

*Sleeves rolled up, axe in hand, they lopped off heads. . . . They packed them off by freight like cattle: so many bulls, so many cows, so many lambs. . . . If the nation only knew their hands dripped with innocent blood, it would have met them not with applause but with stones.*

— MARSHAL G. K. ZHUKOV

LATE IN LIFE, as fate would have it, I was called upon to take part in my country's progress toward freedom. It fell to me to assume the awesome burden of heading a commission—initially under the Politburo of the Central Committee (CC) of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and subsequently under the office of the president of Russia—on the rehabilitation of victims of the political repression of our past.

The task has been a weary one. To descend step by step down seventy years of Bolshevik rule into a dungeon strewn with human bones and reeking of dried blood is to see your faith in humankind dissolve.

Papers are not destroyed; people are. More and more of the bloodstained documents pile up on my desk. From the archives of the president and of the Lubyanka, headquarters of the KGB. If only the files would burn up and the men and women return to life! But they will not return. And the timeless chronicles of endless suffering go on casting their pitiless flames. Nothing I have ever read comes close to the horror of these semiliterate compositions of the secret police and these covert denunciations of informants, or “well-wishers.” I ought to be used to them by now. I’m not. Too much gets in the way: pity, bitterness, indignation, disillusionment.