

THE KOLYMA ROAD & THE MASK OF SORROW: REMEMBERING THE GULAG IN POST-SOVIET MAGADAN

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ABSTRACT // This essay explores the relationship between place and memory in the former Gulag periphery of Magadan in northeastern Russia. Located on the coast of the Okhotsk Sea, the city of Magadan emerged as a gateway to the sparsely populated region after the discovery of gold in the late 1920s. Today, a huge monument, the Mask of Sorrow, raised upon a hill on the margin of the city, commemorates the hundreds of thousands of prisoners who were shipped to Magadan during the dictatorship of Stalin to work in the region's newly established gold mines. Crucial to the region's development was the construction of the legendary Kolyma Road between the port of Magadan and the industrial areas at the upper Kolyma River. Built by prisoners under the most adverse conditions, this road is often referred to as 'Road of Bones'. This essay demonstrates how the Mask of Sorrow and the Kolyma Road, during particular commemorative events, participate in the enactment of a historical landscape that bears the potential for a ritual return of the victims of the Gulag.

The columns of prisoners marched around the clock day after day right through the town from the port to the disinfection center... In the predawn mist of the early morning, when Tolya walked to school, one after another those columns would come flowing toward him. Their characteristic sound was the shuffling of hundreds of shoe soles, the muffled, indistinguishable talk, the shouts of the guards, the growling of the dogs. (Vasilii Aksenov, cited in Hochschild 1994: 247)

When 16-year-old Vassilii Aksenov (Tolya) joined his mother in Magadan in 1948, he soon got used to the sight of prisoners being convoyed every day through this isolated city in the Far Northeast of Russia. His mother, the famous Gulag author Evgenia Ginzburg, had been released from the local camps but was required to stay in Magadan for another five years. The last time she had seen her son was when she had left the four-year-old back in her Kazan flat on her arrest ten years earlier. For Aksenov, who became a famous author himself, the streets of Magadan had remained with him by means of an image of hundreds of shoes shuffling past him day after day. When he included this scene in his autobiographical novel *The Burn (Ozhog)*, first published in Italy in 1980, he tried to refer back to a place that had once seized him as a world apart from anything he could have imagined before.¹ Trying to remember and to describe the unspeakable, Aksenov returns to the evocative image of hundreds of prisoners anonymously passing him on the street, without either of us knowing in detail who those prisoners were and where they went. I have chosen this scene, because it introduces well the main question of this text: How does a city like Magadan, which has come to represent suffering and death in the Gulag more than any other place, communicate in time? I want to follow this question with regard to people's experiences of the past during particular commemorative events and in relation to the preservation of memory in monuments and in the region's landscape. Here I am particularly interested in the role of monuments and landscape for postcatastrophic memory, such as in relation to the Gulag but also in consideration of the more recent collapse of the Soviet Union.

THE ROAD UP TO THE KOLYMA RIVER AS A CHALLENGE TO POST-SOVIET MEMORY

During the years of the Gulag Magadan functioned as the doorway to one of the most isolated and most dreaded punishment regions of the Soviet Union, according to Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, 'the greatest and most famous island in the Gulag Archipelago' (2003: xv). The Gulag functioned as a bureaucratic acronym for a special police department, created in 1929, that oversaw the administration of all corrective labour camps and labour settlements in the former Soviet Union (*Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei*). At the same time, the term 'Gulag' has also become synonymous with the entire system of excessive punishment and mass terror under the rule of Joseph Sta-



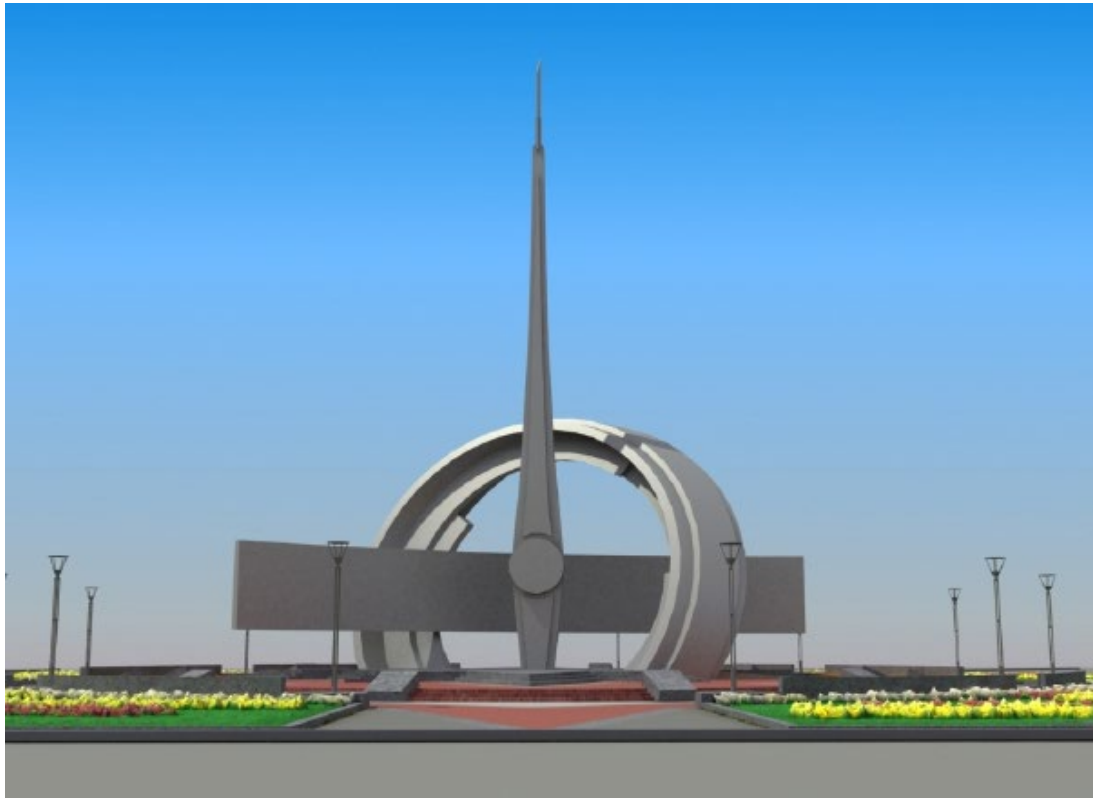
The Russian Northeast, map section from U.S.S.R. - Terrain and Transportation, 1974. (Image courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries at Austin)

lin. From 1929 until 1953, when Stalin died, estimates indicate that 24 million people were either sentenced to prison labour or exiled to remote areas of the USSR (Applebaum 2003: 4-5). Besides the political repression of the so-called 'enemies of the people' (*vrag naroda*), forced labour and colonisation also functioned as a crucial means to the country's industrialisation and collectivisation process in those years. Only prisoners and exiles could be forced to work and settle, for example, in Russia's isolated and inhospitable Far Northeast.

Located on the coast of the Okhotsk Sea, Magadan started to function as a gateway to the region after the discovery of gold at the upper Kolyma River during the late 1920s. In 1932, the sparsely populated region was taken under the control of a special local construction trust (*Dal'stroi*), charged by the Soviet government with the region's rapid development by means of a local forced labour system (*Sevostlag*). According to regional archival documents it is estimated that around 870,000 prisoners were shipped to Magadan in order to build roads and work in the region's gold mines.² Although the department of the Gulag was dissolved in 1960 and most of the camps had been dismantled after Stalin's death, the legacy of the Gulag as a social and cultural phenomenon continues up to the present day. During Soviet times any official memory of the Stalin Terror was suppressed. Only with the beginning of Gorbachev's project of reform, known as *glasnost* (transparency/openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring), in the 1980s, there was an outpouring of personal accounts and memoirs from underneath the surface of silence which suddenly started to be communicated in public. But even then, remembering and representing a catastrophic past has often been a painful and impossible process. One major concern in the memory of the Gulag,

¹ See also: John Pohlmann: Conversations with Vassily Aksenov. <http://www.sovlit.net/conversationswithaksyonov/> [03/10/2013].

² For numbers of prisoners and victims of the Kolyma Gulag, see for example: Panikarov (2007: 267-283) who bases his account on the work of two local historians: Batsaev and Kozlov (2002).



Model of future monument by Kramarenko



Berzin's bust in front of city admin

including the juridical question of responsibility, remains the challenge of coming to terms with the incommensurable dimension of suffering and death that had been hidden away during Soviet times. For example, how can individuals and the Russian public today commemorate the large number of victims of the Gulag, most of whom disappeared anonymously and without a proper burial?

When Aksenov joined his mother in exile, Magadan mainly consisted of watch towers, barbed wire fences and prison barracks. Only the two main streets, *Prospekt Lenina* and *Prospekt Stalina*, had barely been built up, reminding him of a real city. In contrast, the road up to the Kolyma River (500 kilometres) had already been in operation for more than a decade. This contradiction of a poorly developed capital city, compared with the road, which had been forced onto the region's difficult landscape within only a few years, clearly underlines the priority of the Dal'stroi construction enterprise. It shows that Magadan above all functioned as a transit base for prisoners who after their arrival on ship were sent further on to the mining areas at the Kolyma River, with the Kolyma Road serving as a key infrastructure in the region's industrial management. It was this transient aura of a tragic-heroic construction site, exclusively focused on the region's mineral exploitation through the excessive employment of forced human labour, which Aksenov became aware of when he first saw the columns of prisoners flowing towards him. The shuffling of hundreds of shoes passing him on the street every day symbolises the constant arrival of new shiploads of prisoners in Magadan. It metaphorically produces the image of a place that constantly vanishes away into the region, but also refuses hold in terms of memory when it comes to remember all those who never came back from the mines. The historical experience of the Gulag is thus reflected in the region's material landscape and speaks in the very architecture of the road itself, where the city's main street, *Prospekt Lenina*, flows into the region's highway, without any major interruption, but in a single, straight line disappearing towards the Kolyma River.

There have been recent discussions in the local media concerning the idea of creating a new image for Magadan's future. One important aspect of the debate relates to the construction of a new monument highlighting the beginning of the Kolyma Road in Magadan. Such monument perhaps would interrupt the constant flight of the city's main street into the region, helping its residents to identify their city as a place on its own. In one of our many conversations, a local geologist, who has been living and working in Magadan for a long time, introduced me to his own thoughts regarding the possible shape and message of such monument. One Saturday morning in May 2012, we left the city in order to spend the day out exploring the surrounding landscape. Passing a roundabout that could be seen as a kind of demarcation between city and region, Boris M. Sedov suggested that in the centre of this roundabout the road could simulate a tunnel, going underneath the road's surface with columns of hu-

man figures disappearing into the ground. This kind of memorial montage, according to him, would be able to communicate both the region's tragic Gulag but also its gold mining past. However, following the discussions in the local news and talking to one of the leading artists who has actually been involved in the planning of the new monument, the dominating idea has come to concentrate on the commemoration of the region's geological opening and industrial construction without referring to its forced labour system. According to the artist, Evgenii P. Kramarenko, the region's tragic past has already been addressed by another monument, the Mask of Sorrow, as well located at the margin of the city and speaking exclusively to the former Gulag. The new monument, replicating a magnetic compass to represent the geological expeditions at the beginning of the region's Soviet development, shall address the other, more heroic, side of the region's history. Significantly, the colossal monument of the Mask of Sorrow has often been identified by local residents during our conversations as being ugly and ill-proportioned. This aesthetic dislike of the city's most famous Gulag memorial, however, was often accompanied by a more substantial critique or resistance against the existing view, mainly from outside the region, of associating Magadan first of all and often exclusively with the terror of the Gulag.

ENTERING THE FIELD AND WORKING WITH THE REGION'S LANDSCAPE

When I started my field research in September 2011, my mind was filled with images from the memoirs and personal accounts of former Kolyma prisoners. One of the things that I wanted to do first was to explore the city of Magadan as the original background of those events that happened more than half a century ago. However, at least in the beginning, my mental representations hardly coincided with the material reality of the present city. While walking along its streets, Magadan did not automatically reveal to me its Gulag past. The place, of course, has changed since the local forced labour system had been dissolved during the 1950s. The prison barracks have been replaced by common tenement houses. The watch towers and barbed wire fences have disappeared in the process of reconstructing and redefining Magadan after Stalin's death.

Despite the region's on-going economic and social decline after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Magadan continues to exist as an important gateway to the region and as administrative as well as economic centre in the Russian Northeast. According to its residents, the worst effects of postsocialist transformation, such as food supply shortages and unemployment, have now been overcome. After the region's population had dropped by 50 percent during the 1990s, the city of Magadan has regained a certain degree of economic stability within the last ten years. Most of the people I interviewed have lived in Magadan for a long time, but not long enough to have personally

experienced the Gulag. Often they came to the region as contract workers, following the Soviet propaganda of the North and attracted by higher salaries and other financial and social benefits. During our conversations I became aware that most of my interlocutors had strong local identities that had been created through their personal participation in the region's industrial and ideological construction and as part of the process of overcoming the region's inhospitable conditions. I started to understand, why my interlocutors sometimes felt rather frustrated when my questions kept asking about the region's Gulag while ignoring their own historical experiences and sense of place. Even though they often viewed my questions unfavourably, they generously kept inviting me to their homes and often took me on trips into the region in order to share their lives and their beautiful natural surroundings with me. During these experiences, I learned to read the actual city how it is today, while the Gulag of the past often entirely disappeared from my mind.

And yet, the longer I stayed in Magadan and the more I got to know its people, I also increasingly felt the hidden but unavoidable presence of the region's tragic past. Walking daily its streets and reading about the city's history in the local library and in the regional archive gradually resulted in me having a more intimate relationship with Magadan. Slowly, I began to see its places beyond their immediate appearance also following their traces back into the past. This spatial-temporal conversation was increasingly influenced through the accounts of some of the few remaining ex-prisoners, to whom I was kindly introduced at official meetings organised by the local Caritas and the Magadan Committee of the Victims of Political Repressions. Listening to their narratives and trying to catch a glimpse of their lives would sometimes bring back into existence for me this 'other place' related to the region's Gulag. According to Eric Hirsch in *The Anthropology of Landscape*,

[t]here is the landscape we initially see and a second landscape which is produced through local practice and which we come to recognize and understand through fieldwork and through ethnographic description and interpretation (1996: 2).

I believe that this process of recognition and the conjunction of different spatial-temporal settings in one and the same place is what I have experienced during my own fieldwork in Magadan. However, interestingly, Hirsch relates the subjective experience of the researcher during fieldwork to a more general pattern in which landscape appears and interacts as a cultural and physical surrounding in any local context. Trying to go beyond the Western convention of landscape as an ideal representation of the material world, Hirsch suggests an understanding of landscape that builds on the relationship between those ideal representations and the actual world of everyday social life:

There is a relationship here between an ordinary,

workaday life and an ideal imagined existence, vaguely connected to, but still separate from, that of the everyday... Defined in this way, then, 'landscape' entails a relationship between the 'foreground' and 'background' of social life (Hirsch 1996: 3).

Again I believe that this conceptual distinction between foreground and background landscape corresponds well with the different spatial-temporal readings of place in and around the city of Magadan. This distinction helps me to enter a discussion of memory and place in Magadan, bearing in mind my own limitations in understanding the region's historical background, but also in relation to the different social and political enactments of the past in the region itself.

THE MASK OF SORROW AND THE ENACTMENT OF A HISTORICAL LANDSCAPE

Since its inauguration in 1996, the Mask of Sorrow is the most famous Gulag memorial site in the entire region. Situated at the margin of the city by the Kolyma Road, the monument commemorates the location of a former transit camp where prisoners used to be taken after their arrival in Magadan and before their departure to the region's industrial area. Raised upon a hill and resembling a human face, the huge concrete sculpture looms above the city and watches all over the surrounding landscape. Viewed from close up, tears in the form of smaller masks can be seen dropping from its left eye. The other half of the face is arranged around a barren window that is underlined by an anonymous prison number: И-О-937. According to the author of the monument, Ernst Neizvestnyi, the mask's face divides into two sections, one of which refers to Gulag punishment and incarceration in the past, while the other also relates to the act of mourning and the obligation of memory in the present (Raizman 2003).

Neizvestnyi, a Russian émigré living in the US, was invited to Magadan in order to discuss the monument on the initiative of the local representative of the Russian Human Rights Organisation Memorial in 1989. In the following years, while a great part of the region's population was struggling with the effects of post-Soviet transformation, the new monument was vividly discussed in the local newspapers. According to the local historian David Raizman (2003), not everyone supported the idea of an expensive art-memory project in the time of economic crisis. In the end, the monument was co-sponsored by the federal government in Moscow and the regional government in Magadan, but also supported by other private funding initiatives in Russia and the US. However, the long public debate preceding the creation of the monument was not only a financial issue. It also conveyed the emergence of a new political discourse that was strongly affected by questions related to the past and finally started to take on itself the task of coming to terms with the so-

cial catastrophe of the Gulag. According to the architect of the monument, Kamil Kozaev, the Mask of Sorrow is a clear statement to the world that Russia is willing to repent for the atrocities of the Gulag (Raizman 2003). However, comparing the on-going debate of state-sponsored memory in Germany after the Holocaust, James Young (1992: 270) argues that there exists a 'paralyzing ambiguity' in state-sponsored memory when it comes to the commemoration of the victims of crimes which the state itself has perpetrated. In Russia this ambiguity is further complicated, because terror and violence were organised by the state arbitrarily against its own people. The social catastrophe of the Gulag, therefore, involves a problem that Alexander Etkind has termed as 'unjustified repressions', referring to 'senseless acts of violence which do not specify agency and therefore, elude responsibility' (Etkind 2009: 184). Both Young and Etkind demonstrate that in contrast to remembering historical victory or triumph, the memory of self-inflicted genocide and mass-murder poses a completely different challenge to the task-outline of a related monument.

The first new memorial in Magadan during *perestroika* therefore was not dedicated to the victims of the local Gulag but instead came to honour the first boss of the Dal'stroi company, Eduard P. Berzin, who had also been in charge of the local forced labour system. He was arrested in 1937 under the accusation of espionage and sentenced to death in 1938. His bronze bust, mounted in 1989 in front of the local city administration building, has opened a path of memory that will not be easy to tread. It instead allows different narratives to come in that perpetuate the ambiguity of the past in the present. By emphasising Berzin's relatively moderate conduct as the region's chief executor (in comparison to his successors) and highlighting his posthumous rehabilitation in 1956, commemorating him thus still takes a critical distance to the Stalin Terror. It also allows local residents to hold on to their settler identities in line with the region's celebrated construction during socialism. However, the final realisation of the Mask of Sorrow demonstrates how uneasy this narrative of the region's conquest remains with the hundreds and thousands of victims of the local Gulag. Today the Mask of Sorrow plays an important role in the local culture of memory, because it consequently keeps addressing unpopular questions about the atrocities perpetrated in the region's Gulag. In the following paragraphs I want to show how this often difficult communication with the region's past is facilitated by the ritual enactment of a historical landscape that otherwise tends to remain hidden behind the city's actual everyday appearance. The very ritual enactment of this landscape however shows that there exists a constant relationship not only between the foreground and background of social life, but also between the actuality of the present and the memory of the past.

Here I want to follow Neizvestnyi's dual interpretation of the monument as representing the suffering of the prisoners in the past and as addressing also the painful process

of mourning in the present. In the formal arrangement of the monument this duality is turned into a separation, when the outline of the sculpture follows a large cross dividing one half of the face from the other. Considering the problem of memory in the particular context of the Gulag, this material division of the mask, at least in my own reading of the monument, metaphorically relates to a disturbing silence between the living and the dead. During my own visits to the monument, this silence was often increased by the effect of a surrounding landscape that found itself in a particular communication with the elevated sculpture. In one direction, gazing out into the distance of the Okhotsk Sea, the Mask of Sorrow holds a kind of mystic contact with the Nagaev Bay, where the prisoners used to arrive on ship during the Dal'stroi period. On the reverse side of the monument a young woman on her knees, with her face covered by her hands, is turned towards the region's interior with the fateful Kolyma Road disappearing towards the Kolyma River. The kneeling woman is joined above her head by a defaced prisoner on a metal cross that seems to fall into the same direction. According to Kozaev, the whole scene on the reverse side of the monument resembles an open church that flows into the surrounding landscape and evokes the idea of an unbounded cemetery for the dead (Raizman 2003).

Together, the Kolyma Road and the Mask of Sorrow constitute a remarkable landscape of memory relating to the region's former Gulag. However this temporally charged landscape does not reveal itself in a simple representational view. Rather it should be understood, with regard to Hirsch's idea of several landscapes interacting with each other simultaneously, as a potential background that is only revealed under particular circumstances. The enactment of the past begins at the Mask of Sorrow that functions as a mediator between different landscapes. The region's background however only begins to speak when other conditions join together as well. In the following paragraphs, I would like to illustrate through an example how this spatial-temporal communication takes place on the occasion of a particular commemorative event. Before I start my ethnographic description, a few more words should be said about the conceptual relationship between memory and place.

The notion of place proposed here does not derive from rational geometry, as outlined, for example, by René Descartes in his *La Géométrie* (2001 [1637]), indicating a spatial site within a three-dimensional-coordinate system. Rather place in this context follows a phenomenological understanding, as advanced, for instance, by Edward Casey (1987) in relation to the Aristotelian notion of containing place as a medium that holds its contents steadily within its own boundaries and thus allows for a certain continuance in time. Considering the relationship between place and memory, Casey asserts that 'it is the stabilizing persistence of place as a container of experiences that contributes so powerfully to its intrinsic memorability' (Casey 1987: 186). However, the notion of place in its



Mask of Sorrow



Magadan and Nagaiev Bay, Sep. 2011



Nagaev Bay in Magadan



Marking the Road of Memory through Magadan on 30 October 2011 (Photo by V. Smirnova)

containing function does not imply that the landscape of Magadan and memories of the past do not change. Bearing in mind the idea of different perspectives based on diverse experiences simultaneously at work in one and the same physical location, place and landscape can contain more than one experience of memory and thus must vary accordingly. Consequently, place and landscape are understood as a continuous relationship, as proposed earlier with regard to Hirsch (1996), between different poles of experience that interact but also hold certain tensions with each other. While the containing function of place provides for a certain continuity of experience over time (Casey), the tension within landscape in respect to its different foreground and background qualities (Hirsch) also accounts for the disharmonies involved in the human spatial-temporal encounter. While Casey allows me to understand Magadan as a place that continues in time through the accumulation of historical experience, Hirsch helps me to address the region's historical disjunctions followed by particular problems of memory.

GULAG REMEMBRANCE DAY: THE RETURN OF THE DEAD

In the morning of 30 October 2011, the Russian Remembrance Day of the Victims of Political Repressions, a small group of former prisoners, their families and friends, some representatives of the city administration and others, including myself, meet in front of the local House of Culture in order to join the yearly procession by bus from Nagaev Bay to the Mask of Sorrow. The idea is to commemorate the prisoners' arrival in Magadan and to join them on their walk all the way through the city until the former transit camp at Kilometre Four of the Kolyma Road. Starting off at Nagaev Bay, the two buses slowly followed along the streets of *Kommuny* and *Sovetskaia*, stopping over at the former disinfection centre, and continuing on via *Prospekt Lenina* and the Kolyma Road. For those on the bus, who were not familiar with the region's Gulag past, a local historian illustrated the journey with details about how prisoners used to be convoyed along these streets, with numbers pinned to their backs and in the company of barking dogs. At Kilometre Four on the Kolyma Road the bus turned left onto a small serpentine road approaching the monument from below. By then the atmosphere on the bus had grown increasingly intense. People were singing a popular song composed by Gulag prisoners, *Ia pomniu tot Vaninskii port* (*I remember that port in Vanino*), in which the final trip to Magadan is described as a journey to a different planet baring any hope of a return. When we finally arrived at the foot of the Mask of Sorrow, most people on the bus had started to be under the impact of a particular transformation that would draw everybody closer into the emerging space of a commemorative landscape.

Studying the impact of monuments on the flow of time, Mikhail Yampolsky (1995: 96) argues that 'any monument creates around itself... a sort of mystical protective zone... that is apparently connected with the experi-

ence of temporal metamorphosis'. This temporal effect is based on the monument's exceptional arrangement in relation to the surrounding landscape, its elevated position and colossal proportions, which, according to Yampolsky, keep the visitor at a functional distance and start to act upon the flow of time when approaching the monument. Relating Yampolsky's argument to the ritual bus tour from Nagaev Bay to the Mask of Sorrow, people's intense reactions on the bus while approaching the monument can partly be explained by this transformation of time. In other words, approaching the Mask of Sorrow by bus has gradually prepared for a breakdown of linear time, that is, of the distinction between past and present. From people's emotional reactions, interpreted in the wider context of my fieldwork experience, I understood that some of us on the bus had started to experience the past in more immediate ways. Long since forgotten events had reappeared on their troubled minds. Distant memories had returned through their reacting bodies. People's lives had joined together although being separated chronologically. The gradual collapse of time in the process of approaching the monument can be seen as a crucial element accompanying the ceremony at the Mask of Sorrow. The arrival at the monument represents one important stage in this process of spatial and temporal approximation. People had started to gather right next to the Mask of Sorrow, while the gigantic sculpture was looming above their heads. Out of this spatial contrast, the monument had grown into the incommensurable and started to play on its transcendental qualities.

On the next stage, the revival of the past and the commemoration of the dead continued with the ritual reading of names from a local book, called *Za nami pridut korabli...* (*The ships will come for us...*), published in 1999. Also referred to as Martirolog, this book includes a list of 7,546 registered cases of people who had been sentenced to death by non-judicial local Troika commissions.³ Following the example of a tradition that had started at the Solovetskii Memorial Stone in Moscow in the early 1990s, volunteers read aloud an alphabetical selection of names from this book. The performance was led by the coordinator of the initiative *Zabveniu ne podlezhat* (*We must not forget!*), Vera I. Smirnova, who afterwards in a conversation with me emphasised the importance of establishing this interpersonal link between the performing volunteer and the dead person on the list whose name is read out in public. This focused communication between the living and the dead seemed to create a kind of bond between most of us who were present at this reading performance. At least during the reciting of those names from this Book of Memory most attendees of the ritual, despite their different personal backgrounds, appeared to be part of one commemorative community.

² Special Troika Commissions (consisting of three people) functioned as an extra-judicial executive organ of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). They were employed as an instrument for quick execution and punishment during the Stalin Regime.

Once the ritual reading of the names of the dead was concluded, the Mask of Sorrow hill was dominated by an awe-inspiring silence that was only interrupted by the loud chimes of a bell from the barren window in the monument, introducing the ultimate stage of the ceremony. Following the call of the bell, people moved even closer towards the mask, while the first began to slowly climb up a final staircase right into the sculpture's face. Through a small door people then disappeared into the monument, passing through a reconstructed prison cell inside, before reappearing again on the other side of the monument. After the chimes of the bell had stopped, the ritual procession was joined by an unearthly voice forcefully reciting poems that had been composed by prisoners in the camps.⁴ Although coming from loudspeakers nearby, this voice, by some technical effect, appeared from a far distance, turning the monument into a liminal pathway to the other-world.

After having followed the prisoners' route through the streets of Magadan, and after having called the victims from a position high above the city, it seemed only logical that people now were going to 'meet' the dead in the sacral womb of the sculpture. Indeed, the reconstructed prison cell inside the monument was dark and narrow. People had to pass through this intimate space alone, one by one. This isolated encounter, hidden away from the mass gathering outside the monument, appeared as the final instant of experiencing the past in this way. Joining the procession through the mask, I was partly able to experience myself the mystical potential of this moment inside the monument. The people immediately preceding and following me through the reconstructed prison cell were silent and, as far as I could see, carefully tried to get a sense of their 'unusual' surroundings. The protective zone of the monument, speaking in Yampolsky's words, had collapsed under the effect of 'traumatic proximity', sacrificing all spatial and temporal boundaries. Human penetration into the monumental space had finally resulted, even if not for all participants, in a mystical union between people and their spatial-temporal environment. The past had fallen into the present, while the dead were reuniting with the living. What truly happened inside the monument, however, cannot really be expressed through ethnographic description. This ultimate reality inside the Mask of Sorrow remains a privilege of unique communication, leaving behind but a potential silence.

...we feel ourselves merging with a place, which on this very account becomes invisible, dissolved in its own luminosity, disintegrated as a discriminate object. We experience this objectlessness in moments of overwhelming joy or fear or abandon... Then place becomes ours at last; but in remembering it, we remain beholden to its intrinsic power. (Casey 1987: 200)

⁴ The poems were selected from Suzdal'tsev & Panikarov (eds.) *Polius Liutosti* (2010).



Remembrance Day of the Political Repressions in Magadan, 30 October 2011

CONCLUSIONS ON THE AGENCY OF PLACE AND MONUMENT

After passing through the monument, most of the participants seemed exhausted. Slowly they made their way back to the bus. Randomly interviewed by the local radio *Magadan Efir* right after the ceremony, some involuntarily burst into tears when they tried to answer the interviewer's questions. They were still under the effect of the event, experiencing the proximity of a past that they had learned to control in their everyday lives but that was now depriving them of their very ability to speak. Most of the interviewees had lived in Magadan for a long time, and most of them had someone in their family, mother or father, who had suffered or disappeared in the Gulag (*Magadan Efir*, 1 Nov 2011). According to the radio program following the event, 120 petitions had been sent to Magadan in the running year of 2011, usually inquiring about the reason for an arrest that had taken place more than 60 years ago, or asking for a return of personal belongings to the victim's family. The strongest request, however, which mostly remains unsatisfied, concerns the place of a person's burial. The knowledge of where and how a person died seems to be crucial for relatives or friends in order to deal with the person's death. However, people in Stalin's Russia disappeared *en masse* and often under unknown circumstances. The families did often not know where the arrested had been taken to and if they were still alive. According to Etkind (2009), this uncertainty concerning the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of people has created a haunting condition in

which the missed person is neither dead nor alive and can return as a ghost at any time. This return of the dead is usually linked to the experience of particular places that in one way or another relate to the past. The Mask of Sorrow and the Road of Bones clearly follow this pattern of place and memory.

In 1996, the Mask of Sorrow started to function also in compensation for the absence of other official memorials relating to the disquieting loss of so many people. Its main challenge therefore is the problem of anonymous death. Lists of names of victims, compiled from the archives, at last speak evidence of a person's death and testify to the crimes committed in the past. However, the ritual reading of individual names at particular historical sites reaches beyond the matter of documentation. The ritual, above all, confronts its participants with a social catastrophe in the past and attempts to partly convert this catastrophe through social spectacles of memory during which the 'ghosts of the dead' are finally put to sleep. The Mask of Sorrow here functions as a platform for all sorts of people with their own individual memories and beliefs. The monument's distorted face in this process works as a mirror relating to the country's complicated history. Resembling the anonymity of death itself, the Mask of Sorrow renders a kind of creative silence without imposing any narrative from outside. Confronting the past in this rather open way, the sculpture also generates new discourses and therefore participates in the historical process itself. In other words, the monument functions as a creative means of historical exploration, unmasking the historical event and allowing individual interpretation.

I started this text arguing that memory in the aftermath of the Gulag has developed in its own particular context. Under the condition of postcatastrophe, historical representations in Russia do not follow clear narratives, but are dominated by defamiliarisation and silence (Etkind 2009). This silence, however, does not implicate the absence of language and memory altogether. Rather this silence challenges our ways of reading and understanding the past. I have tried therefore to emphasise the role of place and landscape in the communication of time. The Kolyma Road, for example, does not only reveal the physical transport of prisoners to Magadan and to the Kolyma River. As a metaphor (Road of Bones) it simultaneously explores the transcendental journey between life and death. Hereby the road conveys a particular transience of space and time, which is successfully remembered in images and practices of movement, such as the shuffling of hundreds of shoes along the Kolyma Road or the liminal passage through the monumental body of the Mask of Sorrow. Taking its departure from the prisoners' journey into the netherworld of the Gulag, this final commemorative act also represents a historical experience in its own right, an experience that is not only concerned with the past, but one that tries to establish new ways into the future. ◆

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