



Photos by Vladimir Rumyantsev

13.01.2023, 14:58 Vologda Oblast

свой опыт

“Between ‘Disgusting’ and ‘Scary’”—an old dissident’s life in a letter from a detention centre

On December 22, a court in Vologda sentenced Vladimir Rumyantsev to 3 years in a general regime penal colony for spreading «fakes» about the Russian army. The 61-year-old boiler furnace operator and radio enthusiast was accused of spreading deliberately false information on his social media and via his personal radio. He spent more than 5 months in the pre-trial detention centre.

Текст на русском

CHILDHOOD, STALIN AND THE WAR

I was born in Vologda in 1961 in the hospital on Chernyshevsky street. My mother worked as a waffle maker making ice cream cones at the Vologda Cold Storage Plant ice cream factory. At that time my father was a mechanic working with steam locomotives at the VPVRZ (Vologda Steam Locomotive Car Repair Plant — *OVD-Info*). In 1968 they stopped repairing steam locomotives, and both my father and I went to school — I started first grade, and he started studying to become a carpenter. He worked as a carpenter until his retirement. In total, he had fifty years of work experience at the VRZ (Railcar Repair Plant — *OVD-Info*), from January 6, 1953 to January 6, 2003. Our life was similar to many others — we lived in a two-storey wooden house with eight shared apartments and no bathroom facilities.

In 1975 I went to study in a boarding school in the village of Nebolchi in the north of the Novgorod region. It was a school for children with musculoskeletal system disorders. I stayed there for two years. I must mention our mentor and history teacher Mikhail Alekseevich Alexandrov, who was a war veteran. Unlike many veterans who did not like reminiscing about the war, he talked about it a lot, and his stories were far from glorious. He could barely say a word about Stalin without swearing.

Our school principal Ivan Semyonovich Annenkov was also a war veteran. He taught economic geography of the USSR and slowly led us to understanding that the situation with the Soviet economy was not as rosy as Soviet propaganda claimed. Perhaps both of them played a part in the development of my critical thinking. Finally, the Voice of America and the BBC helped a lot. It was quite easy to receive their transmissions until August 1980.

It was a particularly memorable moment when Soviet troops entered Afghanistan. The Voice of America reported it a couple of days before the Soviet TV News announced the

coup. During the «The World Today» TV program Anatoly Potapov said: «This is completely an internal affair for Afghanistan, but meeting the numerous requests of the Afghan government the Soviet government introduced a limited contingent of Soviet Armed Forces over there.» It remained unclear which government requested help.

In 1980, my brother, who was a Komsomol activist, was awarded a trip to France. He told me all about it when he came back, and also brought back a few things. For some reason I particularly remember a plain paper bag from some store. He used it for a long time afterwards to carry his children's laundry. These are all the things that gradually helped develop my negative attitude towards the Soviet regime. That is why it was easier for me to welcome and accept the 90-s.

I will never forget that emotional uplift on August 22, 1991. I do not know if I will ever experience it again. In 1989, we formed the electoral literacy club «the Alternative» in Vologda. I participated in its work and was a member of its coordination council, so I have my modest share in making the «wild» 90s possible. I can describe my attitude toward the 90s as the brightest period of my life. Despite financial challenges and working two jobs, there was hope, and every consecutive year was better than the previous one. It is enough to compare life during Yeltsin's presidency, in 1991 and 1999. Despite the default of 1998, these years are worlds apart.

THE FAMILY

In 2009, I buried my parents. I was left alone, though I have a brother, he has three children, and six grandchildren. A year and a half ago, my brother got elected as the Chair of the local Council for warVeterans. After he retired, he became active with the veteran organization. He repaired the ambulance car from the train formed in June 1941 at the Vologda locomotive

and car repair workshop. In March 2022, we discussed recent events.

I criticised him for supporting «the special military operation» in a comment he made in an interview with a web publication. He responded by warning me about the responsibility for the posts I publish. That was it. We don't communicate directly anymore, only through a lawyer. A month after his visit, the FSB came with the first search.



A rail car restored with the support of Rumyantsev's brother, 2020 / Photo by Vladimir Rumyantsev

BECOMING A BOILER OPERATOR

A year before the arrest, I got a job at Woodstroy LLC as a boiler operator. I tended an automatic boiler for burning sawdust and a manual furnace boiler for wood waste. For an additional fee, I would stack fuel briquettes on pallets.

VK PROFILE

I joined [VK.com](https://vk.com) (Russia's major social media platform — *translator's note*) in December 2011. In 2014, I bought a smartphone and registered a new profile as I got overwhelmed by trying to enter my overcomplicated old profile's password.

I deleted my old profile as it became hard to keep two. This (the fact that the account was registered in 2014, after the beginning of the first phase of the conflict in the east of Ukraine — *OVD-Info*) was a pure coincidence. My old account had the same content.

POLITICAL VIEWS

The political views settings on social media are a relative thing. So I thought about what to choose, and decided that «the liberal policy of Leopold the cat*» was not entirely appropriate, so I put «libertarian.»

I was influenced, among others, by Yulia Latynina (a Russian political columnist). In my opinion, she has a balanced philistine approach. From politicians, I would single out Margaret Thatcher, but she is no longer with us.

*Leopold the cat is a Soviet cartoon character famous for his «Let's live in peace» catchphrase

RADIO GA-GA

I have been keen on the radio for a long time. The age difference between my brother and me is seven years. So when he was in the tenth grade, I went to the third. Leafing through his textbooks, I came across a physics textbook. I read it — it turned out to be quite a fascinating subject, so I got hooked. Ever since third grade, I have been interested in electrical circuits. And Soviet electronics enticed

you into constantly fixing and upgrading your devices. I listened to the radio stations I could tune in to. In the summer of 1978 and 1979, I was indescribably glad to tune in to radio stations from Poland, Bulgaria, Nalchik (a city in the Russian south), and other stations transmitted on ELF waves. It was possible at the time to tune into TV broadcasts from Sweden, Denmark, France, and the GDR.

Then there was a period of high solar activity, and CRT television sets were sensitive. In 1980, I listened to the Radio Moscow World Service on medium waves in the evenings. I learned about the bands Voskresenie (Resurrection), Mashina Vremeni (Time Machine), and Valery Leontiev. Then I tried to tune in to Western radio stations. In 1988, I think, I listened to the novel Moscow 2042 by Voinovich on Liberty. I never expected back then that this dystopia would actually become real.

I have listened to the radio station 'Moscow Echo' ever since the very first day of its broadcast in Vologda on May 7, 2000 right up until it was cut off. Its cutoff caught me at work, where I was listening to a program called 'In the Circle of Light', after which the signal was lost. I had to listen to later broadcasts in podcast form and on Youtube. Naturally, I had a negative reaction to the closing of 'Echo', but at that time I had a multitude of other sources of information, including Youtube

RADIO UNDERGROUND

My radio broadcasts were just a consequence of my attempts to somehow radiofy my apartment. You see, after 2012 and especially 2014, some sort of "patriotic" hysteria started on the radio. And I as the sole inhabitant of my apartment unanimously voted for banning federal television and radio broadcasts in my house. Well, one needed to create something instead.

Having tried everything from computer speakers to Bluetooth speakers, I found little radio transmitters with a few Watts of power in the FM range of frequency on the Internet. That was a perfect option in terms of ease of use. The signal is received by any receiver in any corner of the apartment.



Vladimir Rumyantsev, 2018 / Photo: Vladimir Rumyantsev

Originally I was planning to listen to audiobooks. I had quite a large collection, I think the overall length was close to two

years of length of the recording. In 2010, the chief engineer of the brick factory asked me to find a book by [Suren] Tsormudyan online, 'The Last Passengers', I think. I found it, I downloaded it, and somehow it clicked. Later, I downloaded a lot of radio plays, recorded radio broadcasts from the past. 'The Famous Captains Club', including the first episode of 1945, 'Good morning' and many other programs from the 1940s-1980s

Lately, a lot of material was uploaded to YouTube from Gosteleradiofond — I took all of that for myself and listened to it on my broadcast. The show also included podcasts from conversation radio stations 'The Echo', 'Speaks Moscow', 'Freedom', 'The Salt', and whatever else I could find.

The topics varied from popular science programs to politics. But due to recent events, there is now a bias towards political broadcasts. The radio worked whenever I was home, i.e. almost round the clock. At night, I would set something from my music collection and some radio plays for pleasant dreams. The coverage, I think, was about two to three blocks. But the FSB wrote in the protocol that it was from one to three kilometres. I think they are exaggerating.

I didn't discuss this with any of my neighbours, of course. The whole thing was originally an adventurous one, I didn't even hope that I would be able to take the transmitter home from the post office. It clearly stated on the box what the device was, to whom it was sent, and the customs gave the go ahead. Strange. And they tolerated my radio hooliganism for another five years.

Later, when the FSB confiscated my transmitter, I entered "underground radio station" into "VKontakte" for my place of work; anyway, after the brick factory closed down, I didn't list a place of work there. This is simply me declaring that I have some experience in this field.

«À LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU» (IN REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST)

I'm amazed at the attention focused on me — throughout my entire life, I've not received as many letters as I have in the past not-quite-two months of imprisonment. Somehow, I don't think of myself as a hero. It's just when I was forced to choose between two paths, 'It's disgusting' and 'It's scary,' I chose the latter. One day it will all be over, the only thing I regret is the time the country wasted for nothing.

More to read



Memory Wars

Alexey Uvarov explains civil society's struggle to commemorate repression victims.