

Baptism as a Political Crime: Killing Archimandrite Pimen

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On April 18 1936, Archimandrite Pimen, a retired monk-priest residing in his native village Chkhuteli, Tsageri district, of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, was detained on the charges of anti-Soviet activities. The NKVD¹ officer assigned to his case, Sergeant Chabukiani, interrogated him, but did not take the elderly archimandrite into a pre-trial detention. He was allowed to remain at his residence after signing a note promising not to leave the district without NKVD's permission. Archimandrite Pimen was reported to the Soviet state police by a resident of one of the villages where he had baptized a child. The fact that the retired priest was baptizing children was confirmed by one of his neighbors from the village Chkhuteli.²

Chkhuteli is a small village³ in the Tsageri district of Georgia, a remote, mountainous and sparsely populated area primarily distinguished by its beautiful scenery and homogeneous population. In 1923, a year after the annexation of Georgia by the Soviet Russia, Soviet authorities forcibly closed more than 200

¹ In Russian *Narodniy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del'* (NKVD) – People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs – a centralized state police of the Soviet Union, with its own militarized regiments, which oversaw everything from traffic violations and domestic disturbances to counterterrorism and counterintelligence. Among other things, NKVD also managed firefighting service, prisons, and the infamous Soviet labour camps.

² არქიმანდრიტ პიმენ დაშნიანის საქმე (1936–1937 წწ.) “Archimandrite Pimen Dashniani's Case (1936–1937),” *The Archival Bulletin*, No. 8, winter 2010, The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, pp. 101-115.

³ In 2002, the village population was 880. ჩხუტელი <<https://ka.wikipedia.org/wiki/ჩხუტელი>>

parishes of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Tsageri and surrounding districts, leaving only a handful functioning under crippling restrictions. In the first massive campaign after the Russian takeover of the country in February of 1921, Soviets closed 1,212 parishes belonging to the Georgian Church. They also closed synagogues, mosques, and parishes functioning under Armenian, Greek, Russian, and Roman Catholic jurisdictions.⁴ Soviets also closed all monasteries, disbanded monks and nuns, essentially forbidding monasticism. In this first massive campaign against religion in Georgia, the Soviet police acted in concert with communist political activists and volunteers, members of organized atheistic organization, hired thugs, and local supporters. In some areas of the country, for instance in Guria, locals did show some enthusiasm in persecuting the church.⁵

The 1923 Soviet anti-religious campaign in Georgia met with some sporadic resistance, mostly peaceful, involving all faiths, with Georgian Christians and Jews being the most active. In their anti-religious fervor, Soviet authorities only showed caution in the districts of Georgia which bordered the neighboring Turkey – in these districts majority of population was Muslim, sharing this religious trait with the Turks.⁶ In many districts Soviet police reports noted that women mounted more vocal resistance than men. Communists tried to give this campaign an image of spontaneous popular uprising against religion, but their classified reports betray that the campaign was carefully planned and executed to avoid upsetting their supporters prematurely. In the Dusheti district, for instance, where Georgian communists had a power base, it was decided to close the churches after the Easter holidays to avoid mass protests. In other districts, an equal number of Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Armenian churches were closed to avoid clashes among

⁴ „ერთ წელიწადში საქართველოში 1212 ეკლესია დაიხურა,“ *The Archival Bulletin*, No. 8, Winter 2010, The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia. Pp. 44-51

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

religious groups. In some districts, especially in more remote mountainous ones, authorities had to admit defeat and abandon their plans for time being.⁷

A few months after Soviet authorities forcibly shut down more than 95 per cent of all religious institutions in Georgia, churches, chapels, monasteries, synagogues, mosques, church schools, seminaries, religious publications, and charitable and non-profit organizations affiliated with various faiths, the country experienced yet another violent upheaval. In August-September 1924, an anti-Soviet uprising was organized by political groups seeking to liberate Georgia from the Russian military occupation. The Soviets ruthlessly crushed the 1924 resistance movement, and massacred its participants, suspected participants, their sympathizers, family members, close friends, and neighbors. Russians deployed additional troops and secret police units in Georgia to defeat the anti-Soviet movement and to carry out mass executions. Approximately 3 thousand people died in military clashes, while Soviets executed more than 12 thousand people in the period from August 29 to September 5, 1924. More than 20 thousand people were deported to Siberia.⁸

After 1924, in the view of Soviet authorities, anti-Soviet activities and the church were even more closely connected. In fact, the uprising had nothing to do with the church as it was led by the secular Social Democratic Party of Georgia, the largest opposition group in the country. This political party had the strongest support in Guria, a region in Georgia where people also displayed most enthusiastic in persecuting the church barely a year prior to the uprising. The 1924 uprising, which was a nationalistic movement involving groups of various ideological persuasions, failed as their organization had been infiltrated by the Soviet secret police, the secret police also disrupted coordination between Georgians and their counterparts in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Chechnya, and

⁷ Ibid. Also, „საქართველოს მართლმადიდებლური ეკლესია 1921–1932 წლებში,“ in საეკლესიო ბიბლიოთეკა <http://www.library.church.ge/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=390:-1921-1932-&catid=47:2010-03-11-12-05-46&Itemid=67&lang=ka>

⁸ Markus Wehner. "Le soulèvement géorgien de 1924 et la réaction des bolcheviks" *Communisme*. n° 42/43/44. 1995, pp. 155–170.

Western European powers failed to support nationalist movements in the Soviet Union. Regardless, since the rebels tried to defend traditional or European values that included freedom of religion and conscience, it was easy for communist propaganda to depict all in violent opposition to the Soviet regime.

Ironically, the Constitution of the Soviet Georgia, just like the Constitution of the Soviet Union, guaranteed freedom of religion and conscience. In fact, the Criminal Code of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic provided for punishment for those persons who interfered with religious activities of the clergy.⁹ This argument was presented by Archimandrite Pimen to Soviet authorities upon his initial interrogation in April 1936. However, according to Archimandrite's NKVD records, he had been warned not to function as a priest in 1933, and he did heed the warning and retired to his ancestral home. In March of 1936, Archimandrite Pimen was beseeched by a group of people from neighboring villages: they were looking for his help to save their children. Someone had apparently started a rumor that unbaptized children would die prematurely,¹⁰ and as this was the first generation of young Georgians in more than 1,500 years who were massively unbaptized, people panicked and started looking for solutions.

Russian communism was a utopian progressivist political (and economic) ideology, firmly rooted in social Darwinism and militant atheism. They condemned religion, abolished private property, glorified science and scholarship (that is, branches, fields, and schools that did not contradict Russian communism), and generally promised bliss and equality for all. Some in Georgia bought their message and willingly participated in communist instigated violent campaigns, but life went on and nothing much changed for the better. In fact, for most people, especially in rural areas life got worse: inefficient collective farms, and disorganized means of economic distribution impoverished rural population on a massive scale. In early 1930s, at the height of collectivization efforts, millions

⁹ "Archimandrite Pimen Dashniani's Case (1936-1937)," pp. 101-115.

¹⁰ Ibid.

starved to death in some areas of the Soviet Union, especially in Ukraine.¹¹ Georgia avoided mass starvation, but still, poverty, deprivation and heavy labour had its toll on population, and some remembered that things were better when the church was around and people were not terrorized into submission by the state.

During the interrogation, Sergeant Chabukiani asked Archimandrite Pimen whether it was he who had started the rumor of unbaptized children being in mortal danger. Archimandrite replied, no, in fact, "I tried to persuade them [villagers] that it was not true at all."¹² According to his testimony, he then decided to travel to Tbilisi and visit Catholicos-Patriarch, head of the Orthodox Church in Georgia, and to seek his guidance in the matter. Patriarch advised Archimandrite to seek permission from his bishop and request a 'mandate' from him, which would state that he, Archimandrite Pimen was indeed a clergyman, and according to the law of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic he had every right to exercise his priestly functions if people came and requested such services. Indeed, Archimandrite obtained such a 'mandate' from his bishop in Kutaisi, went home, and in less than a month baptized around 120 children in the Tsageri district and in parts of the neighboring region of Lower Svaneti.¹³ One person reported this 'anti-Soviet activity' to the state police in the region, which managed to find one more person who confirmed the report. This gave the police sufficient grounds to interrogate Archimandrite, and to search his house.

Traditionally, the church keeps a registry of the people who are baptized, date, place and people involved. The names that are entered in these registries include those of children's parents or guardians, and their sponsors or Godparents. Archimandrite Pimen had no such church registry, but he did keep records of the performed baptisms and those of other performed services, such as funeral rites and memorial services. There is nothing unusual in this, and such demographic recordkeeping constitutes regular church activity. However, it became a major

¹¹ "Ukrainian famine, 1932-1933," Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights, Rutgers University <<http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/center-study-genocide-conflict-resolution-and-human-rights/ukrainian-famine>>

¹² "Archimandrite Pimen Dashniani's Case (1936-1937)," pp. 101-115.

¹³ Ibid.

crime evidence for NKVD: now they could go after those parents who had baptized their children, denounce them as backward, reactionary, and dangerous, and potentially seek their conviction as well. As some of these people were state functionaries and even members of the ruling communist party, they defended themselves by pointing out that their children were baptized without parents' consent, and they themselves had not been present at the ceremony – these children had been taken by their relatives to be baptized without us knowing anything about it, state and party officials argued.¹⁴ Archimandrite Pimen, indeed, confirmed that he had not seen these officials present at their children's baptisms, but this made his 'crime' even more grave in the eyes of NKVD.

Sergeant Chabukiani composed a written account of the interrogation, and Archimandrite Pimen signed every page of the document to verify its accuracy. He told his story, and acknowledged that he did baptize children and helped bury the dead. He denied other charges brought against him, such as, 'spreading rumors on the impending collapse of the Soviet system,' and 'agitating against [Soviet] collective farms.' He acknowledged that he remembered of being 'warned' by NKVD in 1933 to resign from priesthood, but thought the situation had changed since and cited Soviet law, his bishop's mandate, and people's requests to justify his activities. The Soviet basic law guaranteed freedom of consciousness and one could not be just charged for fulfilling religious duties. The members of the Communist Party were forbidden by the party handbook and guidelines to be members of any religious organization or to engage in religious activities, those who were are not members had no such restrictions imposed on them, therefore, at least legally they could engage in religious activities. Therefore, priests and their flock could not be charged for being religious, but NKVD had to find other formulations for their alleged 'crimes.' Archimandrite Pimen was never charged for performing religious duties, but his alleged crime was formulated in more nuanced and diabolical forms.

By 1936, NKVD had very broad powers of investigating alleged crimes, formulating and presenting the charges, and at the end carrying out the sentences

¹⁴ Ibid.

handed down to prisoners by either shooting them (the death sentence), incarcerating them (NKVD managed prisons) or distributing them throughout the labour camp system (NKVD also ran GULAG).¹⁵ Also, the Soviet judicial system did not allow for the principle of presumption of innocence, instead the opposite was practice, everyone charged was presumed guilty unless proven otherwise. In Archimandrite Pimen's case, the investigator/prosecutor assigned to him, NKVD Sergeant Chabukiani, determined that Archimandrite's crimes were severe and stemmed from his following acts: he visited Tbilisi to seek advice from his 'superior,' he travelled from village to village to baptize children, he crossed the boundaries of his home district to baptize children in the neighboring Lower Svaneti region, he baptized school pupils, and he baptized around 120 children in less than a month, which in sergeant's opinion amounted to "mass baptism."¹⁶

Sergeant Chabukiani asked the suspected 'anti-Soviet activist:' "the children that you baptized, how old were they? Where there among them [Soviet school] pupils, and did you know that baptizing grown children meant [committing] a political crime, and that it was an act directed against [Soviet] authorities?"¹⁷ Archimandrite answered: "the children that I baptized were up to the age of about 10 or 11 years old, and I did not ask whether they were pupils [in the Soviet schools] or not, and I did not even know that this would be considered a crime [against Soviet authorities] or I would not have done it."¹⁸

In the same interrogation document, the NKVD officer is recorded to have asked: "did you know that walking outside [one's] village in all other villages, and moreover, in the Lower Svaneti region, this would be considered an act directed

¹⁵ NKVD and other Soviet police organizations (GRU, Cheka, MVD, KGB, etc. – some preceding others inheriting NKVD apparatus) always enjoyed broad powers to the very end of the Soviet Union, but by 1936, NKVD had acquired a broader mandate following the assassination of Sergei Kirov in December 1934, and the crackdown on the opposition members within the ruling communist party. Kirov, who was one of Stalin's closest allies, was murdered by the disgruntled husband of one of his many girlfriends, but Stalin used the occasion to get rid of his opposition through NKVD.

¹⁶ "Archimandrite Pimen Dashniani's Case (1936-1937)," pp. 101-115.

¹⁷ Ibid. Although Chabukiani was writing in his native language, his account has many grammatical and stylistic deficiencies.

¹⁸ Ibid.

against [Soviet] authorities, as [committed] by a classic opponent [of the Soviet government], trying to recruit the masses, moreover that you visited Tbilisi so that to acquire a permit for this [activity] from your head? Did you know that you were committing a crime and that authorities would charge you?”¹⁹ Archimandrite answered: “I did not know it was an error otherwise I would not have stepped outside my house.”²⁰

At the end of the interrogation record, Archimandrite Pimen acknowledged his error, which was essentially missionary work done through crossing one’s village boundaries in order to baptize children in other villages and say funeral rites, he asked for forgiveness indicating his advanced age. The interrogating officer Archimandrite’s name as Pavle Dashniani, Archimandrite’s birth name, asked him to sign every page to acknowledge it correct, signed it himself and dated the record April 18 1936.

A couple of unusual things happened after the interrogation. One, Archimandrite was not taken into custody, as it was a custom in the Soviet Union to detain people no matter how trivial the suspected infringement. The same judicial custom of holding people in pretrial detention for trivial issues or based on unfounded accusation still persists to these days in some post-Soviet countries, especially Russia. However, Archimandrite was allowed to stay home – perhaps, he was known to NKVD as a trustworthy person or he was not considered further risk due to his advanced age. Further, in his official charges dated April 27 1936, the same NKVD officer Chabukiani states the accused, Pavle Dashniani (Archimandrite Pimen), to be 70 years old – he was, in fact, not older than 64, as Chabukiani himself established few days prior.²¹ Most importantly, Archimandrite’s case took an unusual turn for the Soviet judicial system of the 1930s, when one could be charged, tried and executed within a month. On April 27 1936, NKVD forwarded Archimandrite’s case No. 1845 to the district prosecutor’s

¹⁹ Ibid. It is remarkable that although Archimandrite Pimen was acting openly and visited several villages, only two people denounced him to NKVD.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

office with the conclusion asserting that his case “was proven beyond doubt.” The prosecutor ascended, and transferred the case to the district judge, who confirmed the charge on May 28 1936, after which the case seemingly went dormant for more than a year.

From the recently declassified documents it is not clear whether Archimandrite Pimen was sentenced to anything in 1936 or whether he was reprimanded or fined or once again cautioned. There is no evidence that he ever had a lawyer to defend his case when he was initially charged – very few people in those days had access to defence lawyers. Defence lawyers or any legal norm associated with justice system or any due process completely went out of question later on when NKVD’s powers were broadened even further to include one missing function lacked – that to organize their own courts and trials. What is clear that his case under the same number, 1845, was picked up by the same NKVD officer once again in October 1937, the old charges were brought back, embellished, and overall the 1937 documents carried two new distinctly ominous signs: the document with official charges was composed in Russian, and the charges against Archimandrite Pimen now included alleged “activities against [Soviet] collective farms.”²²

It is unclear as to what judgment, if any, was pronounced over Archimandrite Pimen in 1936. In the Soviet Union, a person could be tried more than once for the same crime. This practice was legally permitted although it was rarely used: the Soviet state prosecutors’ offices obtained nearly 100% conviction rate for the cases they brought to the court, especially for the criminal cases, and even more so for those involving charges of various types of anti-Soviet activities. In 1936, alongside with Archimandrite Pimen another priest was also charged, Father George (Putkaradze), a seventy-six year old priest who was accused of similar ‘crimes.’ Although the two had no direct connection with each other, but because they were charged with the same crime, baptism of school aged children,

²² By mid-1930, Soviet efforts to put the entire agricultural sector of the vast country into collective and ‘Soviet’ farms failed to produce economic bliss, far from it, in many places misguided policies resulted into serious economic setbacks. This was blamed on phantom opponents of the Soviet regime identified as ‘anti-Soviet elements,’ ‘wreckers,’ ‘saboteurs,’ ‘reactionaries,’ ‘spies,’ ‘kulak,’ ‘anti-collective farm’ activists, etc. By summer 1937, any of these labels attached to anyone was the most serious accusation normally resulting in a death sentence or labour camp imprisonment.

their charges written under the same case number in the same document. In October 1937, when Archimandrite Pimen's case was brought back with a mix of charges elucidated in Russian, but under the same case number, Father George no longer was named with him. It is possible that the older priest did not live another year past his 1936 case or by October 1937 he was already exiled.

Few months before Archimandrite Pimen's charges were written up in Russian, the most momentous event took place in Moscow, the capital of the Soviet Union, through secretive government arrangements that granted NKVD even greater powers. The head of NKVD petitioned the supreme governing body of the Soviet state, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (the Politburo) to grant NKVD powers to organize an extraordinary court system. In July 1937, Nikolai Yezhov, Commissar of NKVD, signed the secret directive No. 00447 "Regarding the Suppression of Former Kulaks, Criminals, and Other Anti-Soviet Elements."²³ According to this directive, the all-powerful department of internal affairs of the Soviet state, NKVD, now could organize the so-called extraordinary courts, the so-called 'troikas' (triads), to expedite and simplify trials of individuals charged with political crimes against the Soviet state.

From late summer of 1937, NKVD started to try its own cases through the troika process: it would investigate cases, charge and prosecute individuals, try them, and carry out the sentence – and all these often would be done by the same group of individuals. The troika or triad courts were so named as they were normally composed of three persons: the chair, who would be the local NKVD chief, the second person would normally be the chief of the local apparatus of the Communist Party,²⁴ and a secretary. The troika courts tried the cases informally behind the closed doors, they took no notes, followed no predetermined rules or guidelines, the accused was not present and no witnesses were called; troika

²³ The full text of the groups of people that were designated for repressions is given in Республиканские, краевые и областные тройки НКВД, <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Республиканские,_краевые_и_областные_тройки_НКВД_СССР>

²⁴ The chiefs of communist party organizations outranked the NKVD chiefs within their regions, but NKVD chiefs were assigned the top role in troikas as law enforcement 'professionals.'

required no evidence and did not call either prosecution or defence to present their cases. The judgment troikas pronounced depended on a write-up given to them by the NKVD officer, and in some cases even that was not required – troikas only needed names of the accused, of which they decided, often arbitrarily, who to execute and who to exile. The whole trial process took only few minutes – a verdict was decided upon, and a short write-up was produced with two or three signatures. The verdict was not made public and it could not be appealed. After the troika verdict was carried out, relevant notes were attached to the cases, they were classified top secret and filed in NKVD archives.

The Politburo made sure local NKVD and party officials diligently and efficiently enforced the secret directive No. 00447. The Politburo established two main categories for the alleged ‘anti-Soviet elements,’ and quotas were assigned to each category for individual federal entities or regions of the Soviet Union. Categories I and II were used as euphemisms for the groups of people who were expected to be shot (Category I), and exiled to labour camps (Category II). NKVD offices in each union entity were ordered to try and find guilty a certain number in each category. For instance, Ukraine was given a quota of 28,000 persons of which 8,000 were designated for Category I, destined to be shot, and the remaining 20 thousand were to be exiled.²⁵ Interestingly, initially Moscow also directed regional leaders to lower the quota for Category I, if they deemed it to be necessary, but forbade them raising it. Many regional leaders had no difficulties finding candidates for either of these categories and many of them exceeded the assigned quotas, some unilaterally and others after getting additional authorizations.²⁶ In late 1937 and early 1938, Politburo increased the quotas many times over for many Soviet republic and regions. Many of those who were arrested were severely and

²⁵ Robert Gellately and Ben Kieman, eds. *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, p. 225

²⁶ Since there was no evidence that ‘the anti-Soviet elements’ committing large scale crimes to cripple Soviet economy (see note 22), communist authorities decided that there was a vast conspiracy taking place in the country and concluded that former priests, Czarist officials, political dissenters, former wealthy peasants, etc. had to be members of this conspiracy. The quotas were decided by estimating where in the country such individuals were likely to be residing. Therefore, the quotas for death sentence were higher in the regions where people with undesirable background were to be living in larger numbers, for instance, eastern Russian and Siberia – many had already been exiled to those parts.

brutally tortured not because to elicit their confession – that was not necessary as the guilt of these people had been decided in advance – but to name others, to give NKVD leads who to arrest, execute or exile.²⁷ When this period in Soviet history, known as ‘the great terror’ or ‘the great purges’ ended in late 1938, more than 1.5 million people went through the troika ‘trials,’ and around 50% of them were swiftly executed soon after the verdict.²⁸

Archimandrite Pimen’s case was revived on October 10 1937. The same NKVD officer who charged him 18 months earlier, Chabukiani, wrote a new conclusion in Russian and forwarded it to his local troika. The troika conviction card filled out for the “priest and an anti-Soviet element” has no date, but it was most likely done later the same month. The card lists the charges against him: “in 1936, being of anti-Soviet views, [he] was actively provoking [actions] against Soviet authorities, was calling on peasants to religiously baptize their children. In 1936, [he] conducted tours in villages organizing mass baptisms. Regarding [Soviet] collective farms, [he] agitated for their closing as economically unsustainable enterprises.”²⁹ The verdict noted on the same card: “to be shot... property to be confiscated.”³⁰

The NKVD troikas of 1937 were not the first such institutions in history of the Soviet regime. Twenty years earlier the original Soviet secret police, the so-called Cheka (from Russian *Cherezvychainaia komissia* – ‘extraordinary commission’), received a mandate from the first Soviet government headed by Lenin to arrest, try, and execute all those suspected of harboring anti-Soviet thoughts. Organized soon after the October 1917 Bolshevik coup, Cheka ruthlessly suppressed all political and economic activities frowned upon by the first Soviet government. During the Russian civil war (1917-1922), Cheka engaged in activities mandated under the Soviet ‘red terror’ policy – mass execution of civilians in

²⁷ Stephane Courtois, Nicolas Werth, et.al. *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1999.

²⁸ The estimates of those who were executed are lower in Gellately and Kieman.

²⁹ “Archimandrite Pimen Dashniani’s Case (1936-1937),” pp. 101-115.

³⁰ Ibid.

cities, towns, and villages suspected in sympathizing with anti-Soviet forces. After the Russian invasion of Georgia in 1921 and forcible Sovietization of the country, Cheka brought its methods to Georgia, and implemented them with ruthless efficiency against the 1924 pro-independence movement.

Archimandrite Pimen was one of thousands of clerics that were murdered through the troika process in 1937-38. The NKVD directive No. 00447 also targeted former officials and officers of the long-gone Russian imperial regime, former wealthy peasants, former business owners, dissenters within the communist party, intellectuals who were suspected of harboring anti-Soviet thoughts, and also family members, relatives and friends of these individuals. For some of the most distinguished prisoners the Soviet regime organized show trials in Moscow and major cities, but vast majority of the arrested were convicted, shot or exiled within two weeks of their detention. Subsequently, NKVD purged itself, including those who participated in arrests and executions, and even those who served as troika members. Subsequently the NKVD boss Nikolai Yezhov fell victim to one of the subsequent waves of state-sponsored terror that he initiated.

The communist regime's persecution of intellectuals, priests and ministers of various religions, and the people of other than communist worldview was conducted openly, frequently paraded in show trials as it fit within the social Darwinist model of Russian communism. However, the way the process was done, severity of punishment for the alleged crimes, the flimsy nature of charges, and most often, non-existence of any evidence that the accused committed anything illegal under the existing Soviet law constituted nothing but a campaign of state terrorism on a massive scale. The Soviet leadership knew that it was doing something very wrong – that was the main reason the personal cases of the victims of the great purges were classified as top secret with no expiration date – “keep it forever” was the most common classification label attached to them. They could not keep it secret forever, though, as the system which Archimandrite Pimen allegedly pronounced economically unsustainable did collapse in 1991, and with some reluctance, post-Soviet authorities started a slow process of declassification of the NKVD archives.

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