

## Yuri Shchekochikhin: A Tribute

**Y**uri Petrovich Shchekochikhin, who passed away prematurely under mysterious circumstances in early July 2003, was a towering figure in the democratization of the USSR and Russia and a part of *Demokratizatsiya* since its first issue.

A modest and accessible man whose vocabulary did not include the words intimidation or fear, Yuri somehow managed to combine an active legislative role with a very successful journalistic career. He was Russia's most renowned investigative reporter, specializing in abuse and corruption by a system that could produce little else. He made "mafiya" a household word when he and Aleksandr Gurov wrote an article in *Literaturnaya gazeta* during the early glasnost period. "As if the light had been turned on after a period of darkness," he recounts in *Demokratizatsiya*, "people started seeing it everywhere." After several years at *Literaturnaya gazeta*, he founded and headed *Novaya gazeta*, a pioneering paper read by nearly the entire thinking class. His colleagues often would boast that Yuri was the best known person inside Russia, and perhaps they were right. More than once I would turn on the television in Russia and see Yuri being interviewed, giving his opinions, and facing down cynical government officials. The last time that happened, Yuri was speaking about the as yet unsolved murder of his fellow democrat and Duma member Sergei Yushchenkov.

Yuri's politics were incidental, almost reluctant. In 1989, a district in Ukraine elected Yuri to the USSR Congress of People's Deputies, and there he joined the fateful Interregional Group, alongside figures such as Andrei Sakharov, Galina Starovoitova, Yuri Afanasyev, Gavriil Popov, Anatoly Sobchak, Sergei Stankevich, and Boris Yeltsin—in the very eye of the perestroika storm. Shortly after Russia's independence, Yuri led the charge to annul an attempt to merge the KGB with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in what would have amounted to a NKVD-style super-ministry—a decree that Yeltsin signed on his lap while boarding an airplane. He was later a member of the Duma, being first in the Yabloko party list. That party, liberal but critical of the *vlast*, was probably the perfect party for him. At the Duma, he was active in the security committee, and was one of the loudest voices against the Chechnya invasions, often travelling there himself on fact-finding missions. His office at the Duma had pictures of him in a military uniform, mingling with soldiers and civilians.

I met him accidentally, by way of a common friend, Jonathan Halperin. Even before the first issue of this journal came out, those of us who were forming it were also busy organizing conferences on post-Soviet developments. The main conference, in early 1992, was on the KGB. Yuri happened to be in Washington, D.C., at that time and participated in that panel, plus another one we organized

later in Moscow. There, former CIA director William Colby and other panelists acknowledged Yuri's contribution to embarrassing Yeltsin into rescinding his police super-ministry plans. Yuri just shrugged away any compliments. Reading the transcripts of those panels, which also brought J. Michael Waller, Victor Yasman, Sergei Grigoryants, Father Gleb Yakunin, Lev Ponomarev, Vadim Bakatin, and other renowned specialists and figures in contact with the journal, it is readily apparent that they quite clearly foresaw the consequences to Russia of leaving the KGB intact.

Fascinating, offbeat, thoroughly laid back, and always generous with his time and company, Yuri gave the impression of not taking his achievements seriously. He often introduced himself as a "former member of the former Congress of Peoples Deputies of the former USSR." In his house in Peredelkino outside Moscow (where he would later be laid to rest), Yuri had his USSR People's Deputy pin hanging on an old jacket. He once tried to give it to me. In a visit with Nikolai Zlobin he casually mentioned to us, "You know, I had this long interview with Gorbachev that supposedly was going to be published in a book, but why don't you use it instead for that first issue of your journal." And that's how the last major interview Gorbachev gave as president of the dying USSR came to be published in the premier issue. No Putin administration officials attended Yuri's funeral, but Gorbachev, fellow deputies from Yabloko, including its founders Grigory Yavlinsky and Vladimir Lukin, and many intellectuals, artists, and especially journalists did—figures of the Moscow Spring.

This past May, I had the pleasure of seeing him one last time in Moscow in his new flat, which was oddly located in a housing compound for foreign intelligence officers. "Putin assigned me this apartment by decree," he said, almost sarcastically. He seemed very happy and talked broadly about his life. He had a new girlfriend, who joined us for drinks later, was getting ready for a trip to a Russian province (I forget which one), and had just come back from a speaking engagement abroad. He signed his latest book for me, a personal testament to the cynical abuses that keep the KGB well fed on a daily basis, titled *Raby GB* ("Slaves of State Security"). I later realized that although I had my camera, I had not taken any pictures of our meeting. I thought Yuri was always going to be around.

He wrote in *Demokratizatsiya*, "[The KGB] was a criminal gang that seized power in 1917, and then perfected the system . . . And was not the NKVD, the precursor of the KGB, a band of gangsters, causing terror in the whole country, like bandits somewhere in Palermo?" Yuri's death, which many suspect was neither natural nor accidental, coincided with his investigation for *Novaya gazeta* of a company that had imported furniture without paying customs duties. That company is owned by the father of a KGB general, who is the head of the KGB's Economics Department and deputy to Putin's successor at that agency. Yuri and his *Novaya Gazeta* also had been investigating several atrocities in Chechnya, including the apartment bombings that touched off the second invasion and launched Putin's presidential career. (The KGB is suspected of having conducted those apartment bombings.) *Novaya Gazeta* journalist Anna Politkovskaya was arrest-

ed for her reporting, tortured, and denounced on Putin-controlled television as an “enemy of the country”—a slightly adapted version of the “enemy of the people” phrase uttered during Soviet times against dissidents.

Yuri was truly a remarkable pioneer in the democratization of the USSR and a brave critic of what transpired in Russia later. His absence is heartbreaking. This journal lost Galina Starovoitova in 1998 and now loses another one of those irreplaceable, historically towering figures and friends.

There is perhaps no more apt an allegory for Vladimir Putin’s Russia than the death of Yuri Shchekochikhin.

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