

# **Make Way for the Working Class!**

**The Russian Workers' Uprising in Novochoerkassk, 1962**

Various Authors

1993

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# Introduction

This is a historical documentation on the popular uprising in 1962 in Novochoerkassk, an industrial city of about 180,000 inhabitants in southern Russia about 30 km northwest of Rostov-on-Don. The events seem to have scarcely been written about in English, though this is hardly surprising given that the KGB and Soviet Interior Ministry kept them top secret into the late 1980s. The four articles which make up this piece are taken from an August 1992 supplement to the Moscow Trade-Union Federation's monthly paper 'SOLIDARNOST.' At that time the editorial staff included several anarcho-syndicalists.

There is a certain degree of overlap between the two main articles 'Novochoerkassk in Context' by Alexander Shubin and 'The Tragedy of Novochoerkassk' by Peter Siuda, but the former offers more in the way of general context while the latter gives a wealth of detail based on personal experience, so in a way the articles complement each other. In translating 'The Tragedy of Novochoerkassk' comparison was made at several points with an earlier version published in the Siberian anarcho-syndicalist paper 'GOLOS TRUDA,' Tomsk, in June 1990.

This publication is dedicated to the memory of our Russian comrade Peter Siuda, the author of 'The Tragedy of Novochoerkassk,' who was murdered in 1990 (see 'Peter Siuda – Eyewitness and Historian').

Will Firth, translator

# 1. Novochoerkassk in Context by Alexander Shubin (written 1992)

The uprising in Novochoerkassk thirty years ago is now no longer a secret to those in Russia who have taken an interest in the country's more recent history. The public have known about the tragedy of Novochoerkassk for just three years now because prior to this it was among the Soviet Empire's most terrible and carefully-guarded secrets. Now the tragedy in Novochoerkassk has receded as a political factor and has finally become a factor of history, as distant to us today as the 'Bloody Sunday' massacre of 9 January 1905 in St Petersburg was to the participants of the events in Novochoerkassk. The state cannot go for long without human sacrifice. Every new regime feels like an inexperienced child if it hasn't yet spilt blood and created terrible new secrets of its own. Perhaps for this reason the tragedy in Novochoerkassk remains a warning, a reminder for the future.

## Khrushchev's Statement

The scene of the tragedy of 1–2 June 1962 was set in bright Communist colours. People were looking forward to the development of true communism in their lifetime. They were convinced that they lived in a country of social justice and democracy. And if there had been transgressions in the past, the new Party leadership would be uncompromising in condemning the abuses of the previous era. These abuses were condemned, with characteristic bravery, by the very same people who had committed them. And, having cleansed their conscience, went on to lead the people to new glory...

The Empire was in its prime, and like every self-respecting absolutist state it liked to flex its military muscles. In May 1962 Khrushchev had the brilliant idea of stationing Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba to put the Americans in the same kind of position they had put the USSR by deploying nuclear missiles close to its borders. Realising this could provoke war, Khrushchev had the Soviet military-industrial complex increase armaments production. But a 'guns not butter' policy required resources, so the country had to tighten its belt again.

The new phase of the Cold War which began in 1961–62 marked a watershed in the socio-economic development of the USSR. The relative improvement of people's material standard of living achieved in 1955–60 was brought to a halt. A period of unrest began. In the city of Aleksandrov the authorities opened fire on a crowd of protesters. This marked the beginning of a series of clashes between the people and the state, which proved that people's trust in the authorities had been unfounded.

In 1962 the Party leadership had to choose between guns (or rather: missiles) and butter. It chose missiles. On 1 June a price rise for meat, butter and eggs was announced. As usual the 'necessity of important economic reforms' was advanced as an argument for this attack on ordinary people's basic standards of living: "Everyone must grasp that if we don't implement measures

today such as an increase in the retail price of meat, tomorrow we will see a shortage of these products and there will be queues for meat,” said Khrushchev, describing the essence of the reforms. Clearly, the economic logic of the Communist ideologists back then differed little from the ‘neo-conservative’ constructs of today. Incidentally, in mentioning the possibility of there being queues for meat in future, Khrushchev was playing tricks. Actually meat had already disappeared from the shelves in small towns and villages. People there had to purchase meat and other foodstuffs in the cities, or at private markets. At markets, however, the prices depended on those in the public sector and shot up after Khrushchev’s announcement, thus making the supply situation intolerable.

Novocherkassk resident B. Stepanov recalls: “When people remembered that just two years previously the food shops had been full of everything a modest Russian wanted, and that people had already got used to there being a 10–20% reduction in prices on 10 March each year, this sharp deterioration in supply for no evident reason came as a rude awakening to everyone. It could not but evoke nasty feelings.”

The economic crisis of 1960–62 created an explosive situation. The price reform sent shockwaves through the entire country. Indignant workers held discussions to work out what was happening, but in the end they kept working all the same. In Novocherkassk it was different.

### **“Fine Pasties with Pluck”?!**

Hardest hit by the price rise were those workers whose enterprises had just cut wages. Among them were the workers of the ‘Budyonny’ Electric Locomotive Factory in Novocherkassk. The workers got together in groups and began discussing how they were going to make ends meet.

The situation in the factory’s steel section was particularly tense, and the factory manager Kurochkin went there with the president of the factory’s Party committee. Peter Siuda, a participant in the events, explains: “They talked with the workers in a very condescending, high-handed way. At a particular moment the workers surrounding the manager were approached by a woman carrying a tray of pasties. Seeing them, Kurochkin decided to make a witty remark, ‘No money for meat or sausage, you say, and here you are scoffing fine pasties with pluck!’”

“The workers broke into fits of rage. ‘And the bastards have got the gall to mock us too!’ That was how it all started. It all went so quickly, the workers didn’t need to agitate their workmates to join the strike. It was enough for one group of strikers to appear and everyone stopped work instantly,” Peter Siuda recalls. “From the large groups of workers informal leaders soon began to emerge, and simple demands were phrased. The metalworker V. Chornykh and the section’s designer V. Korotyeev hung up a placard with the slogans, ‘Give us meat and butter!’ and ‘We need flats to live in!’ The slogan ‘Eat minced Khrushchev!’ became very popular. Seeing the mass of furious workers, the police cordons around the factory scattered,” writes Peter Siuda. The factory siren droned through the nearby workers’ suburb and bringing together ever more people. It was turned on by a group of workers led by V. Chornykh — this was to cost him twelve years in prison camp.

Attempts by the factory management to disperse the protests and calm the workers ended in failure, especially seeing it was only chief engineer Yolkin who had the gumption to speak with the workers face to face. The workers who got up to speak soon shifted from meat and butter to the injustice caused by the government and to other political issues of national significance.

Participants of the Novocherkassk uprising were later also accused of blaspheming against that holy of holies — international aid to ‘brotherly regimes.’ These are topics which the Soviet intelligentsia did not dare to openly question until many years later. In the meantime people had been asking themselves the question ‘What next?’ Clearly a protest rally at the factory alone was not going to produce very much in the way of results. In order to get someone’s attention, at least of the residents of the workers’ suburb, the strikers decided to block the main railway line which passed close by the factory. They thus managed to stop the inter-city train from Saratov to Rostov-on-Don. They even started using the horn of the diesel locomotive to sound the alarm. Halting transport on the railway would spread word to other cities along the route that ‘something was going on.’ The strikers were counting on the solidarity of the country’s workers. By blocking the railway line the strikers had essentially issued a direct challenge to the Soviet regime. They refused to let the regime deal with their problems — piecemeal or not at all. Instead they appealed to the whole country.

From the top of the pedestrian underpass the workers I. Sluzhenko and S. Sotnikov spoke to the assembled strikers and called on them to go to the nearby enterprises and bring out the workers there. A delegation of workers from the factory, headed by S. Sotnikov, set off to Factory no. 17 and the electrode factory. At Factory no. 17, a privileged high-security plant, virtually no-one supported the strikers from the ‘Budyonny’ Electric Locomotive Factory. Full of anger and spite, the strikers tried to stop work at this ‘strike-breaker factory’ and other factories by cutting off the supply of gas. But this plan failed: when the strikers burst into the gas supply station the operator, Fyodorov, deceived them by only turning off the instruments, not the actual supply of gas.

It was later established in court that cutting off the gas supply could have led to localized explosions. But whether the danger was real or not can be judged by the fact that the case file only mentions it in passing after establishing a much more significant danger — production losses to the value of 50,000 roubles.

At the electrode factory the dispute between strike supporters and the ‘order and discipline’ faction was much more dramatic. The engineer at the accumulator station, Vyunyenko, threatened to blow up the station with the strikers inside. But a section of the workers at the electrode factory supported the strikers and came out to join them. They were headed by the ex-officer A. Korkach, whose heightened sense of justice had cost him three years imprisonment under Stalin, and the worker G. Katkov. The verbal exchanges between strikers and those opposing a strike were reaching breaking point and verging on a fight. Abuse flew thick and fast: “Whoever stays at work now is a fascist,” one of the strike supporters said in hefty language typical of the argument. Having grown up on Soviet propaganda about the life of working people in capitalist countries, the strikers branded their opponents with the insulting word ‘strike-breaker.’ But a brawl did not ensue, and the supporters of the strike left to go to the mass-meeting, having essentially paralyzed work at the factory. Workers from the ‘Neftemash’ factory also came out to join the strike.

By then the mass-meeting had grown beyond just being one of factory workers. Local residents began to speak. The student Yu. Dementyev suggested seizing the bank, telegraph office, telephone exchange and post office in Novocherkassk so as to spread the protests to other cities. Back then students had clearly mastered the works of Lenin! The workers, however, were not yet in such a decisive frame of mind. Peter Siuda, for example, voiced the dominant mood: “I stood up at the mass-meeting and spoke out in favour of continuing the strike, of exercising restraint

and firmness, and of getting better organized. I proposed that the next morning everyone march from the factory into the city, formulate joint demands and submit them to the authorities.” This was the proposal that then prevailed.

Before breaking up, strikers went through the factory management’s offices, collected the numerous portraits of Khrushchev, and burnt them outside on a bonfire, leaving no doubt as to the political nature of the movement.

It would not be true to say that the workers had the factory completely to themselves. The First Secretary of the Regional Party Committee, Basov, arrived on the scene and addressed his subjects from the balcony of the management offices. His elevated position enraged the assembled strikers who began pelting the big-wig with whatever they could lay their hands on. Soon troops arrived, but they were soon swallowed up by the crowd. The soldiers, mainly ethnic Slavs, turned out to be quite susceptible to the workers’ agitation. In the evening armoured troop carriers arrived with army officers. But this measure by the authorities also proved to be of little effect – the crowd began rocking the vehicles, putting those inside in a very awkward position. The troop carriers were forced to withdraw. That night, when the mass-meeting was over, tanks arrived. Workers who were unable to go to sleep that night after the heady events of the day began fighting their own Soviet Army and ‘blinded’ the tanks by covering up their vision slits. In the course of this battle a tank crashed into a pylon, knocking it over and tearing down a power-line. The tank rolled into a trench and was unable to get out.

That same night the KGB carried out its first series of arrests. Those arrested were above all people who had spoken at the mass-meeting from a more constructive point of view (Peter Siuda, for example). This could only have had one objective – to increase the proportion of leading strike participants of the more ‘extremist’ variety who would incite the crowd to action and thus provide a pretext for the reprisals to come. The rapid deployment in the city of troops of Caucasian origin also indicated that a punitive action was in the planning. The maxim ‘divide and rule,’ familiar in every empire, was rigorously applied in the Soviet Union. In the 1940s and 1950s troops of Slavic origin had been used to put down unrest in the Caucasus. Now troops of Caucasian origin were in a position to ‘take revenge.’

## **“Make Way for the Working Class!”**

On the morning of 2 June a demonstration of between 10,000 and 30,000 participants began in front of the electric locomotive factory and set off towards the city centre. People carried placards with slogans calling for the maintenance of social justice, there were also portraits of Lenin. At the front were Pioneers (members of the Party children’s organization) and a ‘Neftemash’ worker, G. Shcherban, carrying a red flag. Later in court he was charged for this ‘offence.’ (It is of interest to note that the massive opposition demonstrations of the perestroika also began under red flags.)

When the demonstrators approached the bridge over the river Techa separating the workers’ suburb from the rest of Novochoerkassk, they found tanks on the road ahead of them. The crowd of thousands began to chant: “Make Way for the Working Class!” The tanks did not move, nor did their crews give any sign of life, and the workers passed between them and continued on their way. The mass of demonstrators poured into the city. The demonstration was so well organized (that is to say, self-organized), that the inhabitants of inner Novochoerkassk could not possibly have thought that ‘disturbances’ or ‘riots’ had begun. “I took a look towards the building with

the spire and saw a crowd,” recalls N. Ovsyannikova. “At the front were children in Pioneer uniform, there were lots of placards, banners and portraits. My first thought was: ‘Is it a public holiday today?’” Incidentally, lower level authorities already had a feeling that something was not right. “They had taken down Khrushchev portraits and Party slogans — they were afraid of rioting.”

Finally the crowd reached the buildings of the city council and began demanding that the administrators come out. People flowed onto the square in front of the historical Hetman’s Palace where the city council was located and into the adjacent streets which were soon filled to overflowing.

The crowd waited, but no-one came out of the city council building. The staff of the building had left through the rear doors. Finally a part of the crowd entered the city council building. There, in a hall, they found a table set for a luxurious lunch for two — the city administration had been ready for the visit of a government commission from Moscow headed by Mikoyan. The sight of victuals long since forgotten by ordinary people enraged the strikers. They carried the laden table out onto the balcony, and this had a stronger effect on people than the most eloquent and fiery of speeches. When the workers caught a high-level administrator hiding in his office, they led him out onto the balcony and demanded that he explain why the leaders were living in luxury when ordinary people had nothing to eat. “The crowd howled in fury,” eyewitness A. Kosonozhkin recalls. “Cries went up: ‘Tell the people everything!’ ‘Comrades! ...,’ the official began, but he was unable to continue because a hail of stones flew up at the balcony. The official was set free. Then chairs, documents, a portrait of Khrushchev, and pieces of office equipment began raining out of a first-story window.”

Soon the workers finished rioting and speeches were held from the balcony, which by lucky chance was equipped with a microphone. Those who spoke dwelt on the same topic — life had become misery, and here the bureaucrats were wallowing in luxury. Some speakers appealed to the crowd to take more decisive action and proposed that the soldiers be disarmed. But speeches of that kind were in the definite minority. “Anyone who wanted to could go up to the microphone and give a speech,” recalls G. Senchenko. “People expressed their dissatisfaction with the price rises for meat, milk and butter, and with the wage cuts at the factory. They were exasperated by the words of the electric locomotive factory manager who had basically told workers asking how to make ends meet to get by on delicacies — ‘fine pasties with pluck.’ Almost all those who spoke called for a continuation of the stop-work until the prices of meat, milk and butter were lowered and the wages at the factory raised.” Towards the end Y. Levchenko spoke and called on the assembled demonstrators to go to city police headquarters and free the participants of the mass-meeting the previous day who had been arrested. (In actual fact they had already been deported from Novocherkassk, which the demonstrators of course did not know.) A part of the crowd then set off with Y. Levchenko towards police headquarters.

At that point in time soldiers armed with automatic weapons were brought in. They forced back the crowd and cleared the city council building of demonstrators. It seemed the situation was under control and there was some possibility of negotiations. The bulk of demonstrators then headed for police headquarters and began demanding that those arrested be set free. But nobody was released from the cells. Then the assembled demonstrators led by V. Cherepanov set about storming the building. They took a door off its hinges and used it to ram the other doors, and soon they broke in. There the workers managed to seize an automatic rifle from a soldier



called Repkin but didn't use it. Cherepanov tried to wrest an automatic rifle from another soldier, Kuvardin.

## Deadly Fire

And there the unlikely happened. O. Yaroshenko recalls: "Caught in the inertia of the crowd I was pushed in through the gap. And there, inside the building, I heard a sharp burst of machine-gun fire. I was pushed back together with the river of people but managed to see a young man in a white shirt with three huge bloodstains on his breast whom the people were now holding up high on their hands."

Several minutes later the carnage also began at the Party's city council building, although there hadn't been any spontaneous confrontation there. "We heard several isolated shots from over at police headquarters, and about three minutes later shooting began on the square. Soldiers fired their automatic rifles into the air. Over a loudspeaker they called on the crowd again to disperse. But no-one went. Then the weapons thundered again, but this time not into the air. The square was filled with heart-rending screams. Boys who had been sitting in the branches of the square's trees began falling like flies. I remember a grown man falling from the trees too, he screamed terribly and writhed in agony. The shirt over his stomach was soaked in blood. The open-work fence in the square collapsed under the pressure of the crowd. People scattered, pushing and trampling one another in their panic," G. Senchenko recalls. The shooting was not indiscriminate: "It was a concentrated salvo of automatic fire that lasted for several moments, not isolated bursts accidentally triggered off," O. Yaroshenko confirms. When the last of the crowd had dispersed, around fifty bodies lay in the square.

According to the version of events argued by Peter Siuda it was not so much the soldiers cordoning off the city council building who fired, but ones high up on the roofs of the buildings firing down at the mass of people assembled in the square. Not only people in the square were killed but also in a hairdressers' and near a shop on the far side of the square separated from the city council building by the dense crowd. The fact that bullets tore through the foliage of the trees at the very beginning of the shooting, hitting the children there and making them drop into the crowd, strongly suggests that the fire came from the roofs. The soldiers at ground level could certainly see the children, but maybe those above couldn't. According to G. Senchenko's account, machine-gunners were stationed on the roofs. O. Yaroshenko recalls that bullets bored into the asphalt quite some distance from the scene of the massacre. All this evidence excludes the possibility of the shooting in front of the city council being an unfortunate coincidence — the machine-gunners stationed on the rooftops around the perimeter of the square were clearly given the order to open fire.

E. Morgunova recalls: "At the hospital I saw a motor-scooter, its motor off, being pushed by two men. Sitting on it was a young woman with a smashed-up knee. It would seem that explosive bullets were used. The woman neither screamed nor groaned, but just sat there in silence with her eyes open wide. The supposition that explosive bullets were used is confirmed by surgeon T. Stoyanova, who operated on many people wounded in the massacre: "In my view the injuries were inflicted by explosive bullets, fragments of which were to be found in the abdominal cavity, in soft tissues, and in the extremities. I reported this to the head doctor of the hospital."

The authorities had fire engines standing at the ready, and these were used to hose down the square straight after the massacre. Not that the fire-hoses would have been used earlier to force the demonstrators from the square, no – the architects of the reprisals called for a blood sacrifice.

Who gave the order to open fire? It is a known fact that General Shaposhnikov refused to order the massacre, and that cost him his career. That means the order was given higher up. The government delegation led by A. Mikoyan and F. Kozlov arrived from Moscow before the massacre, so the decision cannot have been made without their knowledge. Top-level military and political circles were showing ever more discontent with what they saw as the ‘chaos’ of Khrushchev’s leadership. Khrushchev’s actions were undermining that holy of holies, the power of the absolutist state, which for the majority of officials was always a higher virtue than the interests of the people. They needed to give Khrushchev a visual demonstration of the bloody chaos which his toying with the people could lead to. At the same time the authorities were vitally interested in the suppression of public protests as soon as possible – if they spread they could have fatal consequences for the regime. Therefore they decided to show the residents of Novochoerkassk that resistance will be mercilessly punished.

This ‘shock therapy’ undoubtedly had an effect on the upper-level leadership. In 1962 Khrushchev’s ‘liberalism’ ultimately came to naught. Peter Siuda made the fair assessment that the tragedy in Novochoerkassk was the forerunner of the ‘palace revolution’ of 1964.

But the people were not to be intimidated so quickly. They began coming back to the square almost straight after the massacre, but were met by a terrible sight: “The square was awash with blood, and the trampled white sun-hats of the children stood out against the bloody, dirty mess,” recalls M. Los. Strategic buildings in the city were under guard by troops, and the crowds surged around them. N. Vazhinsky recalls: “An impassioned woman in disheveled clothes stood in front of one of the soldiers and was furiously trying to prove something to him, or was accusing him of something. She was not far from snatching hold of him by the collar. And the soldier... the soldier just stared at her in silence while tears rolled down his cheeks.”

S. Podolsky remembers: “The news that there had been a massacre soon reached everyone and produced an unexpected reaction. The majority of factories stopped work, the streets filled with people. Cars with workers drove up from all directions. Workers got out in Moscow Street and walked in silence to the square in front of the city council building in a tight, irrepressible column as wide as the street itself. I’ve never seen a demonstration like it – such direct, spontaneous organization, resoluteness, determination... It was impossible to stop t h i s demonstration, although armed soldiers could still be seen on the rooftops.”

There was a sea of people on the square in front of the city council building. Ten thousand? Twenty thousand? The tanks there tried to move off the square, but people wouldn’t let them. “Tell Khrushchev! Tell Khrushchev!” the crowd chanted, and then: “Let him see this! Let him see this!”

“From the balcony of the building some people tried to speak to the masses gathered below,” O. Yaroshenko recalls. “But their voices drowned in the hubbub of the crowd. I can only remember that when someone said Khrushchev was calling on the phone and wanted to speak to the people of Novochoerkassk the crowd shouted in unison: ‘No! Down with Khrushchev!’ A military helicopter circled overhead, and people greeted it, thinking it was the members of the government commission that had come to Novochoerkassk. They looked up and waved. But the asphalt beneath their feet was wet, having been washed with abundant water; and in many of its irregu-

larities there were puddles of water still dark brown from blood. Clotted blood remained in places the fire-hoses did not reach.

The fact that the crowd greeted the government commission shows that the destruction of people's belief in a 'good tsar' still didn't mean the end of their belief in authority altogether. This suited the plans of the top Kremlin leadership very nicely. At this point in time the government commission was doing all in its power to stifle the movement in Novochoerkassk as soon as possible. The soldiers who had fired into the crowd were promptly withdrawn from the city. They were replaced by fresh units who had no concept of what had happened. The soldiers needed a long time before they could believe such a thing was possible in the Soviet Union.

Mikoyan went on radio and announced: "After consulting Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev we have decided to take all measures necessary to restore order in Novochoerkassk!" Only in passing did he mention a 'tragic incident.' People's reaction was most understandable: "Come on and tell us about it, or come here and face us!" And when nothing was forthcoming: "Ha, crawled back into his hole, has he?!" Tanks moved up to the crowd. But the first tank stopped dead in its tracks in front of a row of brave protesters who joined arms and blocked its path. At the same time children climbed on top of the tank and started banging stones against the hatch. The tanks fired blank shells which shattered nearby windows and caused squeezing in the crowd, they also turned on their axis full circle, but the crowd refused to disperse.

Ultimately the government delegation was compelled to enter negotiations. A. Antonov, who was on compulsory military service at the time, recalls: "Mikoyan proposed that the mass-meeting elect representatives for negotiations. People in the crowd did not believe Mikoyan was in the city and was prepared to hear the demands of the people in the square, but a group of representatives was put together all the same. I drove them out to the garrison town. They went in, Mikoyan greeted them and asked them to sit down. 'What grievances do you have? Let's discuss them. After all, we're all Soviet people. We know that wages at the factory have been lowered — that measure will be subject to review. But in terms of the price rise, we cannot change that. So, as you see, we're prepared to meet you half-way. Anything else?'"

However, it was no longer the wage cuts which were the essence of the grievances, but the massacre. Later the very fact of being at these 'negotiations,' which had been initiated by Mikoyan, was turned into a charge against the 'leader' of the demonstrators' delegation, B. Mokrousov. The verdict against him states: "By initiative of Mokrousov a group of nine persons was formed, calling itself a 'delegation,' so as to put provocative demands to the representatives of military command... In the discussion in Novochoerkassk with leaders of the Communist Party and visiting members of the Soviet state, Mokrousov, as representative of the bandits and hooligans who were committing excesses, impudently demanded the withdrawal of military subunits from the city, addressed threats and insults at the Party and government leaders, and made spiteful and slanderous remarks about life in the Soviet Union." The text of the verdict went on to echo a stanza from Nekrasov's well-known poem 'Who Can be Happy in Russia?,' which Mokrousov turned around and applied to the current situation — it was Khrushchev and his circle who 'could be happy in Russia,' but not the people. There were no real negotiations.

When the delegation returned to the square, one of the members spoke to the crowd and called for concessions to be made to the authorities. He was interrupted by calls of "Traitor!."

Towards evening the crowd found itself hemmed in by troops. Everyone who wanted to leave could pass, but the soldiers threatened that those who left last would be arrested. When evening came the crowd dispersed.

## Reprisals

In the night to 3 June there was another wave of arrests. During the events of the previous two days the KGB had taken thousands of photographs so as to keep track of everything that happened in detail. These were used to identify the 'leaders' and agitators. Everyone who was arrested was interrogated and shown the photographs. Under threat of punishment they were forced to reveal the identity of people they recognized. The movement was thus deprived of its leading participants. At the same time a curfew was imposed on the city and food supplies were improved — a stick and carrot strategy by the authorities.

A whole series of meetings was held in workplaces, schools and colleges in Novochoerkassk. Managers, directors and headmasters of various calibre 'proved' that everything had been dealt with properly. The Secretary of the Central Committee of the Komsomol, Pavlov, "drew parallels between the events of 1956 in Hungary and the strike in Novochoerkassk, describing the workers' protests as nothing short of a counter-revolutionary revolt." He painted a vivid picture of "tattooed, vodka-swilling, hard-core criminals climbing up on top of our tanks, smashing empty bottles on them, and screaming derisive anti-Soviet slogans."

The 'criminal' card was also played in court. For the main proceedings several of the real leaders of the movement were found, including Mokrousov, Korkach, Cherepanov, Sotnikov, and several agitators who already had a police record, including A. Zaitsev who had been recorded swearing about Lenin, and A. Kuznetsov, who had called on people to beat up Communists. The carefully chosen public allowed to witness the trial did not interrupt the farce. Of the 14 accused at this trial seven were sentenced to death and the remainder to long prison sentences. Most of the accused, including several of those to be shot, were only guilty of verbal transgressions, not of any material crime. All in all several dozen people were sent to prison or labour camp on the basis of the files compiled on the Novochoerkassk events.

Could a tragedy like this really occur again today, in our time? After all, one of its main causes was the Communist regime with its merciless repressive apparatus. But this was not the only cause. In many respects the tragedy in Novochoerkassk occurred in contradiction to Communist ideology, which did not foresee the suppression of working class social protest. This explains why even those directly involved in the events had such difficulty comprehending that this catastrophe had really occurred, an inability shared by many of those told about the events later. The causes of the tragedy lie in the very dichotomy between rulers and ruled, where the problems of those in power are resolved at the expense of the workers.

Price rises and wage cuts are a characteristic sign of the times today too. One side makes these decisions, the other side resists — as best it can. A wave of strikes can force those in power to make concessions, but it cannot force through changes that would challenge the very 'right' of that narrow ruling circle to determine the fate of the working masses. Sooner or later those in power are faced with the choice of either continuing to make concessions and relinquishing their centralized, monolithic economic system, or of resorting to violence. I fear they will prefer the latter, even if their reprisals are transparent, cynical and bloody, like in Novochoerkassk. They will even refrain from concealing what they have done, as if to say 'behold and tremble!' The times of the Communist dictatorship are over, but the dictators remain in power. And people's right to social justice is flouted even more openly than before. Therein lies the danger of a repetition of the Novochoerkassk tragedy.

## **2. The Tragedy of Novocherkassk by Peter Siuda, 1937–1990 (written 1988)**

For 26 years after the bloody suppression of the strike and workers' demonstration in Novocherkassk on 2 June 1962 I was unable to find any information suggesting that events there had ever been dangerous to anyone. Only once in a book by Solzhenitsyn did I find two pages dealing with the tragedy. His description of events is extremely distorted and inimical to the truth. Today the media, ideologists, present Party leaders, heads of state and all variety of officials at all levels do not tire of speaking about the 'errors' and crimes of past decades, suggesting that they have since been corrected. But even today they maintain a shroud of silence over the tragedy of Novocherkassk. Formal applications for the rehabilitation of the strike, the demonstration, and all their participants have recently been submitted to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet and the Supreme Court of the USSR. But to date not one victim has been rehabilitated. Only in the regional paper 'KOMSOMOLETS' of 22 June 1988 (no. 119) has an article been published, 'Days of Oblivion, Days of Insight' by O. Nikitina, which is basically unsympathetic towards the victims of the tragedy and falsely abusive towards me for sticking to the issue. The article was reprinted by the local paper in Novocherkassk and in the factory's internal bulletin. It is therefore vitally important that the whole truth of the tragedy in Novocherkassk finally be made known. This is a matter of prime importance for the memory of all the participants of the workers' protests in 1962, especially those killed or convicted and their friends and relatives. It is also necessary so that the dimensions of the crime committed 26 years ago by the Party and the Soviet state be made public. This was not only a crime against the residents of Novocherkassk, but against all workers and the people as a whole, one which can be directly compared with the crimes of tsarism committed on 9 January 1905, on 4 April 1912 on the river Lena goldfields, and at other times and places as well as. Full publicity is necessary to prevent such crimes being repeated.

As we know, the events in Novocherkassk were preceded by processes propounded in the 1950s – publicizing the crimes of Stalinism, debunking the 'personality cult,' and trying to give socialism a human face. People believed this was sincere. While condemning Stalin's 'personality cult,' the Party leaders and state officials left Stalinism as a criminal system of Party and state power untouched. The Party's Stalinist political platform continued to develop and entrench the voluntarism of the leaders and officials, reproducing the authoritarian and totalitarian bureaucracy. The arbitrary rule of those at the top continued, as did the powerlessness of those below, leaving the organs of state power (the KGB and the Ministry of the Interior) beyond popular control.

If today the victims of the tragedy and those who participated in the protests are not rehabilitated the Party and the Soviet state will continue to deny people's right to life, dignity and social justice. When workers protest in defense of their rights and freedoms the bureaucrats in

power will again have the prerogative to hurl special forces at them and crush them with tanks and automatic weapons.

Until now the curse of all victims of the tragedy, of all those honest workers, hangs over the Party and the Soviet state. The Party and the state must cleanse themselves, and rid themselves of the responsibility for this heinous crime. This is only possible by revealing to the public the whole truth about the tragedy and offering an honest condemnation of the methods used by Stalinism to quash workers' unrest.

As we know, in those years the wages of workers in industry were arbitrarily cut practically every year. This allowed officials to ensure the high labour productivity growth rates demanded by the central authorities, to lower the costs of production without corresponding capital investments, and to raise the level of mechanization and automation of production. This in turn created the opportunity to implement organizational changes and qualitative improvements in the technological process. Under capitalism such 'improvements in the figures' would certainly be accompanied by workers' protests and an increase in strike activity. However, in the last dark decades in the Soviet Union the initiative, will and ability of workers to wage class struggle — their preparedness to fight for their own interests — was completely paralyzed. The democratization proclaimed in the 1950s once again fooled the masses, cultivating in them the false hope that they could conduct genuine dialogue with the authorities, the Party-state bureaucracy. The tragedy in Novochoerkassk tore the mask of lies and hypocrisy from the criminal, authoritarian and totalitarian system of Party and state.

On 1 January 1962 at the Novochoerkassk Electric Locomotive Factory, the largest factory in the city, a sequence of wage cuts was phased in, which would affect all sections of the factory and involve a drop in wages of 30–35% for some. In May the wages were finally cut in the last section of the factory, the steel foundry. By now the workers of the other sections had somehow got used to the regular infringement of their interests. But for the workers of the steel section the pain of the last cut was still fresh when the next blow came.

On the morning of 1 June 1962 national radio announced a sharp but 'temporary' price rise of up to 35% on meat, milk, eggs and products containing them. This was an unexpected and heavy blow to the standard of living of the workers of the whole Soviet Union. A price rise could not but create general discontent. But there were a range of other factors which combined to spark off the strike at the Electric Locomotive Factory.

In Novochoerkassk there was a particularly acute housing problem which also affected the workers at the Electric Locomotive Factory. The construction of new flats was proceeding relatively slowly, and to rent a flat in the private sector at that time cost 35–50 roubles per month, i.e. 20–30% of a worker's pay.

At that time Novochoerkassk was considered a city of students. Its food supplies were accordingly poor. There were practically never any meat products or butter in the shops, and the price of these foodstuffs on the market were exorbitant. The new price rise in the dominant state sector automatically also led to an increase in food products on the market.

But even these problems by themselves would hardly have led to the strike, had not a loathsome, self-satisfied official flung a spark of insult into the 'powder keg' of people's anger and discontent. It was Kurochkin, at that time manager of the Electric Locomotive Factory.

On the way to work that morning and in all the sections of the factory the workers were discussing the unpleasant news and were full of anger. Workers in the steel section got together in small groups and discussed not only the price rise but also the recent cut in wages. They

thought feverishly about protesting or going on strike, which no-one had yet dared to do. There were no organizations and no 'leaders.' The very thought of trying to liberate themselves from political and social slavery, to stand on their feet again after Stalinism had forced Soviet workers to their knees, was terrifying. The only changes to have been made were pathetic experiments at 'democratizing' society.

Presumably the factory manager and the factory Party committee got word of the steel section workers' discontent, so Kurochkin headed there with the president of the Party committee. When they arrived they started speaking to the workers, but it was not a frank discussion. They spoke down at the workers in a very condescending way. While the manager and the workers were talking a woman came up to them carrying a tray of pasties. Seeing them, Kurochkin decided to make a witty remark. Addressing the workers he declared: 'No money for meat or sausage, you say, and here you are scoffing fine pasties with pluck!' This was the spark which led to the tragedy of Novochoerkassk. It was precisely this little incident which focused the gamut of pent-up contradictions in the social and economic reality of Soviet workers. The workers were furious at the manager's arrogance and yelled 'And the bastards have got the gall to mock us too!' The workers split up into groups. One of the groups went to the compressor station. V. Vlasenko and the metalworker V. Chornykh were in this group. Another went around the various sections of the factory calling on the workers to stop work and declare a strike. It should be mentioned that neither at the beginning of the strike nor in the further course of events on 1-3 June was there any group or body which took on responsibility for conducting the strike in an organized way or running the workers' protests. All the events occurred spontaneously. It was seething with initiative and ideas from below, from the mass of workers. No 'external factors' were involved, not even Western radio stations. The workers at the factory didn't need to be agitated to join the strike. It was enough for one group of strikers to appear and everyone stopped work instantly. The number of strikers snowballed and grew into a mighty avalanche. In June 1962 about 14,000 people were working at the factory. The striking workers left the buildings and flowed into the yard near the management offices. The yard could not hold all the strikers. A group of workers removed the section of fencing which enclosed the yard. They draped it with red rags and used it to block the main railway line which passed close by the factory. They thus managed to stop the inter-city passenger train from Saratov to Rostov-on-Don and all other railway traffic on this section of track — the workers were determined that word of their strike spread to other cities along the route.

Chornykh prompted his workmate V. Korotyeev, the section's designer, to draw up placards with the slogans 'Give us meat and butter!' and 'We need flats to live in!' These were then taken out of the factory and attached to one of the pylons supporting the overhead contact system of the railway line which was in the process of being electrified. The slogan 'Eat minced Khrushchev!' was written on the diesel locomotive of the passenger train. This slogan was later to be seen in other places as well. In addition to the factory siren, the horn of the diesel locomotive was also used to sound the alarm. Day-shift and night-shift workers as well as residents of the worker's estate began arriving at the factory. The first attempts at ending the strike were made by the lads from Factory Security who wanted to re-open the railway line and let the train continue on its journey, but they did not succeed. They were forced to take off their Factory Security armbands and withdraw.

Neither Party bodies nor the factory management nor even the city authorities entered into negotiations with the strikers. The factory's chief engineer S. Yolkin tried to speak to the workers

on his own initiative without having been authorized to do so. He had nothing concrete to say about retracting the wage cuts and made no promises or assurances, but simply tried to persuade the workers to stop the unrest and get back to work. The indignant workers dragged him into the back of a truck and demanded that a concrete resolution be found for the problems. I also asked questions of him, which the court of law later found to be an offence.

Around midday word spread through the mass of strikers: "The police have arrived!" A huge crowd dashed out onto the permanent way towards the police. I was one of those at the very front. I looked around. We must have been a very impressive sight – a seething crowd poured out of the factory grounds to form a solid block of strikers 350–400 metres long. And on the other side of the railway line several hundred police were in the process of forming two lines about 200–250 metres long. The vehicles that had brought them were parked in the vacant lot to the side. The protesters stormed furiously at the police, whose lines immediately dissolved. The routed police rushed back to their vehicles, hopping into them at a running jump. Only two policemen didn't get there in time, be it because they were slow runners or because their knees had gone weak from fear. The police vehicles zoomed off in the most cowardly way before the mass of strikers could reach them, leaving their two slower comrades to an uncertain fate at the hands of the angry strikers. Despite their rage the workers didn't touch the two policemen, as it turned out, but sent them away with a warning that the police not poke their nose into the strikers' business.

Later it became known that police dressed in civilian clothes infiltrated the mass of strikers. KGB operatives were sent in as well, equipped with mini-cameras built into cigarette lighters, cigarette cases and God knows what else. KGB men also took photographs from a fire watchtower. Later at the inquest we were literally confronted with a pile of thousands of photos taken of strikers. The finely-tuned mechanism of the police state operated most smoothly.

Attempts at provocation were also made against the strikers. The weather on 1 June was hot and sunny. There were no drinking fountains or other sources of water near the factory yard. I remember everyone was terribly thirsty, but no-one left the yard. Everyone was fused together by a feeling of unity, a belief in their own power and in the justice of their demands. At one point a car drove up into the hot, jam-packed yard. It was loaded with boxes of fruit-flavoured mineral water. This was obviously a colossal temptation for everyone, however not a single bottle was taken from the car. The thousands of strikers plagued by thirst had completely paralyzed the railway line, but still they let a car full of soft-drink pass through the crowd. The provocation failed.

Towards the end of the working day the first detachments of an army subunit from the Novocherkassk garrison arrived at the yard next to the management offices. They were unarmed. As soon as the columns of soldiers moved close to the mass of people they were swallowed up by the crowd. The strikers and soldiers fraternized, they hugged and kissed each other. That's right, they kissed each other! The officers had great difficulty extracting their men from the crowd, rallying them and leading them away. A while later the First Secretary of the Rostov Regional Party Committee, Basov, tried to speak to the strikers from the balcony on the wing of the management building. He stood there, surrounded by officials. The cowardice of the Party bureaucrats was not only plain for everyone to see, but also offensive. Obviously none of them wanted to talk with the strikers on the same level. It clearly revealed their degrading treatment of the strikers and the strikers' lack of basic rights. The strikers tried to pelt Basov and his



retinue with various objects, but in that they were high above the crowd, in the literal sense of the word, they were not hit. Basov and his lackeys withdrew.

Armoured troop carriers with reinforcements of officers began arriving at the yard next to the management offices. The authorities were now convinced that the troops of the Novochoerkassk garrison were unreliable, therefore they placed their hopes in the officers. But strong workers gave the officers a rough time – literally. They surrounded the vehicles before the officers could get out and began rocking them from side to side. It was funny to see the poor lieutenants and majors inside being shaken about on their seats in a less than dignified manner. The confusion and fear on their faces showed that they were also in no position to dampen the workers' anger. The armoured vehicles drove away again.

The strikers' excitement did not die down but grew with every attempt to quell their protest. It turned into a mass-meeting, the upper rim of the entrance to the pedestrian underpass serving as a speaking platform. There were calls to send workers as delegates to other cities and other enterprises, and to seize the post office and telegraph office in town so as to send appeals for solidarity throughout the country. At the same time we heard the first reports that the road into the city was cut off, barred by police and troops.

I had not intended to speak at the meeting, but the calls to seize state institutions (and after all, what else are the post office and telegraph office?) left me feeling uneasy. I remembered well what people involved in the events in Hungary and Georgia had said. Trying to seize state institutions in the city was fraught with serious consequences. Later the authorities construed these calls as appeals to seize power. And this false accusation worked so incredibly well, that I myself did not even try to get shut of this nonsense until recently. When I heard these calls to seize state institutions I spoke out for the strike to continue and called for restraint, firmness and a degree of organization to be maintained. I also proposed that the next day all of us march into the city, conduct a demonstration, elaborate general demands, and put them to the authorities. The calls for seizure of state institutions and violence did not meet with general approval. It was decided that the next morning we would march into the city and demonstrate. This goes to show that the protests in Novochoerkassk were not accompanied by extremism or violence towards the authorities. Later the inquest and the courts, however hard they tried, could not find any evidence of extremism or violence, with the exception of two negligible incidents. The first involved the factory's chief engineer Yolkin, who was forcefully dragged into the back of a truck. He was not beaten up, however. The second incident involved the Communist Braginsky, who had his ears boxed by his subordinates. But he was not injured and didn't need any medical treatment.

Late in the evening, when the workers' anger had reached incandescence and had no means of release, workers took the portrait of Khrushchev off the facade of the management block. They then went through the management offices and collected the other Khrushchev portraits, piled them all in a heap in the yard, and lit a big, blazing bonfire. As night fell the big crowd around the factory gradually began to thin. Then a group of workers led by Sergei Sotnikov, an incredible guy, headed off to the gas supply station to cut off the supply of gas to the industrial enterprises in the city area. In practice this did not work.

Between four and five o'clock in the morning I was woken by two loud 'explosions.' Half dressed I dashed out of the shack where my wife and I lived. Everywhere people were coming out of the houses to see what was going on. It turned out that a tank, 'blinded' by its vision slit having been covered up, had knocked down two pylons of a high-voltage power-line. The wires had made contact, and the resulting electric discharges were the 'explosions' we heard. I went

towards the factory. 400–500 metres from the railway line and the management offices small groups of 5–15 local residents had begun getting together. I went up to the group which had gone furthest towards the railway line — from there it was perhaps 300–350 metres ... We could see that the stretch of railway line beside the factory, and the factory itself, were cordoned off by soldiers armed with automatic rifles. Tanks were also stationed near the factory and the local train station ‘Lokomotivstroi.’

People told me that between midnight and one o’clock in the morning army subunits and tanks had been deployed in the workers’ estate, at the factory, and in the city. They said that during the night inhabitants of the estate had used whatever they could lay their hands on to build barricades against the tanks, which however the tanks had easily overrun. Then workers had begun jumping up on the moving tanks and using clothing to cover up the vision slits and ‘blind’ them. That is how one tank brought down two pylons supporting the high-voltage overhead contact system of the railway line before rolling into a trench.

An officer and a soldier with an automatic rifle came towards our group. People rapidly began to run away, leaving just 5–7 of us. A heated argument began with the officer. He demanded that we come with him to the factory. We refused, saying that since the army had occupied the factory it should work there now. In the heated verbal exchange we didn’t notice that two more soldiers armed with automatic rifles had come up behind us. We were now under arrest. We were taken to the factory management’s offices. There we saw many soldiers of Caucasian origin, officers, people dressed in civilian clothes, and KGB officers. The latter met me with malicious delight and told me that they had long been waiting for me and were “glad to see me.” I was then promptly escorted out by three men who put me in a car and drove me to the Ministry of the Interior. On the way there the men threatened and abused me, waving their fists. At the ministry’s office a large staff of officials was already working at full capacity to quash the protests.

New people who had been arrested were brought in all the time. I was taken into a room where a panel of officials was waiting, I think there were six of them. They put me through a swift interrogation. They demanded that I promise no longer to take part in the ‘mass riots.’ I replied that I would do what the majority of workers would do. They suggested I think it over and sent me out of the room. I could hear how the officials in the room were becoming increasingly nervous and tense. Telephones rang constantly and the officials screamed commands like “People must not be allowed to assemble!” I realized that I had made a mistake and got myself into the soup. I asked to be let in again and began assuring the officials that, in hindsight, I would not take any part in the disturbances. But, being young, I could not hide a spiteful grin, and this gave me away. I was sent to a cell, and 15–20 minutes later I was taken to a police van, I think with four others, and driven away to Bataisk 52 km from Novochoerkassk. That was the end of my participation in the events in Novochoerkassk. I spent many months and years in the cells of the KGB’s investigation ‘isolator,’ in the Novochoerkassk prison, and in concentration camp with active participants of the later events of the Novochoerkassk tragedy. I strove as best I could to re-create the events piece by piece. I checked and cross-checked, comparing every fact and the seemingly most insignificant details. I can therefore vouch for the historical accuracy of the account that now follows.

In the morning the workers of the morning shift and also the other shifts went to the factory. Tanks stood by all the factory gates. The workers went in and found the individual sections of the factory full of soldiers and strangers dressed in civilian clothes — evidently KGB officers. Despite demands that they disperse the workers gathered in groups. Their anger and indignation grew. A group of workers left their workplaces again and began leaving the sections. They were all in

elemental rage. The small groups of workers merged into bigger ones. No-one could stop the process now. Larger groups began thronging towards the factory entrance-passage. The yard inside the factory could now no longer hold all the workers. The pressure on the factory gates increased until they burst open and the workers flowed out onto the square in front of the factory. The mass-meeting of the previous day had called for a demonstration, and now this was it – the workers set off towards the city in their thousands. It was a long way – about 12 km from the factory to the centre of Novocherkassk. Several workers headed to other factories to spread the calls of the striking electric locomotive builders. The calls were willingly answered by the workers at nearby building-sites, from the electrode factory, from ‘Neftemash,’ and from a number of smaller enterprises. Columns of workers were now marching into the city centre from various directions. Red flags and portraits of Lenin were brought out, and the demonstrators sang revolutionary songs. Everyone was excited, full of faith in their own strength, and convinced of the justice of their demands. The column of workers grew longer and wider. When the demonstration came close to the bridge over the railway line and the river Tuzlov people saw two tanks and a line of armed soldiers blocking the road. The demonstration stopped for a moment and went quiet, the revolutionary songs died down. Then the huge solid mass of demonstrators began to move forward again. The cry went up “Make way for the working class!,” and it grew into a mighty chant. The tank crews showed no sign of life. Nor did the soldiers hinder the demonstration, but let the people pass between the tanks. The human river flowed round the sides of the cordon and passed over the bridge. The excitement grew and grew. Thousands of voices singing revolutionary songs grew louder, more powerful, and sang in chorus. The demonstration entered Moscow Street, the main street of Novocherkassk. I cannot even make a rough estimate of the number of participants because no-one has been able to give any figures. Everyone agrees that the large square in front of the Party’s city council building (the historical palace and headquarters of the Don Cossacks’ Hetman), a large part of Moscow Street, and a section of Podtelkov Avenue were full of people. A tank was on the square next to the statue of Lenin. Children and demonstrators completely plastered it with clothing and other objects so the tank crew could not see out. Evidently this was more than their patience could bear, because there was a deafening bang as the tank fired a blank round, causing the window-panes of nearby buildings to shatter. It must have been the disconcerted crew, because the tank commander would hardly have shouldered the responsibility for firing even a blank round in the middle of the city.

The mass of demonstrators in front of the city council was in ferment. Inside the building there were a lot of soldiers of Caucasian origin. Through the doors the demonstrators and soldiers hurled abuse at each other. One Caucasian couldn’t put up with it any longer and, knocking the glass out of the door with his rifle butt, he stuck it through and hit a woman demonstrator. Under the pressure of the indignant demonstrators the doors were squeezed inwards until they burst. The mass of people flooded in, sweeping the soldiers before them. The soldier who had struck the woman was found hiding under the staircase and, according to several accounts, was beaten up without mercy. That was the only recorded instance of any official or any soldier of the newly-deployed troops being beaten up. The city council was now completely in the hands of the demonstrators. Bursting into one of the rooms, the demonstrators found a table set for two with cognac and replete with hors d’oeuvres. No-one could have escaped from the room, although, according to other accounts, when the demonstrators seized the building many people dressed in civilian clothes – obviously KGB officers – had been seen jumping out of first-story windows. There was no-one to be seen in the room. The demonstrators started searching. A high-level

official from the Regional Public Prosecutor's Office was found hiding behind the couch, and hiding in a bookcase they found A. Shelepin. Was it not his bodyguards who so courageously sprang from the first-story windows? The demonstrators dragged Shelepin and the prosecutor towards the balcony, demanding that they speak to the people. But they dug their heels in and refused. Then the demonstrators took the cognac and hors d'oeuvres and carried them out onto the balcony for all the demonstrators to see. A mass-meeting began.

Y. Levchenko spoke to the meeting. She told the crowd that during the night and that very morning strikers had been arrested and beaten up. That was the truth. But even she could hardly have known that many of those arrested were no longer in Novochoerkassk. The calls for the release of the arrested strikers became more and more insistent. A section of those at the meeting set off for police headquarters. A mass of soldiers of Caucasian origin were now inside that building as well. The demonstrators started to force their way in. The doors broke open and the demonstrators poured into the building. At that stage one of the soldiers lifted his rifle-butt to deliver a blow to an oncoming worker in blue overalls. The worker grabbed the automatic rifle and a scuffle began. The worker ended up with the rifle, but the soldier had the magazine. The rifle in the worker's hands was now no more use than a club, and he didn't use it, but the soldiers were given the order to open fire. The worker holding the gun was killed instantly. The soldiers could hardly miss in the jam-packed hall full of demonstrators. Panic ran through the crowd as people sought refuge from the hail of bullets, dashing into any nearby room they could find. KGB officers and plainclothes police in the crowd used this opportunity to 'help' the panicking demonstrators find 'cover' — they closed the doors behind them and locked them in.

After the article was published in 'KOMSO MOLETS' people began coming to see me, and I received letters giving different versions of the events. I cannot name these sources for the time being, but one of the people told of how a police sergeant-major had boasted about playing a nasty trick on the demonstrators seeking safety from the bullets. He had enticed them into a cell and slammed the door shut behind them, bolting it shut. This 'hero' later received a government award.

One of the participants of the events who was wounded in the shoulder by a ricocheting bullet and was later sentenced, Alexander Teremkov (now deceased), told me in concentration camp that he and others had been forced to pile up the dead bodies in the cellar of the State Bank located next to the police headquarters. Some of them were not quite dead — their arms and legs were still twitching. Who knows, perhaps some of them could still have been saved. It is typical of all the eyewitnesses of the events that no-one can give even an approximate figure of the number of dead they saw.

The soldiers at the city council building also fired into the crowd, but there had been no storm of the building and no violence. The building was in the hands of the demonstrators. Recently I heard that shortly before the soldiers opened fire a call was made by megaphone for all 'military personnel' to leave the crowd and get away. 'Military personnel' presumably referred to operatives who had infiltrated the crowd. They knew that such an order would be coming, and when it came they responded accordingly. Another eyewitness told me how he saw a colonel leaning over the railing of the balcony and waving energetically into the crowd with his cap — when he saw it seemed to him like a pre-arranged signal and he had a presentiment of what was about to come. He fought his way through the crowd and went round the side of the building into cover. He had only just gone round the corner when he heard automatic weapons fire. Another eyewitness told me he had seen a detachment of Interior Ministry special troops entering the

city council building from the rear. On the square in front of the city council building curious children had climbed the trees. They were facing the building with the statue of Lenin behind them.

No eyewitnesses can confirm the rumour that the officer who received the order to open fire refused to pass it on to his men, and instead shot himself in front of the ranks. In any case, the soldiers opened fire. First of all upwards at the children in the trees, who began falling down — terrified, wounded or already dead. This was the way Party, state and army eradicated sedition, this was how they established the ‘unity of the Party and the people,’ providing proof of the popular basis of the socialist state... Then the fire was turned towards the crowd at ground level.

It is sobering to recall for a moment that this was not a volley of single shots from old-fashioned .375 rifles as used against the people, for example, in the bloodthirsty tsar’s massacres of 9 January 1905 and 4 April 1912. No, this was rapid-fire by automatic weapons into a closely packed crowd of civilians...

Some eyewitnesses have told me how they saw an elderly man running away from the shooting. As he was passing the large concrete flower tubs by the curb he was shot through the head and his brains splattered out over the flower tub. Or how they saw a mother in a nearby shop carrying her dead baby killed by a bullet. Or a little girl lying in a pool of blood; an army Major, disbelieving and out of his wits, stepped in the puddle of blood; people screamed at him: “Just look where you’re standing, you butcher!”; and the officer stopped, pulled out his pistol, and shot himself clean through the head. There are a lot more things like this that people have told me, but I’ll stop here.

Busses and drop-side trucks were promptly driven up. The bodies of the victims were quickly dragged from the square and piled into the vehicles. Not one of the bodies was given to the families for burial. The hospitals were packed with wounded, but soon they disappeared and no one knows where they ended up. The blood was washed off the square with fire hoses, but brown bloodstains could still be seen on the asphalt a long time afterwards.

I was told a lot about the massacre on the square. About how the troops opened fire and the crowd ran in panic. The shooting ceased, the mass of people stopped running, and soon came sneaking back to the square in large numbers. And then the troops open fire again and everything was repeated. To date it has not been possible to ascertain how many people were killed, maimed and injured.

But that was not the end of the unrest. Again the square was seething with people. Rumours and accounts of the evil events passed from mouth to mouth and circulated in the city. Some demonstrators left the square, others came. People went up to the soldiers and showered them with abuse, and the soldiers replied, embittered: “You shot us in ’56, now we’re shooting you.” So much for the ‘triumph of internationalism in a multi-ethnic socialist state.’ After that the Soviet verbiage and slogans were hollow for ever after: ‘Right on, the proletarian international Communist Party!’, ‘Internationalism lives, we are here to serve it!’, etc. Under the banners of internationalism these immature boys, not yet eighteen, were conscripted for military service and sent to foreign parts to kill others like themselves and die for ideals unknown.

The word spread that Politburo members and leading government figures had arrived in Novochoerkassk, among them A.I. Mikoyan and F.R. Kozlov. Spontaneously, without there being a ballot, several demonstrators volunteered to be in a delegation. The representatives of the Politburo and government were afraid of the mass of assembled workers and were hiding out at the garrison of the armoured division. The delegation was driven there. The delegate B.N.

Mokrousov read out to the representatives of the Politburo and government a re-phrased version of Nekrasov's poem 'Who Can be Happy in Russia?' referring to Khrushchev's period as Party secretary, and also to Brezhnev. It was basically because of this that he was later sentenced to death by Supreme Court of the RSFSR chaired by judge L.N. Smirnov. It is said that Kozlov apparently cried when he heard about the massacre. This may be true, but they were crocodile tears. Mikoyan demanded that the tanks be allowed to leave the square, then he would speak to the crowd. This demand was put to the demonstrators, who replied in clear terms: "No! Let him come and see what he has done!" The VIPs came in a helicopter to look at what they had done, it hovered over the square and the adjacent streets, illuminating them by spotlight. Mikoyan then spoke on Novocherkassk radio. In the Soviet press there was not a word about the events, not even in the local paper. A curfew was imposed. There was talk of the entire population of the city — over 100,000 people — possibly being deported. Arrests began. At night there were instances of people coming from behind corners and throwing stones at soldiers.

There is the story of a young worker who lived at the single men's hostel of the electric locomotive factory. He crept in late one night, all covered in dirt and blood. Quickly he raked his things together and asked his mates not to tell anyone they had seen him. He told them that, unconscious, he had been thrown into a truck full of corpses. At night the truck drove to a gully somewhere beyond the prison. He had jumped off the moving truck and then, taking absolutely no chances, carefully made his way to the hostel. After that he went into hiding. The place where the bodies were disposed of has remained a secret until today. There are wildly diverging opinions about the location — in a prospecting shaft, at a crematorium, in an area now overgrown with trees, in gullies and ravines in quite different places... In any case, the bureaucracy is maintaining a deathly silence. Why? On Sunday 3 June the unrest began to die down. The city's food supplies were soon improved and a new program for the construction of cheap housing was introduced. But wages were not raised. Mikoyan confirmed that the deportation of the city's entire population was indeed being considered. As it turned out, the Novocherkassk tragedy was not compounded in such a way. But a period of judicial reprisals began.

Fourteen participants of the strike and demonstration were tried at a former cavalry division's garrison. The trial was demonstratively harsh. The Supreme Court of the RSFSR chaired by judge L.N. Smirnov and with public prosecutor A.A. Kruglov in attendance found seven of the fourteen guilty of gangsterism and incitement to mass unrest (Articles 77 and 79 of the RSFSR Criminal Code) and sentenced them to death.

It was evident right from the start that the court's investigations were biased. For the trial they chose largely detainees who already had a criminal record. And in another case they put a man on trial who clearly was mentally disabled. The goal was simple — to compromise the events in Novocherkassk as far as possible. We know today that special photo albums were made for officials with images of broken glass (from the tank firing off a blank round in the centre of the city), doors battered in at the mass-meeting, burnt remnants of Khrushchev portraits, etc. We should also recall the passion of certain sadistic fascists who had their photographs taken for posterity with the sanguinary results of their dirty work in the background... KGB staff from Leningrad, Moscow, the Ukraine and elsewhere were involved in constructing evidence.

In prison after the trial we tried to estimate the number of people convicted. We ran through those we knew in alphabetical order and came up with not less than 105 names. The exact figure will never be known. The courts certainly did not hold back when it came to sentencing — the most common sentence was 10–15 years imprisonment. Seven or eight days after being arrested

I was taken out of my single cell. There were three cars in the yard. I was put in the back seat of one of them. Two big strapping fellows came and squeezed me in, one on either side. A third sat in the front seat next to the driver. Another arrested comrade was brought out, put in the second car, and was 'kept company' in the same way. The cars started their engines and left. The third car followed us with only KGB men inside (I'm always astonished how many of these parasites there are). With such an impressive escort we were taken to the KGB 'isolator' for the Rostov region. We were put in two-person cells.

It must be said that in the KGB 'isolator' we were treated with considerable respect. But there were neither newspapers nor radio and we were kept in complete isolation from the outside world. The prison walks were carpeted so the steps of the overseers could not be heard. There was no squeak when the hatch went up or the inspection hole was used. It was a terrible, deathly silence. The light was on 24 hours a day. But the food was ample and good, better than when we were outside — the food situation in the shops really was very bad.

My mother, who was not imprisoned, searched for me. She found out about my arrest three days afterwards and was relieved to hear I was still alive. She wrote a letter to Mikoyan and was able to have it delivered through the right channels. She wrote about her husband, my father, who began revolutionary work in Batumi in 1902 and was a Party member from 1903. He worked closely with Stalin and with many of the 26 martyred Baku commissars, he led the revolutionary movement in Grozny at the time of the first Russian revolution (1905–1907) and was an activist for 11 years in Baku, where he was a close friend of Dzhaparidze and Fioletov. In 1937 he was repressed for defending another Party member, and after more than a year of torture he died in prison in Rostov-on-Don. My mother reminded Mikoyan of his old Party comrade and fellow revolutionary from his Baku days. Mikoyan responded favourably. Two days later I was called to my first questioning, which however was limited to my particulars. I was sent back to my cell, and a day later was called out again. Once again it was a brief session. The investigator, a captain and former headmaster by the name of Kostryukov, if I'm not mistaken, showed me a thin document-case and told me it contained the file of the Bolshevik and Leninist P.I. Siuda, my father. So, 25 years down the line, the fate of father and son had come together in the dungeons of the KGB. My mother, wife of an old Bolshevik, passed through these same cells in 1943 and then on to seven years in concentration camp. She was only rehabilitated posthumously on 26 January 1989. Thus the walls of the Rostov KGB prison were virtually a 'family home' for father, mother and son. A curse on whoever planned that building! I was told by the KGB captain that a note had come from Anastas Ivanovich (Mikoyan) requesting that I be given whatever assistance possible. Then they really tried to 'help' me. First they demanded that I give testimony on the tragedy in Novocherkassk, but when they realised I would not be giving them any information, they stopped. Then they started taking a more 'individual' approach — that I should admit the criminal nature of the events in Novocherkassk and concede that it was a mistake to have been involved in them. But by this time I had already heard about the massacre. Backing down was impossible now. After all, it was me who called for the strike to be continued and for there to be a demonstration, and I was fully aware of my responsibility for those who died. To back down would have been a most contemptible act of betrayal. I refused to buy my freedom at such a price. Then they began working on me.

I must emphasize that the KGB did not torture me or beat me up. The treatment was exceedingly respectful and they spoke to me civilly. But this is how they worked on me: other prisoners under investigation were made to believe that their cases were being terminated and that they

would soon be released. The prisoners who had been 'processed' in this way were moved into my cell, one after another. Such cell-mates could only think and talk about one thing – about how they were soon to be released. And when later they were called to gather their things and come, there was great jubilation. There were times I was then alone in the two-man cell for a day or so. Then they brought me my next cell-mate who was convinced of his impending release. It was terrible as a young man to be totally cut off from the outside world and to see how all the other participants of the Novochoerkassk tragedy returned safely to freedom. It was terrible to feel that freedom is attainable for you too if only you soften your position a little... The only hitch was that I later met all those dreamers who believed the words of the KGB as convicted men in prison and concentration camp. But that didn't make it any easier for me at the time. I ended up believing them too. I was 24 years old. I was not strong enough. In the cell we were allowed to have as much tobacco as we liked, and as many matches. I had heard that the material the tips of matches were made of was poisonous. So I crumbled off all the match-tips from a box of 20 matches, doing it carefully so that even my cell-mate wouldn't see. I waited for him to fall asleep, put the crumbled match-tips in my drinking mug and lifted it to my mouth. But what my cell-mate didn't see, as it turned out, had been seen by the guards. Before I managed to swallow the stuff the door opened quickly and silently and in an instant the mug was rolling on the floor. There is no point describing what a performance they then put on. The KGB officials realized that their 'persuasion' was not having the desired effect, so they stopped. For a 'respite' they sent me to Novochoerkassk prison and put me in a common cell together with many other prisoners. In fact, this get-together with fellow prisoners from Novochoerkassk really was a relief for me, an event to be celebrated. But the prison guards were crude and ignorant.

One time a guard sergeant burst into the cell. In a hysterical voice he began abusing all the Novochoerkassk prisoners, yelling and going on about the miserable life of the Ivanovo-Voznesensk weavers before the October revolution. I got indignant, declared I would go on hunger strike, and demanded to see the public prosecutor. After lunch, which I did not eat, I was taken to see the public prosecutor. I protested in strong terms. After that I never heard of any further crude or ignorant treatment of the Novochoerkassk prisoners by the guards. I was returned to the KGB 'isolator.'

In September 1962 seven of us from Novochoerkassk were put on trial in a district courtroom in Rostov-on-Don under the chair of the Regional Court's board of judges, N.A. Yaroslavsky, and with public prosecutor A.I. Brizhan in attendance. Officially the trial was open to the public, but no-one in Novochoerkassk knew about it. Therefore no-one came from Novochoerkassk except for close relatives and friends of the accused. The court sentenced one of the accused to seven years imprisonment, three to ten years, and three – including me – to twelve years hard labour. Soon after the trial I was returned to the prison in Novochoerkassk. This time I met a great number of people I knew.

The prisoners from Novochoerkassk stuck together pretty well, both in prison and later in concentration camp, although there were small groups and cliques amongst us. One evening we heard the soul-rending cries of someone evidently being tortured somewhere in the prison. All of the Novochoerkassk prisoners, being in cells leading off the same corridor, raised a racket by banging with our benches, washbasins and drinking mugs. The guards came rushing up. They said someone could come out to reassure himself that no-one from Novochoerkassk was being tortured. I was let out. As we went along the walks the guard threatened me that he and his mates would soon 'give it to me' too. When we went round a corner I saw guards carrying an



unconscious prisoner who was naked and all wet. They said he had been put in a straight-jacket after having a fit. As far as I could tell from a brief look at him there were no obvious signs of torture, but on the other hand he had been screaming too terribly... He wasn't from Novochoerkassk. After returning to the cell I told my comrades what I had seen. Nothing like that happened again.

I don't remember in what month the first group of Novochoerkassk prisoners were sent to concentration camp. It was in the Komi Autonomous Region in the taiga of far northern Russia. I was with the second group sent early in the winter. The concentration camp where we were on hard labour was about 40 km from the Sindor railway station in the Komi Autonomous Region. I don't remember which camp those sentenced to imprisonment were sent to. It's astonishing how well my memory has preserved everything connected with the tragedy in Novochoerkassk, while I have forgotten many things to do with the concentration camp, prison, and 'isolator.'

In the concentration camp it was a good experience meeting up with the other Novochoerkassk prisoners again. But almost right at the very start I was flabbergasted to learn that the first group had accepted the proposal of the guards to form a kind of inmate security group inside the camp. This made me exceedingly angry. Together with Vlasenko, Chornykh, Globa and several others I managed to force through the standpoint that nothing of the kind was permissible with Novochoerkassk prisoners, and so we spoilt the camp guards' practical joke. All the concentration camp inmates worked at tree-felling and building a narrow-gauge railway designed for the extraction of timber. Daily camp life was very routine. Periodically there were small, acute conflicts with the camp management. Once a conflict with the guards ended with an operative of the camp's special division firing a burst with his machine-gun. He had aimed it at me, but at the last instant another guard deflected his gun and it fired into the air. We were able to achieve the dismissal of this belligerent fellow from his section in the Ministry of the Interior. We also managed to attain permission to organize an evening school with lectures given by the prisoners themselves. We were required to attend mindless political education classes, but we did not sit there passively and obediently. Once the Deputy Commander for Political Affairs could no longer put up with our attitude — he called me into his office and banned me from attending the classes in future.

Among the prison guards there were all sorts, including individual officers who treated us Novochoerkassk prisoners in a benevolent way. Once, on a day off work, I was standing by the sideline of the camp's small football field. A guard lieutenant came and stood next to me. He waited for a while until those who had been standing close to us moved on, then he told me through his teeth and without moving his lips that there had been a tragedy similar to the one in Novochoerkassk in Murom (300 km east of Moscow). In this way the Novochoerkassk prisoners learned of yet another crime of the Party and state.

There were instances of the whole Novochoerkassk work-brigade refusing to work, as a form of protest. This never led to anything worse than the camp management freaking out.

After Khrushchev's removal from the political arena, KGB investigators came to the concentration camp in January 1965 to sound out the mood of the Novochoerkassk prisoners. It soon became evident that they were very well informed about details of our life in camp. Soon it was my turn to be questioned. My interviewer was interested and intelligent. But after just a few minutes he grew very tense, and after one of my rejoinders he replied: "The KGB is not anyone's mother, but the armed vanguard of the Party!" The mood of the conversation went from bad to worse. In his temper the KGB officer warned me that they could try to compromise me in the eyes of the other Novochoerkassk prisoners. "We will call in one, then another, then a third, and

a fourth, and we will reveal to them that it was you who gave us the information...” I smiled and drew his attention to the fact that the small hinged frame in the office window was open and that a lot of my comrades were sitting just behind it in the other room. I thanked him for warning me that they might try and divide us by setting one against the other. He flew into a rage and threatened: “When everyone else gets out you’ll still be serving a term; and even when your sentence expires you’ll still be in here.” That was the end of the interview. But I would like to stress just how true the quick-tempered KGB man’s sinister threat turned out to be. How could it be otherwise. The leaders of a terrifying Party with a punitive state organ such as the KGB as its armed vanguard cannot but resort to the cruelest and bloodiest of crimes. This needs to be understood! Soon the cases of the Novochoerkassk prisoners began to be reviewed in Moscow. I was one of the last to have my sentence reduced, but it was brought down to 6 years. The first of us began to be released in the spring of 1965... But for me there was no light at the end of the tunnel. It was a hard and sombre time.

My mother had gone through all the tiers of Stalinist hell and remained a stoic woman. In 1943 she was sentenced to seven years imprisonment under Article 58–10 Paragraph 2 of the RSFSR Criminal Code and served out the sentence to the very last day in the concentration camps of the Kemerovo region (Western Siberia). Afterwards she stayed on to live in Kemerovo. In the years I was imprisoned she was less in Kemerovo than in Moscow, and she also stayed in Sindor. For the prisoners she was a faithful courier. I can’t remember contacts breaking off or mail being lost even once. To get things done she bribed everyone she had to, and everyone was very corruptible. It was precisely due to bribing that she was able to obtain me a good reference and attain my release in 1986.

But there was one episode before my release which deserves to be mentioned. At one stage A. Zharov from Novochoerkassk came up to me and asked if I could forward some letters for him via someone outside. I took the bundle of letters and, without undoing it, sent it via my normal channels. Two days later my messenger came and told me from my mother that Zharov was an informer. A shiver ran down my spine. I requested that the suspicions be substantiated. My mother soon supplied the evidence. She later explained that she recalled the name Zharov having been mentioned at the Office of the Public Prosecutor of the RSFSR together with the names of others from Novochoerkassk who stuck to their firm positions. In actual fact Zharov was not at all one to have firm positions, although he often made scathing criticisms of things. My mother had then scrutinized the letters she received from him for forwarding and noticed that they were addressed to the KGB and the Public Prosecutor. Even the Novochoerkassk prisoners felt that appealing to those bodies at this stage was strange, to say the least. My mother opened the letters. When we lured Zharov into the prisoners’ school, he had to affirm that he was a lieutenant in the KGB. The details of what happened next will hardly be of interest.

While I was still in prison my mother was allocated a flat, and I was included on the allocation form. So even before my release I knew I would be able to settle back in Novochoerkassk.

After being released I continued to lead an activist’s life. But going into that would lead us onto other topics which are no less complex and painful.

### **3. Peter Siuda – Eyewitness and Historian by Alexander Shubin (written 1992)**

Visitors to the Humanitarian and Political Research Centre in Moscow who saw the portrait of Andrei Sakharov on the wall were often surprised to see a photograph next to it of a man less well known. However, despite all the superficial differences, the fates of Andrei Sakharov and Peter (Pyotr) Siuda were remarkably similar. They were both eyewitnesses of a century who delved too close to its secrets. And they were not prepared to hold their silence, they had to speak out.

#### **STANDING ON OUR FEET AGAIN**

All his life Peter Siuda was proud of his father, an old Bolshevik murdered in the Rostov-on-Don prison in the 1930s. Even in 1990 Siuda still reproached us, his anarcho-syndicalist comrades, for our venomous criticism of Bolshevism: “There were honest people among the Bolsheviks too.” Indeed there were. The Bolshevik leaders betrayed their own Party.

For most of his life Peter Siuda considered himself an ‘non-Party Bolshevik’ and struggled against the Communist Party. That struggle began with the tragedy which for many years it was a crime even to mention.

On 1 June 1962 there was a national price rise. The mass media’s lies on this issue were even more blatant in those days than they are today. There were disturbances in many parts of the country. The protests at the Electric Locomotive Factory in Novochoerkassk were particularly energetic. Peter Siuda participated in them, being a young worker at that factory.

The protests were sparked off by an ignorant remark by the chief engineer, answering the workers’ complaints about the ‘economic reforms’ – “No money for meat or sausage, you say, and here you are scoffing fine pasties with pluck!” This spark detonated people’s mountain of built-up discontent. Their belief in the necessity of social justice was too strong, the absence of social justice was painfully obvious.

Those with the strongest convictions, including Siuda, spoke to the indignant workers. He called on the workers to stand on their feet again.

A mighty wave of protest swept away the police cordons without a single person being injured. The feeling of that 1 June 1962, that whiff of victory, were to stay with Peter Siuda for decades – he knew the working class is able to stand on its feet. That night Peter Siuda was arrested and deported from Novochoerkassk. The authorities tried to deprive the movement of its leading participants.

## A PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE

On 2 June 1962 the workers moved towards the centre of the city to demand justice and to help free their arrested comrades. They were met with automatic weapons fire. The true number of casualties remains obscure even today despite the publication of official figures — these are much too low. In actual fact we are talking about several dozens of people, people who believed in social justice and democracy in their country.

Even in the face of the authorities' brutality people were not to be intimidated. The workers' representatives met the grandees flown in from Moscow — Kozlov and Mikoyan — and told them straight in the face exactly what they thought of the events. For want of a better example, they compared Khrushchev with a tsar. The spectre of 'Bloody Sunday' and the 1905–1907 revolution played on the Bolsheviks' nerves. The workers had revealed the terrible secret of millennium-old Russian despotism which did not just disappear in 1917. Further decisive steps were taken. There was a wave of arrests. The seven 'ring-leaders' were shot, particularly those who had met with the Moscow leadership. Dozens of ordinary participants in the protests were given substantial prison sentences. The message to the other witnesses of the events was clear: if you don't want to end up in prison, keep your mouth shut.

Peter Siuda's mother saved her son from being shot. In a letter which she managed to have passed on to Mikoyan, she reminded him of the tragic fate of Peter Siuda senior, whom Mikoyan had known from the time of the 1917 Revolution. This saved Peter Siuda junior, and a potential death sentence was commuted to twelve years in a hard labour camp.

After Khrushchev's removal from power the Novochoerkassk prisoners were released before serving full sentence, though some were kept inside several years longer 'for the sake of order.' Both in camp and later as a free man Peter Siuda scrupulously collected information about the tragedy in Novochoerkassk, examining and re-examining it, and pondering the causes.

Siuda's main conclusion is now evident to many of us — that the state system in the Soviet Union was akin to fascism. It maintained itself largely through lies and violence. And only revolution is capable of doing away with such a system — a workers' revolution — thought Peter Siuda as early as the 1960s.

He couldn't say this openly. But he also could not remain silent. When Soviet troops went into Afghanistan Siuda sent a letter to a central agency of government protesting against this military intervention. The letter was passed on to the local Party bodies in Novochoerkassk with the ominous order to 'sort the matter out.'

Exile him? But where? Novochoerkassk was already further from Moscow than the closed city of Gorky where a lot of dissidents were in internal exile. Put him inside again? Pointless — the last time didn't break him either. So they decided to 'sort the matter out' more simply — they lay in wait for him one evening and beat him up, kicking him in the head numerous times. That time Peter Siuda was saved by his wife, Emma Ivanovna Siuda, who incidentally was also active in collecting information on the events of 1962. She quickly found him, dragged him home, and cared for him until he was well again. Since that incident, however, Peter Siuda suffered from low blood pressure. This is an important detail which we shall return to in a moment.

## THE RETURN OF JUSTICE

It was the perestroika, a bottomless pit of illusions. Reform-oriented Communists of the 1960s generation were allowed to take part in round-table talks and, with a conjuror's sleight of hand, they replaced one set of myths with another. Stalin and Brezhnev were to blame for everything, they said, but the true humanism of Lenin and Khrushchev lent the system moral authority. The 'nomenklatura,' or Party elite, was given a chance to reform itself to the affected smiles of its subjects.

Activists of the alternative movements had already sensed the whole hypocrisy of the game but at that time they were still 'unarmed.' Dissident literature printed outside the USSR was still a rarity, and large-scale samizdat publications did not appear until the end of 1988. The Party would look after the problems itself, thank you very much. 'What's your problem then?' was the gruff official attitude to opposition from outside the Party. It's embarrassing to think back to my first demonstration in 1987 when the group I was involved in protested in support of Yeltsin. But we had the sense not to defend him as a Party boss, but to defend the steps he had taken towards 'glasnost'..

And then he came along. An activist since the 1960s who hadn't made a career for himself. A man with a terrible secret to tell. We already knew from the older generation of dissidents that there had been some kind of clash in Novocherkassk in 1962, but this was all at the level of a myth, of a vague rumour. And here now was a living witness of the events who had collected information for many years.

When I acquainted my friends and comrades with Siuda's material their first reaction was a clear "No, that's impossible." A friend of mine had been to Novocherkassk in 1962 and heard nothing about the tragedy. The state kept its secrets well. But the accounts collected by Siuda confirmed one another, and even the documents from the court case cynically echoed these accounts ...thousands of people go out of the factory gates protesting for social justice. They can't remain silent. They're not looking for victims. They have the thousand-year-old feeling of justice on their side and this gives them moral strength. And then — automatic weapons fire, the death of innocent people, the tenacity of the demonstrators standing their ground, an officer who shoots himself at the sight of what he has done... Later I read Solzhenitsyn's version of the events, which Siuda, incidentally, sharply criticised for diminishing the scale of the crime. Solzhenitsyn's few pages certainly pale in comparison with the detailed eyewitness material collected by Siuda, but this can hardly be considered his fault.

We anarcho-syndicalists were not driven by a journalistic thirst for sensation and our samizdat bulletin 'Obshchina' was distributed free of charge. But having glimpsed Siuda's material we had only one desire — to reveal this secret to others as soon as possible. The gravity of this secret was unbearable and it is quite incomprehensible how one person could have withstood it for so long.

That issue of 'Obshchina' came out in what then was a record print-run of 200 copies, each copy a thick bundle of typed rice-paper. It was distributed to alternative centres throughout the country and was read until it wore thin. In Moscow alone the material was re-published several times in small independent publications. Later the popular magazine 'Ogonyok' was compelled to speak out about the tragedy. The information it published was substantially abridged, but what is significant is that it was published there at all. Novocherkassk began to be mentioned at mass-meetings. The shadow cast by the tragedy destroyed the tinsel ideological constructions of the '60s generation' and forced them to rapidly change their stripes. Communist reformers turned

overnight into anti-Communists. This sealed the fate of the Communist Party — the eyewitness Peter Siuda dealt such a heavy blow to its moral integrity that its structure could not recover.

## THE REVOLUTIONARY

The exodus of the ‘nomenklatura’ to the tricolour Russian national flag and the launch of many a ‘democratic’ career were the main tendencies in the development of the political elite in the period of 1989–1991. But Peter Siuda was no friend of the establishment. He was a man of the people through and through and had no aspirations to get to the top. He could easily have become a member of parliament, but he became an anarcho-syndicalist instead.

Anarcho-syndicalism is the idea of people’s free association, of workers’ self-management, of us arranging our lives independently of capital and the state. Better than any other teachings it corresponded to Peter Siuda’s understanding of honest socialism. Anarcho-syndicalism also suited Siuda’s character — it combined a harsh uncompromising stance with a kind of almost childish mettle. He fought not for power, but for the advancement of an idea.

And his idea number one was the liberation of working people. But not at the expense of others. When one of the many Marxist-Leninist ‘workers’ groups suggested he join the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat, he came down on them like a ton of bricks with a very hefty critique. Any dictatorship is a new road to slavery. For Siuda anarchism was not a tribute to fashion but the highest natural point in the development of ideas.

With the resumption of Siuda’s activist work in 1988 Novochoerkassk became one of the centres of radical political activity in the Soviet Union. With the help of his wife Emma, Peter Siuda typed up and sent off hundreds of letters and articles. It was something like an information centre for the workers’ and syndicalist movement. Visitors flocked to the Siudas’ flat in Privokzalnaya Street in their dozens, almost like pilgrims, soon to become correspondents of the information network.

We were inspired by such efficiency and selflessness, which even went as far as asceticism. Siuda, in turn, was attracted to us young Moscow anarchists, to our alternative hang-outs and radical escapades, which were pointless from a career point of view but helped diffuse the virus of freedom in society.

It was the heroic period of perestroika — the double-faced leaders were not yet unmasked and the outcome of the fight was not yet clear. Speaking at a public meeting in Moscow on Human Rights’ Day in 1989 for the Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists, Peter Siuda warned that “the danger of another tragedy like Novochoerkassk will remain as long as the armed vanguard of the Soviet Communist Party continues to exist — the KGB.”

The CPSU has now been disbanded. The KGB has been renamed, but it remains the armed vanguard of a system run by what was the Party elite. And therefore the tragedy can indeed be repeated.

## HIT AND RUN

The first months of 1990 were probably the most active in Peter Siuda’s life. He spoke at public meetings, mailed off information and conducted an investigation on the disappearance of the wounded demonstrators in 1962. New anarcho-syndicalist groups were being set up in the region. Not far from Novochoerkassk the working class in the Donbass region was making moves to ‘stand

on its feet' again. In the first days of May final arrangements were made for the establishment of the information agency KAS-KOR, which became a communication system of active centres of the workers' movement. For Siuda this basically became a new field of activity.

On 5 May Siuda was busy with matters to do with setting up a free trade-union in Novocherkassk. That night he was found lying in the street half dead. An ambulance came, but Peter died on the way to hospital. Officially the cause of death was a 'natural' haemorrhage of the brain (but remember that Siuda suffered from low blood pressure, which raises major doubts as to the accuracy of this version).

There were a number of other strange occurrences. The family was deceived by being given the wrong time for the post-mortem. It was conducted early, behind closed doors. The type of injuries to the body indicate a violent death which the doctors, of course, 'failed to notice.' I had occasion to pick up Siuda's belongings from the police station. On the record sheet I questioned the numerous stains and marks of unknown origin on his clothes. Furthermore the briefcase of documents which Peter had been carrying when he left the house was missing.

There were witnesses who said they had seen several people set upon Siuda and beat him up. But one of the attackers had approached them and warned them to hold their tongue, otherwise they'd get it ... so they refused to give evidence. There are many versions as to what exactly happened. Siuda's attacks on the KGB and the local Communist Party clan had made it difficult for them to do their own little perestroika. In this respect one Peter Siuda was worth more than the whole organisation 'Democratic Russia.' And nearby in the Donbass, an industrial heartland, the miners' movement was gathering strength... Siuda was a great embarrassment and danger to those responsible for the Novocherkassk massacre and the 'disappearance' of the wounded.

Siuda was buried by his relatives and friends, anarcho-syndicalists from various cities, and local democrats. A commemorative public meeting was held at the factory opposite the very same gates which the workers' demonstration flowed through in 1962.

Death finally caught up with Peter Siuda thirty years later. But in those years a lot was fought for and gained.

## 4. The Lessons of Novochoerkassk by Alexander Tarasov (written 1992)

The crisis of Stalinist pseudo-socialist ideology and of the Stalinist pseudo-socialist empire which has crumbled before our eyes proceeded in three stages. The first was manifested in the death of the great Leader and Teacher himself and reached its peak in 1956 with the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, the crises in Poland and Hungary, and the uprisings in the Soviet prison camps. The second stage began with the 'cultural revolution' in China, reaching its peak in 1968 in the Polish events, the 'Prague Spring,' and 'Red May' in Paris. The third and — as with syphilis — terminal stage began with the invasion of Afghanistan and the formation of 'Solidarnosc' in Poland. This final stage led to the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and to the bourgeois revolution of August 1991 in Russia.

Novochoerkassk played an important role in the history of this crisis, particularly in the first stage, but it was not the only incidence of workers' protest against the Soviet regime. There were also protests in Karaganda, Temirtau, Aleksandrov, Murom and other cities. The protests in Novochoerkassk cannot be compared with the heroic armed uprising of Poznan workers in June 1956, nor with the nation-wide political strike in Hungary from 3–10 November 1956. On the other hand Novochoerkassk was a massive protest by the industrial proletariat officially considered a buttress of the regime; and it was not somewhere on the 'national fringes' of the Stalinist empire but right at its core in the Soviet Union, and doubly so in being on 'ethnic Russian' territory. What is more, Novochoerkassk was neither an uprising of convicts with nothing left to lose like in Vorkuta, Norilsk or Kengir; nor was it a spontaneous outburst of discontent by the population due to the arbitrary behaviour of the police like in Murom and Aleksandrov. It was not unrest consciously provoked by the authorities like in Temirtau. Novochoerkassk was different. It was the FIRST occurrence in post-war Russia of LARGE-SCALE AND CONSCIOUS activity by workers in defense of their BASIC ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL INTERESTS. The extremely harsh reaction by the authorities shows that the upper echelons of the Soviet leadership were exceedingly frightened by the protests in Novochoerkassk and took them very seriously. Despite all the regime's efforts to prevent the impulse of Novochoerkassk spreading, word of the events spread throughout the country and led to a revolution in people's minds. The West German scholar Karl Schlegel, author of an interesting study 'A Stubborn Hero — Workers' Protest in the USSR 1953–1983,' shows that under Khrushchev's rule there were 61 recorded incidences of large-scale workers' protest in the Soviet Union, including 58 strikes, 12 of which grew into public demonstrations and / or rioting.

The workers' protests in Novochoerkassk were significant in that they erupted not in an area freshly opened up (such as Karaganda and Temirtau), where a majority of workers were ex-prisoners or newcomers recruited via Party organizations. Rather, they occurred in an industrial region where people had been settled for centuries, building up friendship networks and family structures, acquiring belongings, etc. — in short, where they did have something to lose. Further-



more, Novochoerkassk and the whole of the Don region had been through massive repression at the time of the campaign against the Cossacks and in the famine of 1932–1933, which could not but have cast a heavy burden of fear on the collective conscience of the population. Peter Siuda once described Novochoerkassk as ‘a real backwater’ (letter to the author, 14 August 1989). So it is all the more striking that the demonstrations in Novochoerkassk involved such a huge number of people, that the local inhabitants supported the striking workers almost unanimously, and that order and organization prevailed throughout the events without their being any hooliganism or plundering.

It is true that the protests in Novochoerkassk were spontaneous. It is also true that the participants advanced only very limited demands and still nurtured a naive belief in a ‘good tsar’ (in the person of the Politburo and Khrushchev). But at that time it could not have been any different. There were no opposition movements anywhere in the country with elaborated programs. And people were virtually unanimous in the belief that the system built by Stalin really was ‘socialism.’ The reforms conducted by Khrushchev and the ‘thaw’ had given rise to enormous expectations in the population. It took the Novochoerkassk tragedy, the overthrow of Khrushchev, the stamping out of the ‘Prague Spring’s’ socialist reveries and the killing of workers at demonstrations on the Baltic coast in Poland for the scales to fall from the eyes of politically active ordinary people in the Eastern Bloc countries. Now they ceased to believe the fable that they lived in ‘socialist’ states ‘representing the interests of the working class,’ and instead began to follow the example of revolutionaries of previous generations by building up opposition organizations and movements. KOS-KOR in Poland, for example, created independent workers’ organizations just as prescribed by Lenin in his ‘What is to be Done?’ As a result ‘Solidarnosc’ did not repeat the mistakes of Novochoerkassk — it was not an uncontrolled outburst of discontent, but had its program and leaders, and did not believe that people lived in some ‘socialist motherland.’

But the ruling regime also learned its lessons from the events in Novochoerkassk. There is no doubt that Novochoerkassk became a trump in the hands of the Stalinist ‘hawks’ opposed to Khrushchev: ‘This is what playing at reforms leads you to!,’ they were able to say. There is no doubt that the Novochoerkassk events also weakened the reformist wing of the Party because the bloody reprisals bound Khrushchev’s most influential ally, Mikoyan, to the ‘hawks.’ It would not be overly exaggerated to say that Novochoerkassk was the first bell to toll for Khrushchev’s regime. (The Caribbean crisis was the second.)

It is a valid question to ask whether the workers of Novochoerkassk had any chance of victory at all. In the widest sense of the word — of replacing the Stalinist pseudo-socialist system or at least toppling the government of the time — certainly they didn’t. But given a different balance of forces within the CPSU and in the top political bodies of the USSR they could by all means have achieved a perceptible liberalization, as did the Poznan workers in 1956, who basically brought Gomulka to power and enabled a range of reforms such as abolishing the collectivization of agriculture, dissolving the Secret Police in the security services, and sacking defense minister Marshal Rokossovsky. Not to mention the considerable chance, in a different ideological climate and with a more favourable balance of political forces, of the strike’s individual demands being fulfilled: a cut in prices, a rise in wages, and an improvement in the food supply situation. After all, there is the well-known example of the Odessa dockers’ strike, also under Khrushchev, where the dockers refused to load ships bound for Cuba with foodstuffs no longer available in the Odessa shops; the authorities satisfied the strikers’ demands and re-designated the cargo for the shops in Odessa.

But no-one can change the past, and Novochoerkassk will remain a heroic and tragic page of history.

In conclusion I would like to draw the reader's attention to one further aspect of the articles in this collection which makes them of such importance. Now, after the bourgeois revolution of August 1991, one fake explication of Soviet and Russian history is being replaced by another, one which is again tailored to suit the regime in power. Articles on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the events in Novochoerkassk were published in the pro-bourgeois press (e.g. in 'ROSSIYSKAYA GAZETA'), but not one mention was made of a hero of the uprising by the name of Peter Siuda, nor of Siuda's selfless, titanic labours in collecting documents and eyewitness reports concerning the tragedy. These are attributed to other people, and the events themselves are interpreted as a bloodthirsty act of the 'godless Communists' who refused to allow people the capitalism they were oh so longing for. Reading this collection of articles will give the reader a true picture of Peter Siuda and the Novochoerkassk workers' alleged 'longing for capitalism,' making the booklet particularly relevant to Russia today.

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Various Authors  
Make Way for the Working Class!  
The Russian Workers' Uprising in Novochoerkassk, 1962  
1993

Retrieved on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2020 from <http://struggle.ws/eastern/novochoerkassk.html>  
Translated from Russian by Will Firth.

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