges certainly was made on the highest level and is connected with the revival of the cult of Stalin in Russia, Demoyan wrote in a commentary published by the Armenian Mirror-Spectator website. Certainly such an exhibition in Armenia in some circles was regarded as an attack on Russia, and it would have been more honest to confess this in the Ministry of Culture rather, than to engage in verbal gymnastics in order to justify such a decision.

Demoyan, who is currently a visiting scholar at Harvards Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, contended that the exhibitions closure provided bald evidence of mixed signals on Armenias future internal and external political preferences and the disastrous consequences to be expected.

Others attribute the controversy to a broader Soviet legacy in Armenia. People whose grandparents participated in these events [the repressions] are now working in government offices, said Vahan Artsruni, a well-known Armenian rock musician, who took part in a roundtable discussion in Yerevan on the controversy. The informers and their heirs are still among us.

The official justification for the closure recalled what we had in my youth, that is the General Directorate for Literature and Publishing, the Soviet institution that censored printed works, said Larisa Minasyan, executive director of Open Society Foundations-Armenia, also speaking at the round table. Bluntly speaking, this is censorship.

Government officials insisted that they were not trying to whitewash the events of 1937. No one is trying to ignore this topic. Among the victims of repression are thousands of our compatriots. Finally, a few of my relatives, Culture Minister Armen Amiryan told RFE/RLs Armenian service.

The Armenian government has never forgotten, and does not forget about massive violations of human rights in the 1920s and 1930s, where about 50,000 Armenians became victims, said Minister of Justice Davit Harutyunyan at a parliamentary hearing on September 13, after being questioned about the closure by an MP from the pro-Western Yelk bloc. These offenses reached their apogee in 1937, and this year we will honor the memory of their 80th anniversary. The schools and textbooks give a clear assessment of this time.

Armenias school textbooks do indeed cover the repressions, but they use a smaller figure for the number of Armenians killed in the purges: about 15,000 throughout the 1930s. In 1937, at the height of the repression in Armenia, hundreds of state, party, cultural figures, teachers, workers, servicemen and soldiers were convicted, the countrys ninth-grade history textbook reads. Only after Stalins death in 1953 were these sentences reevaluated, and most of the repressed were rehabilitated.

The debate over the exhibit demonstrates how Armenia has yet to properly address the repressions, said Hranush Kharatyan, an ethnographer and author of a book on the purges in Armenia. The uncertainty that arises from this ignorance puts people in a situation where it is difficult to determine whether this is political issue or not, whether or not its acceptable to hold this kind of event, she said.

Discussion is set to continue, however. The Yelk bloc has started an effort to rename the streets in Yerevan that are still named after Stalin-era officials implicated in the repressions.

The effort has raised hackles in Russia, and some State Duma representatives have hinted ominously that there would be Russian reprisals if the renaming initiative were implemented.

Meanwhile, a new exhibit on the repressions opened on September 22 at the National Library of Armenia, called Anti-Soviets. And the National Archives is preparing a five-volume publication on 1937, listing all the victims and perpetrators.

The new exhibit, however, is not as sharp as the one at the Tumanyan Museum, according to Ashot Melikyan, chairman of the Armenian Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression. Its difficult to say if the current government saw itself in that exhibition, but we can say that Armenia, having come out of that totalitarian system, in its model of governance recalls that Soviet system, he told the website Caucasian Knot.

A quarter century later they have not been able to make a serious democratic transformation. ✱□

They are still carriers of this Soviet system of values.

Kaynak/Source: