

**Screenplay for the film "1948 — Nikolai Starostin. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze"** written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI.

### **Screenplay Summary:**

*The text uses the life of Nikolai Starostin to weave together football, the Gulag system and the broader history of the Soviet Union from the late 1930s through 1948.*

*It opens in the post-war years, when the country "lives and breathes" football. Stadiums are packed, commentators are national voices, and Starostin is already seen as the moral core of Spartak Moscow and of Soviet football. Yet in 1948 he is not in Moscow, but in Amurlag, a Far Eastern labour camp, coaching a team made up of prisoners, exiles, civilian employees and former POWs.*

*Within the camp universe, football becomes a literal means of survival. Gulag chiefs – NKVD generals who rule over hundreds of thousands of "serfs" – are almost childishly passionate about the game and treat good players as prized property. They argue over who "owns" Starostin, hiding him to avoid transfer or trying to pull him to their own camp. Among the criminal convicts he is respected and protected; card games stop when he starts telling football stories.*

*The narrative then rewinds to the 1930s. We learn about the Starostin family's background as hereditary gamekeepers – neither gentry nor peasants – and about how Spartak emerged from a rough criminal wasteland in Moscow called Goryuchka. Nikolai shows early talent as a manager, studies at a commercial school, then builds Spartak as a people's club, unlike the militarised Dynamo under the security services. Key scenes include the spectacular football demonstration on Red Square for Stalin, with a giant felt pitch rolled out like a carpet, and Spartak's legendary victory over the visiting Basque team, which had already humiliated Dynamo.*

*These sporting successes are not politically neutral. When Beria becomes head of the NKVD and honorary chairman of Dynamo, Spartak's victories over Dynamo turn into personal insults. A grotesque replay of a Cup semi-final – ordered after Spartak has already won the final – shows how arbitrary power intrudes directly into sport.*

*The "great terror" of 1937 rolls through the sports world; many athletes and officials are arrested. In 1942, all four Starostin brothers are taken. The text describes Lubyanka prison, torture and absurd charges (plotting an assassination of Stalin, stealing a wagon of textiles, "praising bourgeois sport"). The phrase scratched on prison walls – "Fedot, don't believe the investigator" – becomes a distilled message from those who tried to endure without denouncing others.*

*Running alongside this personal story is a wide political and social panorama. The abolition of ration cards in 1947 is advertised as a great achievement, but is paired with a currency reform that wipes out people's savings and with sharp price hikes. In Moscow and Leningrad, where special reserves have been stockpiled, people remember well-stocked shops, cafés serving cakes and coffee, even champagne – a time of relative plenty and cautious optimism.*

*For most of the country, and especially the countryside, the reality is famine. A second round of grain requisitions strips kolkhozes of all grain, including what should have been peasants' pay in*

*kind. Grain is exported and hoarded in state reserves, while peasants starve. Letters from villagers, invalids and workers describe endless queues, fights in front of bread windows, living on watery soup and a few grams of bread. Many believe that if only Stalin knew, he would stop it, and blame local officials instead.*

*By 1948 the rural crisis deepens. A decree on the “deportation of malicious idlers” launches what peasants call a second dekulakization: private livestock and tools are confiscated, village meetings decide who is to be exiled, and families are shipped off to Siberia. Another decree makes the wartime deportation of whole peoples (Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks and others) effectively permanent. The countryside enters a structural crisis from which Soviet agriculture will never fully recover.*

*Against this backdrop, Starostin’s fate is emblematic and paradoxical. He is a political prisoner, yet protected by his football talents and by the personal interest of Vasily Stalin, who pulls him out of exile, hides him on air force bases, sits him in the government box at Dynamo Stadium and uses him as a pawn in his feud with Beria. The camp rule – “Survive, and outlive those who put you here” – becomes the final note: all four Starostin brothers do, in fact, outlive their persecutors and the era that tried to crush them.*

## **Screenplay:**

### **1948 – Nikolai Starostin**

The great composer Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich once said:

“Football is, for us, the only place where anyone can say what he thinks about what he sees.”

The post-war country, regardless of sex or age, lives by football, breathes football. In the stands of Dynamo Stadium there are more beautiful women than in the Bolshoi Theatre. People tune in to the voice of the football commentator Sinyavsky on the radio as greedily as, not long ago, they tuned in to Levitan’s.

This time could have been the time of Nikolai Petrovich Starostin. Later people would say of him that he was the tsar and god of Moscow Spartak, the conscience of Soviet football, the mentor of several generations of famous masters. Later, everyone at Spartak would call him “Granddad.”

All his time would belong to Spartak. Early in the morning, Starostin would drink a glass of tea. Late at night, he would eat a heavy meal. That would be his routine for almost the entire second half of the 20th century. He grew used to it.

The New Year of 1948 found the famous footballer and former head of the Moscow club Spartak – now a camp inmate with six years’ experience – Nikolai Petrovich Starostin, in the Far East, in Amurlag. He runs a football team in Komsomolsk-on-Amur. Under Stalin, football is not just a game.

Decades later, Starostin would write:

“Belonging to football was the best safeguard in a country where camps had become a form of human existence. In the camp system that had been created, football turned into a means of survival.”

The plenipotentiary of the USSR Ministry of State Security for the Far East, Colonel-General Goglidze, is a passionate football fan. He has his own team. He is in constant rivalry with the commander of the Far Eastern Army, Marshal Malinovsky, who has not one but two football teams: SKA Khabarovsk and the Air Force team.

Already in 1944, Colonel-General Goglidze learned that the head of Ukhtlag, Lieutenant-General Burdakov, had in his camp the famous Nikolai Starostin, who was coaching the local team, Ukhta Dynamo.

Starostin writes:

“As the years went by, I no longer marvelled at the fact that the chiefs of the GULAG – the embodiment of its inhumanity and horror, the arbiters of the fate of thousands upon thousands – loved football in a naïve, almost childlike way. The head of Ukhtlag, Burdakov, always brought his wife to the stadium – an older, stout lady.”

Teams from other camps came to play matches. From a line-selector conversation between the head of Ukhtlag, Burdakov, and the head of Intlag, General Barabanov:

‘When you come with your team to Ukhta, I’m going to smash you to pieces,’ says Burdakov. ‘I’ll come, I’ll come,’ replies Barabanov. ‘And we’ll see who smashes whom. I’ve got Starostin training my team.’

‘What Starostin?’ asks the head of Ukhtlag.

‘Alexander,’ answers the head of Intlag.

‘Well, my Starostin – Nikolai – will show your Starostin what’s what.’

At this time all four of the Starostin brothers, all of them celebrated Spartak footballers, are imprisoned in different camps.

NKVD generals are the absolute owners of hundreds of thousands of serfs. Those who play football, they almost love. For a victory on the pitch, they might even grant them their freedom. But the main thing is to keep them for themselves.

The head of Ukhtlag is ready to keep Nikolai Starostin at any cost. When a sudden order arrives to transfer Starostin to the Far East, General Burdakov decides to hide him. He sends him 300 kilometres from Ukhta, to a sub-camp at a logging site. It is thirty degrees below zero. There are five or six kilometres to the logging area. Those sentenced under Article 58 fell the trees, while the criminal convicts sit by the fire, lying on spruce branches and playing cards.

Starostin writes:

“For the guards and the convoy, the criminals are not just ‘socially close elements’ – they’re practically family. On our feet we wore slippers cut out of old tyre rubber, wound round with rags. Every day no fewer than forty people died. They were taken to the morgue. There were piles of naked corpses, which were devoured by the hundreds of rats sitting on them. I saw it.”

They took him to the Far East anyway. Colonel-General of the NKVD Goglidze took from Lieutenant-General Burdakov this valuable, coveted serf-footballer, Nikolai Starostin.

Six months on the road from Ukhta to Khabarovsk. Through a dozen transit prisons. Everywhere the criminals run the show.

Starostin recalls:

“The criminals treated me more than kindly. From stage to stage the word was passed on: ‘Don’t touch Starostin.’ When I told football stories, the card games stopped. The repeat offenders listened like model schoolboys.”

And he had plenty to tell.

In 1936, on Physical Culture Day, during the parade of athletes on Red Square, it was decided to show football to Stalin. The government commission for preparing the holiday was headed by the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Komsomol, Alexander Kosarev. He was a good acquaintance of Nikolai Starostin. For the game in the parade, Kosarev chose Starostin’s Spartak. The director of the parade was Valentin Pluchek, who would later lead the Theatre of Satire for many years.

To cover the cobblestones of Red Square, it was decided to sew a felt carpet of nine thousand square metres, paint it and turn it into a stadium. Three hundred Spartak men, including the most famous players, spent every night sewing together pieces of felt with cobblers’ needles. In the morning, the sewn-together carpet was rolled up so as not to block the traffic.

The day before the parade, the finished carpet, rolled into a huge cylinder and disguised with spruce branches, lay along the GUM department store.

On the day of the parade, at Starostin’s signal, hundreds of hands rolled the cylinder. Then, with a single heave, they shook out the carpet – and all the space from St Basil’s Cathedral to the Historical Museum turned into a stadium with an emerald-green pitch marked with white lines. That was where the football began, played by Spartak players divided into two teams.

The Komsomol leader Kosarev stood beside Stalin on the Mausoleum. In his hand he clutched a white handkerchief. He and Starostin had agreed: if Stalin did not like the spectacle, Kosarev would take out the handkerchief and the game would be stopped.

Nikolai Starostin kept glancing at the Mausoleum. All was calm. Stalin liked the football. According to the script, they were supposed to play 30 minutes. They played 43.

Spartak’s main rival was Dynamo, the departmental sports society of the NKVD. Spartak’s participation in the parade was a blow to the professional pride of the NKVD leadership.

In 1938, when Lavrenty Beria would take over the NKVD and, accordingly, Dynamo, he would remember that Physical Culture Day. The Komsomol head Kosarev was shot immediately after Beria came to power.

On the way to Amurlag, during transit in Kirov, Starostin is suddenly summoned. In the visiting room stands the world champion, famous Soviet speed skater Maria Isakova. She pays no attention to the prison governor sitting next to her. She throws her arms around Starostin’s neck, passes on greetings, then suddenly lifts the hem of her dress and takes from her stocking a little pouch of tobacco and some money.

The next transit point is the city of Molotov – before and after called Perm. Starostin recalls:

“The city of Molotov greeted us with the angry barking of the convoy’s German shepherds and the gaping gates of yet another prison on my route.”

There, by chance, he meets his brother Alexander. Alexander is driven off to log timber in Solikamsk. Nikolai arrives at Amurlag. Here he will coach footballers who are camp inmates,

deportees, civilian employees and former prisoners of war – those who, straight from German camps, were sent to Amurlag.

At Amurlag he has a stroke of luck. He lives on the grounds of the garage adjoining the camp zone. He writes:

“This was happiness in the literal sense of the word, because the garage was not the zone.”

He recalls:

“At that time, the management of Amurlag lacked nothing. All the food was American. I don’t know who exactly supervised the transport of supplies sent from America to aid the USSR, but the leadership of Amurlag wore American clothes, ate pancakes made from overseas flour, imported ham, and drank the best brands of tea in the world.”

In the rest of the country, 1 January 1948 marks the beginning of the third week after the abolition of ration cards. The expectation of the post-war abolition of rationing can be compared with few events. In that expectation were hopes for a better, well-fed life, for the idea that things simply had to become easier one day.

No one knew that, to carry out the abolition of ration cards, the state would choose several large cities, above all Moscow and Leningrad, as showpieces. It is precisely Muscovites and Leningraders who would preserve bright memories of the abolition of rationing:

“My husband and I went to Stoleshnikov Lane. The shop was packed with people, but the counters were full of everything! There were no bags then, only string shopping nets, *avoskas*, and from all of them stuck out meat bones wrapped in coarse paper, fish tails.”

By a special resolution of the Council of Ministers, an untouchable stock of goods had been built up in Moscow almost a year in advance: soap, sugar, meat, sausage, flour. Sugar, cereals and vegetable oil were especially in demand. In clothing and shoe shops, galoshes were snapped up particularly quickly. By the beginning of 1948 a so-called “limit” on galoshes had already been introduced.

The capital cities feared an influx of people from the provinces and villages.

Before the abolition of rationing, there were “ration prices,” that is, the prices at which products were bought with ration cards. During the war, ration prices were fixed. In early September 1946, the Council of Ministers and the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) decided to raise the ration prices.

On 10 September, information about the price increase was given to party and soviet activists. On 12 and 13 September, rumours spread through Moscow and Leningrad. On the one hand, people did not believe them, saying: “A price increase would not correspond to the policy of the Soviet state.” On the other hand, these same people immediately lined up at shops to draw their rations for September.

The decision to raise ration prices was published on 16 September 1946 and presented as a necessary precondition for abolishing ration cards in 1947.

Some workers hoped, in connection with this, to raise their wages by increasing their productivity. But the Stalinist economic system did not allow this: production was constantly short of materials and spare parts, downtime and loss of time were ineradicable. In addition, a special secret resolution of the Council of Ministers and the Central Committee strictly forbade raising salaries.

In that same September, a new joint decree from the Council of Ministers and the Central Committee: “On saving in the consumption of bread.” The saving came down to removing a significant part of the country’s population from ration provision: rural employees, kolkhoz farmers, children and invalids. In all, 100 million people, that is, 58 percent of the USSR population. It was these 58 percent who awaited the abolition of cards with especially hungry impatience.

After the abolition of ration cards, contrary to the expectations of the masses, the new prices for food proved higher than the old ration prices. Given wages, only the bare minimum was affordable. Clothing and footwear were very expensive.

At the same time as rationing was abolished, a currency reform was carried out. Money was exchanged at the rate of 10 old roubles for 1 new. The exchange was carried out over the course of a week. During this week, old money could be used to pay for purchases, calculated at one-tenth of their face value. Savings accounts up to 3,000 roubles were exchanged rouble for rouble. Sums over 3,000 were exchanged with large losses. Party and soviet officials learned of the reform earlier than the general population and therefore managed to exchange their money among the first.

In the cities, because of the crush in the savings banks, many were unable to exchange their money at all. The rural population – those who had been putting away a few miserable roubles “for a rainy day” in a stocking – suffered the heaviest losses, owing to the distance from savings offices.

The reform was conceived as an anti-inflationary measure. For a significant part of the population it amounted to a confiscation of money.

Abolition of rationing and the currency reform once again, in Soviet history, drove apart – irreversibly – the population of several big cities and the entire mass of people living in the rest of the country.

That is why memories of 1947 and 1948 would be different.

Before, under rationing, 1 kilogram of black bread cost 1 rouble; after, it cost 3 roubles 40. The price of a kilogram of meat rose from 14 to 30 roubles, sugar from five and a half to 15, butter from 28 to 66, milk from two and a half to 8 roubles.

In the big cities, the minimum wage was 200 roubles – the pay of an ordinary policeman. The average wage was 500 roubles – that of a worker in Moscow. Chocolate sweets and smoked sausage, which appeared in the central delicatessens, naturally, almost no one bought. But the absolutely essential items – pasta, vegetable oil, cereals – people could afford. It’s true that they had to stand for hours in queue for the cheap liver sausage.

Queues were inevitable because a Council of Ministers’ resolution “On norms for the sale of goods in one pair of hands” was in force: cereals – 1 kilogram, sausage – half a kilo, soap – 1 bar, matches – 2 boxes, thread – 1 spool.

But this was simply in the shops, not by ration card. After such a war, this really was happiness. So what if the queue after work lasted more than an hour. The sight of products beyond the means of most people in the windows of the major gastronom stores did not evoke irritation, but optimism.

It was especially Leningraders, those who lived through the siege, who would remember this time as the most well-fed.

On Nevsky Prospekt the Sever café, formerly the pre-war Nord, is open from 9 a.m. to midnight. There they mostly serve pastries and coffee; for hot dishes, fried eggs or omelette. You can order cognac, vintage port, liqueur, champagne.

In small towns and villages, after the abolition of food ration cards, the supply situation is simply catastrophic. The scarcest product is bread. Everything else barely counts.

People stand in queues from morning to morning.

From a letter by a war invalid, Ryazan region:

“Because of my health, I cannot push into the crush, and so my family of five and I have not seen bread for ten days.”

From an office worker in Semipalatinsk:

“At the entrance to the shop where bread is sold they have posted watchers. Every day there’s a fistfight.”

The little windows cut in the brick walls of shops, from which trading is done, are called “embrasures” by the people. They are stormed in an assault, walking on each other’s heads.

For the village, 1946 is a time of universal despair.

In late 1945 and early 1946, people had hoped for the abolition of kolkhozes. In the exhausted peasant mind, everything got mixed together. They said that “the kolkhoz system was introduced on the instructions of the Germans in order to ruin the economy and weaken Russia so as to conquer it.”

On the other hand – and this is confirmed by MGB reports – the peasantry did not believe that Stalin would of his own will give up kolkhozes. From the Pskov, Kursk, Rostov regions and also from Siberian villages, informers pass on the same rumour again and again:

“The former allies – England and America – will force Stalin to dissolve the kolkhozes. The Americans will check from their planes whether the kolkhozes have really been broken up.”

By mid-1946 these hopes disappear. From a letter by peasants in the Stavropol krai:

“They drive us to work, but don’t feed us, and don’t pay us. To bait us, they give a teaspoon of watery soup and 50 grams of bread a day, so we can still breathe and not drop dead.”

In a kolkhoz in Buryat-Mongolia, they say:

“We must get out of the kolkhoz. We are on the verge of death. Stop working – let’s go somewhere.”

In 1946 a famine begins that will carry on into 1947 and further into 1948. It is so terrible that it is this famine that will, in fact, be the main event of those years. It will claim more than two million lives of people who had survived the war.

The 1946 harvest was smaller than that of 1945, but that is not the real reason for the famine. The real reason is that in 1946, just as in 1928, Stalin begins grain requisitions again.

In order to replenish the state grain reserve, after the kolkhozes deliver the grain prescribed by plan, the state sets an additional quota. That is, all the grain is taken from the kolkhozes down to the last

kernel, including the grain intended to be distributed to the peasants as natural payment for their labour. Exactly as in 1930, the countryside immediately plunges into famine.

At the same time, there is grain in the country. As during the first Soviet famine of 1929–1933, in 1947 grain is being exported at full speed.

Soviet newspapers in 1947 constantly write about Soviet aid to the starving in other countries. The state grain reserve was replenished in 1946–1947 and is not released despite everything. The reserve is not released – but it is not preserved either. The grain taken by the state rots in grain elevators, warehouses, at railway stations and during transport.

The grain thus spoiled would have been enough to pay the workdays (*trudodni*) of the starving peasants.

In government documents, the first mention of supplying certain food and industrial goods for trade in the countryside dates from 1950.

Most kolkhoz farmers think that all this time, Stalin is being kept in the dark about the people's dire situation. They do not trust the local authorities.

The kolkhoz woman Ivina, from Ivanovo region, writes to a popular Moscow stage actress, Maria Mironova:

“Dear Maria Vladimirovna, we are sure that our leader and teacher, Comrade Stalin, does not know about this, otherwise he would not allow the people to suffer so. On 7 November, for the holiday of the Great October Revolution, they plan to give out flour. The queue has been written down since mid-October. For manufactured goods there is a crush. Some kind of ‘pull’ has appeared; without it you can't get anything.”

During June 1948, 16 krajs and oblasts, 4 autonomous republics and 3 union republics appeal to the government for urgent help with grain. The requests of the local authorities, however, are never justified by extreme starvation among the population. They cite a slowing of weeding, haymaking, harvesting. In the worst case, drought.

Stalin does not abandon his ruinous policy in the countryside. In the summer of 1948, the famine rolls on in a new wave.

Once, in the summer of 1948, at night, a car drives up to the garage building at Amurlag where Nikolai Starostin lives. It is the car of the first secretary of the city party committee of Komsomolsk-on-Amur. A captain gets out, goes in, and says:

“Starostin, get dressed. Stalin urgently requires you on the phone.”

Half an hour later, when Starostin picks up the receiver of the government line, he hears the voice of Stalin's son, Vasily.

Starostin had seen Vasily Stalin in the late 1930s. Vasily had practised horseback riding at Spartak. Now, in 1948, he is commander of the Air Force of the Moscow Military District. And he wants to have his own football team.

On the phone he says to Starostin:

“So why are they still keeping you there? They jailed you for nothing, that's obvious. But don't lose heart. We need you. I'll call again.”

Vasily Stalin will arrange for Starostin to be summoned to him. That will happen, however, only after Starostin's sentence is up. He is released with the formula "minus 16," that is, with a ban on living in 16 cities. The first on this list is Moscow.

It is then that Vasily Stalin will fly him to Moscow in his own plane. Starostin recalls:

"One all-consuming desire took hold of me – to find myself in Moscow; I did not even try to analyse what dangers this illegal return to the capital might entail."

Straight from the airfield, they take him to Vasily Stalin's mansion on Gogolevsky Boulevard. On the ground floor are billiard tables and the dining table.

On it sit a carafe and slices of watermelon. Watermelon is Vasily Stalin's favourite snack.

Vasily says to Starostin:

"You'll live with me, in my house. No one will touch you here."

Vasily is not interested in Starostin as an innocent man who has been arrested. Of course, he needs him as a coach. But even that fades into the background.

Starostin will write:

"The essence was that he did not want to yield in anything to Beria, whom he hated fiercely, constantly abusing him in the vilest terms, without the slightest concern for who might be present at the time."

The root of this hatred in Vasily is the arrest of relatives on the Alliluyev side – the relatives of his mother, Nadezhda Alliluyeva, Stalin's wife, who committed suicide.

Of Stalin himself, in Starostin's presence, Vasily does not say a word. And that despite the fact that, given the circumstances, they are inseparable. Together at training, at headquarters, at the dacha.

Starostin writes:

"We even slept in the same huge bed."

When at last Starostin makes an attempt to break away and go home to his family, he is arrested and sent out of Moscow. But in Orel, during a stop of the train, Vasily Stalin's men catch up with him. They haul him off the train, put him in a jeep, then on a military airfield into a plane.

In Moscow, Vasily immediately takes him to a football match, at Dynamo Stadium, to the government box. Vasily drives Starostin up to a general and says:

"Meet General Ogoltsov. And this is Starostin, whom you, General, expelled from Moscow this morning."

General Ogoltsov, deputy minister of State Security, is the organiser and participant in the killing of the famous actor and director Solomon Mikhoels.

Then Vasily decides to hide Starostin at an Air Force base in Pereslavl-Zalessky. Eighteen kilometres away is the village of Pogost, where Starostin's mother comes from. Before the revolution, the whole family would go there from Moscow for the summer.

Nikolai's father and uncle were gamekeepers. Besides professionally running hunts, they trained pure-bred dogs whose owners sent them to them. They also had a boarding kennel for dogs that

their owners could not keep at home. All the dogs were pedigree, expensive. Keeping one such dog at the kennel cost 15 pre-revolutionary roubles a month.

Nikolai Starostin writes that he and his brothers were not gentry children, but they certainly weren't peasant children either. They were gamekeepers' children.

In Moscow, the Society of Hunters named after Emperor Alexander I built a house for the Starostin gamekeeper family on the Presnya Rampart.

From the memoirs of Andrei Starostin:

“Our nursery, in the small house on the Kamer-Kollezhsky Rampart in Presnya, seemed to us mysterious and huge. It was there that we played theatre, played wizards, changed roles and travelled.”

The Starostins are hereditary gamekeepers. Among their famous ancestors are Archip and Nikita Starostin, gamekeepers of the Imperial Hunting Society. The younger generation was supposed to continue the family trade. All the more so since Nikolai had an undeniable talent as a manager. But it would reveal itself in another field – football.

At 14, Nikolai studied at the Commercial School of the Mansfeld brothers, which trained so-called commercial correspondents, i.e. managers with foreign-language skills. The school gave an excellent education and superb prospects. Another brother, Andrei, also enrolled in the same school.

Andrei Starostin was the godson of the well-known Moscow millionaire and bon vivant Alexei Nazarovich Gribov. Today the Belgian ambassador's residence is in the Gribov house.

The father of the future footballers, Pyotr Starostin, was indifferent to politics. His brother Dmitry was a convinced monarchist and an equally convinced enemy of football. He called the footballers “bare-legged rabble.”

Soon after the revolution, the head of the Starostin family died of typhus. To avoid starving, the sons bartered away the hunting guns their father had given them, in exchange for flour and potatoes.

The Commercial School was closed, and Nikolai went to work as an accountant. And all the brothers played football.

In their pre-revolutionary childhood they had all been ardent football fans. They would go to watch the city championship games between student teams. The favourite for the title in 1916 was the team of the Imperial College. Year after year, they fought for first place with the team of the Seminary, called simply “the popes.”

Matches were played in Sokolniki, on the 4th radial alley. Wild, rough football was played on Khodynka Field.

In the autumn of 1916, the idea arose to build a pitch for the football team of the Russian Gymnastic Society (RGO). Andrei Starostin recalls:

“My brother, Nikolai, was keen on speed skating on the Patriarch's Ponds. He mixed with the famous speed skaters of the Russian Gymnastic Society. The RGO cultivated football but had no ground of its own.”

Nikolai then proposed to the Society's board that they lease a thieves' wasteland in Presnya, known as Goryuchka. Goryuchka was a kind of casino of Moscow's criminal underworld, a summer branch of Shirokovka, a den located in Bolshoi Tishinsky Lane.

The main sponsor of the football ground on Goryuchka was Shustov, head of the famous cognac firm and financial partner of the Russian Gymnastic Society.

Goryuchka was, in effect, the birthplace of the future Starostin Spartak. The team they formed would change several names before, in 1935, taking the name Spartak at the brothers' initiative.

Alexander Starostin was Spartak's first captain. In 1937, he passed the armband to the next brother, Andrei. The youngest, Pyotr, played for Spartak as right half-back.

Forward Nikolai Starostin, by the time the club was called Spartak, was captain of the USSR national team. In 1936 he stopped playing. But it was from that moment that a new stage of his football career began. He returned to his original profession as a manager.

For the coaching post at Spartak he invited a foreign specialist, the Czech Antonín Fivébr, who had previously coached Spanish clubs, including the famous Valencia.

Using the clout of Komsomol Central Committee General Secretary Kosarev, Nikolai Starostin tapped the huge resources of Promkoooperatsiya (Industrial Co-ops) to finance the Spartak sports society he had founded.

Spartak would never be a departmental militarised structure, unlike Dynamo, founded in 1923 on Dzerzhinsky's personal initiative.

On 16 June 1937, the Basque national team (Baskonia) arrived in Moscow. They played Lokomotiv – 5:1. Then they beat Dynamo, 2:1.

The Basques had an entirely new tactic. They played only with the then-fashionable W-formation – the double-V. Two of the five forwards were pulled back; these were the inside forwards. The centre-forward was pushed up front, at the point of the W. The forward line became broken. The attack more mobile. Meanwhile, we still played “five in a line.”

A rematch attempt by Dynamo ended again in a Basque victory, 7:4. And then Spartak became everyone's last hope.

Arguments over the starting line-up went on around the clock. Not only the coaching council sat in session. Famous Spartak fans joined the discussion – Moscow Art Theatre actor Mikhail Yanshin, writers Yuri Olesha and Lev Kassil.

On the eve of the match, Nikolai Starostin was involved in a serious car accident: his wife was badly injured.

On the day of the match, the Spartak players got stuck in a traffic jam on their way to the stadium. They changed right in their cars and went straight onto the pitch. And they beat the Basques 6:2.

The Dynamo leadership – that is, the NKVD leadership – took this Spartak victory as a personal insult.

After the match came the awards ceremony. Nikolai received the Order of Lenin. Alexander, the Order of the Red Banner of Labour. Andrei, the Badge of Honour.

Starostin would write:

“This banquet was a feast in time of plague. Across the country rolled the avalanche of the 1937 repressions. Hundreds of athletes, many close to me, had been arrested. They arrested Volodya Strepikheev, who had the misfortune to referee that match with the Basques which Dynamo lost. They arrested the best referee and official of that time, Viktor Ryabokon of Lokomotiv. They arrested skiers. At the same time, rumours were spread to compromise the repressed.”

Starostin writes:

“I already knew then: the more incredible a rumour, the more readily the ordinary man is prepared to believe it.”

In 1938–39, Spartak did the golden double – they won both the Cup and the national championship.

In 1938, Beria became head of the NKVD and, accordingly, honorary chairman of Dynamo.

Starostin met Beria in Vyshinsky’s office. The former procurator-general Vyshinsky, in 1939 deputy chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars, oversaw sport.

Nikolai Starostin recalls Beria at that meeting:

“He had become bloated without limits; for an average height, he weighed clearly over a hundred kilos. A swollen face, his neck with numerous shapeless folds spilling out of his shirt collar, lips always wet and greasy. And his eyes – green, bulging, crab eyes. Try as you might, it was impossible to catch anything human in those large pupils.”

Beria attended almost every match involving a Dynamo team.

Dynamo player Vasily Trofimov, in Metropol – then Moscow’s most bohemian restaurant – told Andrei Starostin, Mikhail Yanshin and Yuri Olesha about a conversation between Beria and the Dynamo coach.

“We have a problem in defence,” said the coach.

Beria cut him off:

“Maybe we should put a machine-gun company in defence for you? That can be arranged. Only keep in mind that your backs will also be in their sights. I don’t advise you to forget that.”

In 1939, in the USSR Cup semi-final, Dynamo Tbilisi played Spartak. Spartak won 1:0. Two weeks later they beat Leningrad’s Stalinec and took the Cup. A month later, Starostin learned that Dynamo Tbilisi had arrived to replay the semi-final against Spartak.

The chairman of the Committee for Physical Culture, Snegov, confirmed:

“Yes, despite Spartak’s victory in the Cup, there is an order to replay the semi-final.”

Starostin went to the Central Committee. At department-head level he was told:

“Comrade Starostin, the decision to replay the game has been taken.”

Starostin objected:

“That’s impossible. Replaying a semi-final after the final – that is a precedent unheard of in sport.”

“It is not for you, Comrade Starostin, to decide what is possible and what is not. You will answer for carrying out this decision with your party card.”

“I am not a party member,” replied Starostin.

That evening, Central Committee secretary Shcherbakov phoned Starostin:

“The game will have to be replayed. There is an instruction that cannot but be carried out.”

Fifty years later, Starostin would describe this replay in a way that clearly goes beyond the genre of memoir. It is a brilliant commentary, delivered at the pace of a live broadcast. And it shows how deeply he felt that match and how clearly he understood that everything that happened later was, one way or another, connected to what happened on the pitch in 1939.

In the replay, Spartak would beat Dynamo 3:2.

In that same 1939, Beria submitted to Council of People’s Commissars chairman Molotov a warrant for the arrest of Nikolai Starostin.

Starostin writes:

“Something unforeseen occurred. Molotov did not sign the arrest warrant.”

Molotov’s daughter went to the same school as Starostin’s daughter, they were friends, and Molotov’s wife, Polina Zhemchuzhina, knew this. Starostin would later say:

“Perhaps that’s why Molotov’s hand wavered.”

All the Starostin brothers were arrested in 1942. Later, the husbands of their sisters and close family friends were also taken.

Nikolai was placed in solitary confinement in the inner prison at Lubyanka.

On the cell wall was scratched a phrase:

“Fedot, don’t believe the investigator.”

Starostin would encounter these words in other prisons and transit points.

“Fedot, don’t believe the investigator” – it is a phrase as short as a cry, but utterly clear and complete for anyone reading it in Stalin’s dungeons. In it is the desire to remain un-slandered, to say: I held out, I didn’t denounce anyone. Or, if I couldn’t hold out and signed false testimony, it was only because they tortured me and beat out my last strength – and so, in any case, ‘don’t believe the investigator’ and ‘forgive me.’

At first, the investigator Rassypinsky forced Starostin to confess that he and his brothers were preparing a terrorist act against Stalin during the 1937 parade. Then they accused him of embezzling a wagonload of textiles. Then of publicly praising bourgeois sport.

Later Starostin would say:

“During the time I spent at Lubyanka I understood that the slightest absurdity in that office was worth at least ten years.”

The youngest brother, Pyotr, arrived at the camp from Lubyanka with two tubercular cavities in his lungs – the result of beatings during interrogations. He would be operated on only after his rehabilitation.

Alexander would be lucky: he had a lazy investigator, who simply waited for the testimony that other investigators tortured out of other prisoners.

For Andrei, torture by sleep deprivation caused damage to his vestibular apparatus. After Lubyanka he spent a month and a half in the hospital of Butyrki prison, where he had to learn to walk again.

In 1948, all the Starostin brothers were in camps.

In 1948, the war had been over for three years – on the calendar. In reality, things were different.

Workers who had been evacuated along with factories to the east and who had worked day and night throughout the war for the defence effort were forbidden to return to their home towns.

From letters by workers to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet:

“Our families were not evacuated with us. Now the war is over – let us go back to our children.”

A skilled worker, Kozlov, wrote:

“Our plant was evacuated to the Urals. Let me live out my years in my family – I ask nothing more of you.”

Attempts at collective action by workers were recorded. The party committee of the city of Chkalov examined a collective letter from workers at the Avtozapchast plant complaining about harsh working and living conditions. The committee concluded that the workers had taken an “anti-party path.” The facts set out in the letter were declared “slander against the party and soviet organs.”

Mass demands to be allowed home came from workers at the Chelyabinsk Tractor Plant, which produced tanks during the war. There were 6,000 Leningraders, 4,500 people from Kharkov, 2,000 from Stalingrad and 11,000 men mobilised from the army there.

The situation was the same in Omsk.

Criminal liability was introduced for fleeing home. It remained in force until 1956.

Letter from a worker at the Miass Automobile Plant:

“They feed us worse than during the war – a bowl of watery soup and two spoonfuls of oat porridge, and that’s for a whole day for an adult.”

Reply from a plant director to workers asking for better food:

“You are not Soviet people. Soviet people don’t eat much.”

In the air of 1948, one idea was everywhere: to survive, you had to steal. Prison did not frighten people. There, you could get a piece of bread.

Khrushchev, then the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine, recalls how he informed Stalin about the famine and cannibalism, and how Stalin reacted:

“Softness! They are deceiving you; they report such things on purpose to make you pity them and force you to spend the reserves.”

In 1948, the food situation in the country became utterly chaotic. A ration-card system was spontaneously re-introduced all over the country, except for a few large cities.

The famine of 1946–1948, caused by this second wave of Stalin’s grain requisitions, provoked a mass flight of rural population to small towns, which were themselves already short of food. This process would continue.

Kolkhoz farmers, from whom all the grain had been taken for two years, now tried to work only the minimum of workdays; they were no longer interested in work on the collective fields. Even the threat of court could not force them to labour for nothing.

Moreover, during the war, in occupied territories many peasants had returned to individual farming. They did not want to go back to the kolkhoz. Individual farming was the only way to survive.

The authorities reacted reflexively – that is, solely with coercive measures.

On 2 June 1948, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR issued a decree “On the deportation to remote regions of persons maliciously evading work in agriculture and leading an antisocial parasitic way of life.”

People were deported mainly to Siberia – both individual farmers and kolkhoz members.

In peasant memory, the 2 June 1948 decree is the “second dekulakization.” Once again, private livestock and equipment were confiscated. The decision on deportation, as in 1929, was taken at village meetings. Those to be deported were arrested on the spot. Peasants were torn from their land and, as usual, sent nowhere, to no one knows where.

The Stalinist system rejected the most mature and experienced cadres in agriculture – those who were capable of hard, independent work in the countryside even under Soviet power.

In 1948, that progressive crisis of agriculture began from which Soviet power would never be able to escape.

Sometimes life in exile was better than in the kolkhoz.

People deported from the kolkhoz named after Budyonny and now living in the settlement of Batygann in the Verkhoyansk district of Yakutia wrote home:

“We earn big money, we are very satisfied, we invite you to join us.”

The local district party committee judged that this letter discredited the deportation decree, that it was the result of a loss of revolutionary vigilance and weak censorship at the place of exile.

“Special settlers” were sent to Krasnoyarsk Territory, to the Irkutsk, Chita and Tyumen regions, and to Khabarovsk Territory.

In that same 1948, on 26 January, a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR was published concerning the peoples deported to remote regions of the Soviet Union during the Great Patriotic War. The decree said:

“During the resettlement of Chechens, Karachais, Ingush, Kalmyks, etc., no time limits for their exile were determined. In order to strengthen the regime of resettlement, it is established that the resettlement is permanent. For unauthorised departure – 20 years of hard labour.”

There were many special settlers in the places where the political prisoner Starostin coached his football team.

In the camp where he was serving his sentence, the main law ran:

“Survive, and outlive those who put you here.”

All four Starostin brothers survived, and outlived them.

