

## **Kazakhstan Gulag heritage: dark tourism and selective interpretation**

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# **Kazakhstan Gulag Heritage: Dark Tourism and Selective Interpretation**

Kazakhstan holds some of the most significant Gulag heritage sites however tourism research remains limited. This paper introduces analysis of contrasting sites and considers how some have been developed and others ignored. Selectivity in interpretation is linked to societal amnesia and the collective trauma experienced by the population of Kazakhstan. The paper reaffirms the politicization of heritage in this emergent nation.

Keywords: Gulag tourism, societal amnesia, selective interpretation, heritage, Kazakhstan.

## Introduction

Kazakhstan is the location of some of the most important Gulag<sup>1</sup> commemoration sites of the Soviet period. This includes; museums and monuments located at or near, former incarcerations sites. Research has investigated stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity (Tiberghien, 2018; Tiberghien, Bremner, and Milne, 2018) however dark tourism has received limited attention (Mukashev and Useenova, 2013 and Ford 2017). Gulags had their origins in the Russian Revolution of 1918 and by 1921 there were 83 camps in 43 provinces designed to incarcerate and rehabilitate 'enemies of the people' (Leggett, 1981). Under Stalin, the Gulag's assumed greater prominence particularly during the mass arrests of 1937-38 (see Figure 1). Expansion continued during and after the Second World War and Gulag industrial and agricultural output contributed substantially to the Soviet economy. Some 18 million passed through the Gulag system with a further 6 million deported or exiled (Applebaum, 2003). In 1987, President Gorbachev finally dismantled the system rehabilitating citizens across the former USSR. The remains of element of the Gulag in Kazakhstan forms the basis of consideration of how the society deals with this dissonant heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> Gulag is an acronym, standing for *Glavnoe upravlenie lagerei* although it has come to refer to the range of prison, punishment and transit camps associated with the Soviet era.



Figure 1: Gulag Network in Former USSR (Memorial, 2019)

### **Dark Tourism in the Kazakh context**

Death, suffering, and tourism have been interrelated for centuries and the phenomena was first identified by Lennon and Foley (1996). Academic research includes work on: interpretation (Lennon, 2009); selective commemoration (Lennon 2009; Lennon and Wight 2007), criminology (Botterill and Jones, 2010), literature (Skinner, 2012), dissonant heritage (Ashworth, 1996, Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996; Stone et al, 2018), management (White and Frew, 2013), architecture (Philpott, 2016) and motivations (Poria, Reichel and Biran, 2005, 2006). The relationship is complex; death and killing can be a major deterrent for the development of destinations, yet such acts can become the purpose of visitation in others. Whilst the research on tourist's motivation to visit sites of death is limited the analogous field of tourist death whilst on holiday has

emerged (Cohen, 2009). The response of policy makers and governments to issues of commemoration and commercial development of ‘dark’ sites is variable and fraught with moral ambiguity. Kazakhstan, is no different, but the scale of the Gulag narrative is significant and exploration has been limited. However, it has clear relevance for the Gulag (see Table 1).

<b>Typology of Dark Tourism (Lennon and Foley, 2000)</b>	<b>Site Presence and Relevant Practices in Kazakhstan</b>
Visits to death/disaster sites	Yes
Visits to mass/individual death sites	Yes
Visits to incarceration sites	Yes
Visits to representations/simulations associated with death	Yes
Visits to re-enactments and human interpretation of death sites	Yes

Table1: Dark Tourism and Kazakhstan application

The relationship between pilgrimage and dark tourism has been usefully explored by Collins-Kreiner (2016, 2010) which reveals the similarity in motivations suggesting: “...approaching both categories as a single phenomena, as both stem from the individual’s desire for an experience that will ultimately change his or her life” (Collins-Kreiner 2016, 6)

Such comparison enables the relationship between theories (means of analysis) and phenomena (subjects of analysis) in a flexible mode of knowledge production. Other forms of visitation which Seaton, (1996) refers to as ‘Thanatourism’ can have more limited, less sinister connotations, such as; pilgrimages to the graves of famous authors or visiting battlefields with family associations. In Kazakhstan, the interpretation of such dark heritage is the result of complex interactions between stakeholders. Such

heritage interpretation is contested and the pursuit of ‘accuracy’ is invariably compromised by competing ideologies, funding and other factors. Lowenthal (1998) argued that defining heritage let alone agreeing verifiable truth(s) will invariably remain elusive. Content will be subjectively identified and interpreted according to the will of interest groups (Poiria et al 2006, 2005 and Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). As Seaton (2001) reinforced:

“... Heritage is never a stable, finally completed process but a constantly evolving process of accommodation, adjustment and contestation. This perspective contrasts with that of heritage development as a battle between unproblematic, historical truth and various kinds of bad faith, ranging from commercial to political.”

(Seaton, 2001, p126)

Thus heritage legacies and evidence are not randomly preserved but politically identified and selectively interpreted (Lowenthal, 1996; Dallen and Nyaupane, 2009). The commemoration of heritage in ‘dark’ sites are the result of contrasting perceptions, ideologies and interests. Analysis must consider which heritage is interpreted and developed and what histories are overlooked? The creation of moral spaces and the role of the public sector in commodification and interpretation of dark sites has been considered by Sharpley and Stone (2009). The initial Ground Zero visitor centre, New York, is a public sector developed site that provides sacrality and morality against a terrorist context. Whilst in Northern Ireland, the heritage of the troubles challenges the public sector in terms of funding, marketing and development of sites with visitor appeal (Simone-Chateris and Boyd, 2010). Elsewhere public sector authorities seek to ignore, disguise or evade dark sites for reasons of ideology, development priorities and/

or a selective approach to the past (for discussion of the Lithuanian Jewish context see Lennon and Wight, 2008).

This exploratory research project investigates Kazakhstani Gulag sites through key stakeholders. Interview analysis and site review allowed for content, interpretation and conservation of a range of sites to be considered; Karlag and Alzhir Gulag Museums, Spassk 99, Mamochlino, and Osakarovka (see figure 2 below).



Figure 2: Location of research fieldwork (Barnes, 2011)

Slade (2017) and Trochev (2018) noted that memorialising Gulags is a disputed and politicised issue, throughout the post-Soviet region. Such sites have an important memorial and educative function (Chhabra, 2008) but can also be used to legitimise

political context (Pearce, 1992, Williams 2007). They occupy a dual role in curation and learning, often coloured by content perceived as ‘authentic’ by visitors. (Chhabra, 2008; Pearce, 1992; Prentice, 2007). Tourism to incarceration sites have been reviewed in a range of locations (see Brown, 2009; Strange and Kempa, 2003; Wilson, 2004) and interpretation has been the subject of consideration (Walby and Piché, 2011, 2015). Incarceration and sites of death have served to attract the attention of visitors and residents from ancient times. Indeed, education and conservation are frequently used to justify motivation for development and visitation. Travel as an educative experience is also used as a rationale often, associated with discussions of modernity (Lennon and Foley, 2000). In the context of Gulag sites consideration of societal amnesia is pertinent (Lloyd, 2007). The approach to memory owes much to politics, sociology and history and was usefully explored by Aguilar (2002) in the context of the Spanish Civil War and the slow emergence of post-war democracy. National collective consciousness requires memories evidenced by museums, archives, libraries and heritage buildings. Societal amnesia is characterised by selective consideration of acceptable memory and deletion of the difficult past (Timothy and Boyd, 2006). In this respect the Gulag example is notable.

The development of Gulag tourism in Kazakhstan is a relatively modern phenomenon (Tiberghien, 2018) which followed independence in 1991. The country’s transformation to a market-economy catalysed an increase in visitor arrivals to reach 6,509,000 million in 2016 (CEIC, 2019). Inbound tourists are predominantly from: the Community of Independent States (CIS), China, Germany and Turkey and although business is the primary reason for travel, leisure tourism is growing. During the period of the USSR, over 1.3 million people were deported to Kazakhstan from various locations (Barnes,



2011; Trochev, 2018). The Gulag functioned as a corrective labour organisation and a major economic force in the USSR. Prisoners were involved in: agriculture, mining, metal working and textiles (Barnes, 2011). Their footprint in terms of infrastructure, heritage buildings and mass graves are present across Kazakhstan.

## **Methodology**

This research follows a qualitative case study methodology and adopts an explorative/interpretive position to consider Gulag museums and related sites. This combined semi-structured interviews, observations of sites and qualitative document analysis. A constructivist paradigm for uncovering the process of interpretation and creation of heritage narratives was used. Sites included; museums, built heritage and mass graves. For Yin (2009), a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a realistic phenomenon, helping understanding of people, events and organisations in their social and historical context (Veal, 2006). A case study approach can adopt several data collection methods (Yin, 2003) and allow research teams to evaluate stakeholders' perceptions of Gulag tourism through interview analysis. All cases studies were chosen through purposive or judgmental sampling to select representative examples of Gulag tourism in Kazakhstan. The study encompassed visitation and observations at all sites.

Documentary research was combined with semi-structured interviews using a standard set of open-ended questions, in parallel with review of historical accounts of sites conducted in summer 2018 (see Table 2).

Research Informants Interviewed	Number of semi-structured interviews
Museum directors, archivists, curators, architects of museums	7
Museum guides	5
Tourism operators	4
Relevant Government officials	5
Local NGOs	2
Historians of the period	2
<b>Total tourism stakeholders</b>	<b>25</b>

Table 2: Identification of Stakeholders

Semi-structured interviews were digitally recorded in Kazakh or Russian, translated, transcribed and subject to content analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A textual analysis of documents, books, photographs and illustrations from each site was undertaken. Field notes, interview transcripts, and integration of secondary literature was used to refine emergent themes. Cases chosen were not sampling units but used to enrich the results about the Gulag narrative. The research draws cross-case patterns about various stakeholders' perceptions contextualised within Gulag tourism development. These case studies of dissonant heritage (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996), illustrate the disharmony between the Soviet past and contemporary Kazakhstan. These museums, graveyards and orphanages associated with past atrocities can only be understood by considering how heritage is interpreted or ignored.

## **Case 1: Alzhir Museum, Nur-Sultan**

The Soviet forced labour camp ‘Alzhir’, (Akmolinsk Camp for Wives of Traitors to the Motherland), is located 30km south of Nur-Sultan. This was a subdivision of the Karlag camp system, developed to incarcerate more than 18,000 women from 62 nationalities and ethnic groups, who were imprisoned (Alzhir Museum, 2018). These women originated from: Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, Georgia, Armenia and Central Asia. The museum complex was opened by the former President on May 31, 2007, now designated as a memorial day for victims of political repressions. Following the deterioration of many of the original structures, the museum incorporates reconstructed; prison barracks, cells, torture locations and figurative tableaux to interpret the Gulag. A rail carriage, from the Stalin era, once used for the transportation of prisoners is positioned at the entrance, however, provenance is disputed since archives suggest transportation by road not rail. For visitor guides authenticity of exhibits was less of a concern:

“...original from that time, but not from Karlag...from different places, from local people, from other museums”  
Guide Respondent

The museum incorporates; the history of Kazakhstan from the Russian Empire to the Soviet era. It includes documentation of Soviet domination and the collectivization and starvation of the early 1930s. The ‘Alash’ Hall focuses on the liquidation of the Khans’ and rebellions against Russian and later Soviet authorities. This contradicts

Kundakbayeva and Kassymova (2016) and their assumption that the Kazakh commemorative narrative is;

“...created simply to immortalize the memory of the victims of Stalinist repression not to glorify them as Kazakh martyrs.” (op cit p 617)

They hypothesise a non-nationalistic discourse as more appropriate to the multinational Kazakh society. The reality is more complex; these narratives associated with political and artistic Kazakh figures are documented with photographs, files and interrogation records. A series of portraits and history of famous women, incarcerated in Alzhir also features. Alzhir female history has been the subject of analysis that suggested the frames of commemorative museum practice originated in the powers responsible for interpretation (Raikhan, 2017). The silence surrounding issues of sexual violence in the memorialization processes being symptomatic of this process. Alzhir was also a place where children, deported with their mothers, or born in the Karlag, were incarcerated. Such was the extent of assault and rape that there were constant births over the duration of Alzhir. Children were separated from their mothers at 2/3 years and relocated to a network of 18 orphanages within the Karlag region.

Post-Soviet Kazakhstan is presented in the Museum’s ‘blue room’, standard in all Kazakh museums offering an uncritical appraisal of the Kazakh Republic and its first leader. Visitor numbers are detailed below:

Visitors		2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>Visitors Alzhir museum</b>	International	731	663	660	670	1433
	Kazakhstani	18671	18800	19001	20577	26917
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>19402</b>	<b>19463</b>	<b>19661</b>	<b>21247</b>	<b>28350</b>

Table 3: Alzhir visitors (Alzhir Museum Management).

For some the low visitation to Alzhir Museum is a function of awareness and access:

“...it’s very difficult to reach this place for local people...in the case of Astana, maybe people know we have such a site, but they don’t know how to get here”

Tourism Organisation Respondent

Applebaum (2003), suggested that low awareness of the Gulag was in part due to limited media coverage. The Nazi genocide, by comparison, received more attention from western and global media industries. There is also limited original footage of the Gulags, unlike Nazi concentration camps which were the subject of many recordings during and after liberation. Furthermore, the inaccessibility of Gulags, over the period of the USSR, heightened invisibility of the subject matter. For some, this was linked to a selective heritage narrative:

“Maybe it is connected with the mentality, we mainly would like to show positive places, recreational, connected with nature, rather than to remember totalitarian past (sic)...we are not ashamed but we do not want to remember it”

Local Government Official

Perspectives on authenticity and history are inevitably subjective and understanding does not simply derive from the object(s) but is coloured by visitor background, experience and interpretation (Herbert, 1995).



Alzhir Museum (Author)

## Case 2: Karlag Museum, Dolinka

Karlag, more fully known as Karaganda Corrective Labor Camp of The People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs<sup>2</sup> refers to over one hundred camps (Gulags) organized in the period of mass political repressions (1929-1953). The Gulag's administrative center; Dolinka is 45 km to the southwest of Karaganda city. It was administered directly from Moscow and stretched for 300 km north to south and 200 km east to west, combining; towns, coal mines, metallurgical plants, textile factories, production centers, railways, agriculture, prison and guard accommodation. As Applebaum (2003 p 23) noted:

“...the primary purpose of the Gulag...was economic. This did not mean it was humane. Within the system prisoners were treated as cattle or rather as lumps of iron ore. Guards shuttled them around at will, loading and unloading them into cattle cars, weighing and measuring them, feeding them if they seemed they might be useful, starving them if they were not.”

Following the closure of the Gulag, buildings deteriorated and although such buildings can be viewed, many have decayed (Kundakbayeva and Kassymova, 2016). The museum opened in 2001, sharing functionality with a clinic, later in 2009, the Gulag administrative building was designated as one of the largest Gulag-related museums (Barnes, 2013). Encompassing around thirty halls and exhibitions on three floors, the

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<sup>2</sup> NKVD

Karlag museum mixes displays of artefacts with experiential practices. The first floor is dedicated to deportations during the Soviet era, including repression of the Kazakh intelligentsia and artists. Gulag life including; economic and scientific activities is interpreted. Artefacts, photographs and narrative materials are displayed along with dioramas. Incarceration and torture cells have been recreated and whilst torture occurred at the Karlag, this building (the administrative headquarters) was not the location of such activities. When guides were asked about these displays and whether torture had occurred in this building the response was uncertain:

“I understand that it probably wasn’t in this building, but it really was somewhere, maybe in some other building in Dolinka, maybe not even in Dolinka...”

Visitor Guide Respondent

The pursuit of ‘authentic’ experiences has been the subject of debate (MacCannell, 1973; Herbert, 1995) and for some the entertaining or memorable experience is more important than authenticity. Tours include; the museum, and mass graves and since 2013, the museum has organised an annual ‘Night in Karlag’ event, attended by up to 1,000 visitors, with staged scenes of Gulag life recreating an orchestrated view and helping shape collective memory (Podeh, 2011).

Visitor numbers for Karlag are detailed below:

Visitors		2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>Visitors Karlag museum</b>	International	603	1132	1164	682	1316
	Kazakhstani	14119	22634	23291	22125	26248
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>14722</b>	<b>23766</b>	<b>24455</b>	<b>22807</b>	<b>27564</b>



Table 4: Karlag: Number of visitors (Karlag Management).

Low visitation was seen on a function of selective commemoration:

“...our government tries to leave it because they don’t want any association with Soviet time...we need to make a beautiful image of our country... we have to change everything, names of streets, everything has to be glamorous”

Tour Operator

Such comments affirm the conscious appraisal of the dilution of the narrative and the relationship between motivation to visit or not (Poiria, Reichel and Brian, 2006). A similar, non-engagement with the past through the Kazakh national school curricula is evident. As the same commentator noted:

“My grandparents from my father’s side were deported here...and we don’t know anything about Karlag...and we don’t know nothing (sic) during school time about Karlag...”

The current multicultural nature of the region, is a result of deportation and incarceration of many nationalities during the Soviet period. Current residents are descendants of deportees, prisoners and those employed in the military and Gulag:

“People are shy sometimes to say that the history of their family is related to Karlag history. And it’s still like this. Nobody wants to remember about it”

Tour Operator

Such collective amnesia is also reflected in the loss and reuse of heritage buildings. Karlag built heritage, surrounding the museum is vast yet conservation and interpretation does not occur. These attitudes contrast with Russia, and other parts of

the former Soviet Union. Applebaum (2003) recorded the progress of the Memorial organisation during the period of Perestroika, when archives were accessible. Guides to names and locations of the many Gulag camps were available and a large collection of oral and written survivor narratives were created. However, following this period, access has become more difficult, as the former Dolinka Museum archivist noted:

“Gorbachev opened a window and people started talking, writing, showing, opening archives. Everything was open at that time. But in 1999, when Putin became head of the FSB, everything was closed...”



Karlag Museum (Author)

### **Case 3: Spassk 99 and Mass Grave**

The Spassk 99 Special Camp, of the former National Commissariat of Internal Affairs, located some 45 km from Karaganda was a network of 22 departments. The camp served to incarcerate prisoners of war, political prisoners and other ‘enemies’ of the people. The nearby mass grave is currently a Kazakh army base. The reuse of buildings reoccurs frequently in Kazakhstan. In Karaganda, the former headquarters of the NKVD are now offices of the police force and the site of the orphanage for children of the Alzhir camp (at Osakarovka), is still an orphanage. This heritage is unmarked and its place in the landscape overlooked (Zagorulko, 2005). In Spassk 99, some 67,000 foreign prisoners were detained between 1941-1950 (Dulatbekov, Ticu and Miloiu, 2016). According to official records 7,765 prisoners died and were buried in mass graves. Monument commemoration was funded by national governments including: Armenia, Romania, Japan, Finland, South Korea, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, Ukraine and Russia. Interestingly, after the camp was closed in 1950, the grave site was used as a drill track for military vehicles. Burials here followed deaths in the wider Karlag region and, it is likely that the mass grave is much larger (circa 1-1.5 sq kms), although without forensic archaeology this remains uncorroborated. Visitation is low and the site has no interpretation.

“...we tried to find some information, but there is nothing in Spassk. But the camp was huge...a huge territory of Karaganda region was in the camp...and there is nothing...”

Tour Operator

Yet the narrative is tragic:

“Usually 15 people were shot dead at once, so the (soldiers) buried five people in one grave. The matter is that all this, after a while, was forgotten and even now barely anyone knows where those graves are located.”

Museum Director

Jaquemmet (2008) has argued in the context of the Lebanon’s missing that the forensic identification of human remains and the UN International Convention on enforced disappearances should support those interested in true narrative of such sites. There is an ethical imperative to develop better awareness however political will is limited. Kazakhstan has a poor record of post-Soviet trials and prosecutions for such crimes and this has led to widespread distrust of the police and criminal justice system. This is characterised by pro-accusation bias, low judicial autonomy and high levels of government influence reminiscent of the Soviet era (Trochev and Slade, 2019). A combination of societal amnesia and distrust obscures the past.

“You have two answers; one is very simple, ... we need to install signs, and publish some material, internet sites etc. but another answer; why it’s not done before, I think it is a political decision of Narabayev (former President) to keep good relations with Russia.”

NGO Respondent

A technological alternative has been developed within the museum providing interpretation of the Spassk 99 site which is not without controversy since it features the burial sites of German soldiers, as one former archivist argued:

“Why have the German soldiers there? They came to kill, it was a war”

Thus, this troubled narrative is further diluted by concerns over victim's identity and commemoration.



Spassk 99 Mass Grave (Author)

#### **Case 4: Osakarovka Orphanage**

At Osakarovka Orphanage young children of female prisoners of Alzhir were incarcerated under the jurisdiction of the secret police. Orphans included: those born in prison camps; those left behind when parents were incarcerated, and those incarcerated, either because of connections or actions, unacceptable to the Soviet authorities.

Osakarovka was one of a network of 18 children's homes and day nurseries across the region. These were titled 'Mummy's homes', in reality, they were prisons, with guards, gates and barbed wire. Many children died from malnutrition and poor care (Hoffman, 2009). For survivors, the effects of a Gulag childhood was profound (MacKinnon, 2012). Such individuals faced stigmatization, political and economic marginalization. Some who did not survive Osakarovka were buried in Mamochinko cemetery (Miheeva, 2010), yet site awareness and visitation is low.

“For locals, these are not the best places to go...Do you know Osakarovka, a village on the road between Karaganda and Astana, there was an orphanage... All the children of these (incarcerated) women from Karlag and Alzhir were sent there. There was a very high level of child death...no one can show me, no sign, nothing. I've asked the staff 'where is it? 'and they don't know. I've asked the locals. They didn't know ...”

Tour Operator





Osakarovka Orphanage (Author)

## Case 5: Mamochinko Cemetery

Mamochinko cemetery for women and children of the Karlag is some 40 km from Karaganda. The original footprint of the graveyard (1.25 sq. kms.), is indicative of the tragic scale. However, over building and development has occurred across the site and original boundaries have been lost. What remains is a small part of the mass grave, restored by a charity and the Orthodox Church in 1999 (Memorial, 2001). Such conservation activities are rare and during the Soviet period, this site was treated very differentl.

“That time cars, motorcyclists, drove over the grave yard. At the grave yards all around you could see a lot of garbage. All camp cemeteries had garbage heaps. In the villages, locals covered these cemeteries with garbage intentionally.”

Retired Archivist

Evidence was masked with the detritus of everyday life and the narrative of loss was hidden and lost.

“ The children got sick and died. It was dirty. Dysentery was very common. Winters were cold there...in general all children under the age of one year died. They were buried in the cemetery... now there is nothing.“

Retired Archivist

“Many people ask about the cemeteries...and real places are not disclosed still to this day. It’s like they’re hiding this part of history too, because it’s not that important at the moment.”

Tour Operator





Mamochinko Cemetery (Author)

## Contentious dark heritage

The sites considered should not be seen simply in terms of descriptive supply (Poria, Reichel and Biran, 2005); rather these sites and stakeholders affirm the politicisation of heritage. The tabulation below provides evidence of how museums, grave sites and orphanages evidence selective interpretation of the period.

Site	Directional Signage	Interpretation	Conservation	Educative Function	Selective Interpretation
Alzhir	Limited	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes
Karlag	Limited	Partial	Partial	Yes	Yes
Osakarovka	No	No	No	No	Yes
Mamochinko	No	No	No	No	Yes
Spassk 99	No	No	No	No	Yes

Table 5.0: Gulag sites and selective interpretation

Only the museums offered signage, partial interpretation and educational consideration of the Soviet past. Other sites remain unsigned, decaying with no interpretation. Here contentious heritage is partially commodified and managed, frequently left to deteriorate as an unmarked narrative of a past forgotten by its host society.

Whilst most of these sites constitute commemorative offers that would rate as ‘Darkest’ on Stone’s spectrum of dark tourism supply (2006). Spassk 99, Mamochinko and Osakarovka possess no interpretation and receive few visitors despite their association with atrocity. The interpretive/ dissonance theme, (Sharpley and Stone, 2009) is clearly evidenced and the dark heritage is largely ignored. These sites and the relationship with Russia is revealing, as a senior academic noted:

“During the Soviet time there was great damage to the national history of the fifteen republics. We were not allowed to tell the truth. We had to believe what the Soviet regime

said. In this way, they tried to suppress our national consciousness. Underlying it all was a Russification policy. It means our national values were destroyed.”

The relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia is important as one Museum director noted:

“It’s in the state interest to keep this quiet. The state is only interested in economic development, civil society is very weak”

Token attempts to inject meaning into the traumatic events of Kazakh history offers a *usable past* (Wertsch, 2002). This allows Kazakh nationals to redefine who they are and this should be understood in a national context, where freedom of information and critically evaluation of history is unusual (Licata and Mercy, 2015). As one NGO respondent summarised:

“My explanation is very simple, maybe not smart. Because it is all a slavery country, slavery empire. It was real slavery, then tribal slavery, then feudalism, then Soviet slavery...nobody understood what is freedom... from a psychological side it is not our way – to concentrate on negatives of the past even if you are part of the history...”

Collective trauma of the period of Soviet repression is reinforced by limited Gulag conservation and an unwillingness to reconcile past with present. This creates historical discontinuity and societal amnesia. Nationals seek to distance themselves from that difficult past (Roth et al, 2017).

This attitude, whether in museum interpretation, conservation or even discussion, is a response to the period of repression, deportation, incarceration and fear. Collective trauma is a response to cataclysmic events that impacted on much of the former USSR. Hence, despite a national network of Gulags only a handful including Alzhir and Karlag

are developed, while most decay. As Hirschberger (2018) records, aside from the horrific loss of life and impact on survivors, collective trauma is also a crisis of meaning. This delineates a journey or process commencing with trauma, which transforms in the Kazakh collective memory. The outcome is a system of understanding the past whilst allowing individuals to redefine their current identity. Yet collective memory of the Gulag contrasts with individual memory and it persists beyond survivors and is remembered by individuals and groups, removed from the traumatic events both historically, culturally and geographically. In this way the non-commemoration of the dissonant heritage of ; Spassk 99, Mamochinko and Osakarovka, can be explained, if not understood. Kalinowska (2012), referred to this as defensive elements in the collective psyche providing a stabilizing context for national identity. Research in this area frequently relates to the holocaust and the collective trauma of genocide (Mazur and Vollhardt, 2015). Such trauma may contribute to national or religious narratives (Alexander et al, 2004) or more widely a shared sense of identity (Canetti et al, 2018). In tourism terms it invokes dissonant heritage where value is contested between different interest groups. This is evidenced in the omission of narratives and societal amnesia of the period.

The re-use of heritage buildings is also part of this phenomenon. Whether military barracks in Dolinka (residential accommodation); NKVD headquarters in Karaganda (Police offices); or the rail head and incarceration camp at Karabas (prison). All are indicative of the low value placed on such heritage of the Gulag. As one academic respondent pleaded:

“...the idea to keep those places for our future generations as an open air museum...it is very necessary. If tomorrow they will be displaced/demolished – there will be no sign left behind...you need to show the places, the remaining barracks (at Dolinka), they should be preserved...everything has started in 1987, before that no one said anything about

Dolinka...those who were held at the camp, when they were released, they had to sign up to a special contract with an obligation not to speak, they were supposed to keep the silence.”

Retired archivist

The focus on progress and unease at memorialising the past is clear. Similarly, in education. One former archivist active in teaching Gulag history in Kazakh schools commented:

“...when I visit schools and talk about that time teachers keep asking me: ‘is it allowed to speak on this topic? Do you understand this? It means the fear sits somewhere inside us...from this museum (Dolinka) there is not a single word about Stalin’s politics. They don’t talk about fascism and totalitarianism and the connection between them.”

Indeed, Stalin is rarely mentioned in both Alzhir and Karlag and the period of Russian oppression receives limited coverage. Social amnesia is important to understanding the marginalisation of the victims of the Gulag. Jaquemet (2008) highlighted analogous issues in Lebanon, wherein the missing, were seen as the past ‘poisoning’ the present. Yet, international legal obligations in the field of forced disappearances derive from; International humanitarian law, human rights and criminal law. Legal obligations apply and the right to knowledge resides in international law. The Gulag legacy exists throughout the former Soviet Union and sites, if conserved, can offer learning, and offer evidential heritage. In many locations non-commemoration, deterioration and loss is common. This is not simply ideologically driven selectivity, factors such as: ownership of narratives, historiography, operational conservation skills and local economic priorities are also factors. Objects and sites do not exist in isolation and are imbued with meaning. In the case of Kazakhstan, the interpretation of artefacts and buildings from the Karlag site to Osakarovka orphanage could help local populations better comprehend their shared history, however irreconcilable it may be with their current existence.

Heritage is a contested terrain and the pursuit of historically accurate narrative in Kazakhstan can be contrasted with the Nazi narrative and built heritage associated with

this period of German history (Levi 1988 and Philpott 2016). Germany is littered with built heritage associated with the Nazi past and conservation and interpretation is the subject of national debate. Allowing sites to deteriorate has been challenged as a way of evading the 'unacceptable' Nazi past. Partial or selective narratives create multiple constructions of the past and history is never an objective recall, but rather a partial interpretation, based on the way in which we view ourselves in the present.

The sites examined in Kazakhstan; Alzhir, Karlag, Spaask 99, Osakarovka and Mamochinko, are impacted by their dissonant context and societal amnesia. Ensuring the narrative of these sites is transparent will provide critical learning material and evidential heritage. Such heritage sites influence the historical, social and cultural meanings represented (Smith, 2006). The selection, interpretation and conservation of elements of the past are critical in understanding what is considered and represented (Ashworth, 2008). The silence of perpetrators, victims and their descendants is collective. The issue is humanitarian and as much about the living as the disappeared of the Gulag. Interpretation is used to articulate heritage through objects, artefacts, buildings, audio and filmic recordings; they reconstruct and re-represent the past where authenticity is relative (Dallen and Boyd, 2006). Kazakh Gulag heritage sites could provide authentic narratives and maintain historical record, yet to date, memorialization in Alzhir and Karlag museums is selective and partial and in the case of; Spaask 99, Mamochinko and Osakarovka is non-existent.

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