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# Remembering the Gulag

Images and imagination

edited by Natascia Mattucci

eum

# Il tempo, la storia e la memoria

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Natascia Mattucci

The past as pathmarks

In his now famous *Face à l'extrême*, Tzvetan Todorov writes:

I'm not interested in the past as such, but in the teaching that I believe we can draw from it and that appeals to us today. But which one? The events themselves never reveal their sense, the facts are not transparent. To teach us something, they need to be interpreted<sup>1</sup>.

This reflection on the interpretation of the past seems to be particularly suited to introduce the work of teaching and research on the history and memory of the reticular system of labour and repression camps – usually referred to by the acronym «Gulag» – which has structured the political history of the former Soviet Union and that this volume documents. The past, especially in its most tragic aspects, cannot be tamed or mastered through mechanisms that claim to explain everything. The darkest events are not transparent, but they need a careful hermeneutic work that involves different disciplines, starting from the indispensable contribution given by historiography. The intersection of history, philosophy, literature, visual arts – already fruitful in throwing light on Nazi totalitarianism and the Shoah as the epitome of a deadly violent century – is the path followed in the methodological research for the European project AGE, Amnesia in Gulag Europe, as testified by the essays collected in this volume.

<sup>1</sup> T. Todorov, *Face à l'extrême*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1991.

The studies conducted in the course of the project activities move in the wake of the investigation of the conditions of possibility that were the backdrop to the development of Soviet totalitarianism and its camp-system, both in a historical and geopolitical perspective. At the same time, particular attention was paid to what many have referred to as the essence of totalitarianism – its claim to modify and manipulate the human – focusing on the living conditions and the relationships developed within microcosms as monadic as the camps. At the basis of this dual purpose, there is not the will to reconstruct the past as such, providing data or detailed statistics. As Todorov wrote, we are interested in keeping an eye on one often ignored and misunderstood yesterday, because from it you can learn lessons that are addressed to us today. It is the modernity of this lesson from the past that fostered the memory exercises collected in this paper. As paradoxical as it may seem, telling about the evil can act as a wellspring of good, if that helps making the world less alien. These exercises are in the eyes of Hannah Arendt expressions of that infinite activity called *understanding*<sup>2</sup>. An activity that does not have to absorb the impact of reality or soften its bumps, but just try to make sense of it. In doing so, it is safe to cross disciplinary boundaries and to employ means which encourage imaginative capacity. Because there is no understanding, not even a possible sense, without the exercise of the imagination.

The ability to understand a past that is drifting apart, trying to get in the shoes of those who lived that experience in the first person, is the difficult path to follow if we want these events not to stay silent forever. When the extent of the drama that arises before us seems to exceed our feeling, as in the case of “necessary” or “mass-produced” dead, the sense of inadequacy and failure causes a dulling of thought and feeling that leaves the facts slide away with their burden of responsibility and questions. However, Günther Anders, author of an intransigent diagnosis of the minority of human feeling before technique, has not given

<sup>2</sup> A. Reif (ed.), *Gespräche mit Hannah Arendt*, München-Zürich, Piper, 1976.



up providing guidance on how to adjust the capacity and flexibility of our feelings to the unpredictable excess of what we can perpetrate<sup>3</sup>. The limited imaginative capacity of human beings must at least try to represent the nothingness and react to this sense of loss for what is not given once and for all awakening feelings such as fear. Imagination is the ability to produce images from a sensitive perception and to retain them in their absence by expanding the mind.

Are there images of the real able to establish a different relationship with the world and have repercussions on the ethical sphere? The writings produced as a result of the totalitarian events point out how the arts and humanities have a decisive role in the development of the imaginative faculty that Anders called «moral imagination». If we think of the cinema, the imaginary figure of a single tortured person whose life we have come to know, could reveal more about the millions of deaths than it would have done their millionaire addition<sup>4</sup>.

Likewise, some contemporary images of the places that hosted forced labour camps, as sparse and little descriptive as they are, force our gaze to stop and to linger. The viewer must take action to make sense of them, because that kind of image – as in the case of the work of Tomasz Kizny – does not master the past, but it tells a story that we can see if we are able to represent it in the present. Not all representations succeed in this, especially in an era saturated with images that technology delivers to our home and that are likely to clog our imaginative capacity. In the educational path followed in the project activities of AGE, as documented by Filippina Calafati's essay, the work on the images of Kizny was supported by an analysis of texts that have become "classics" in both the concentration camp scene and in literature *tout court*. These are images and writings that can orient us in an attempt to make exercises of political-historical imagination.

<sup>3</sup> G. Anders, *Wir Eichmannsöhne*, München, C.H. Beck, 1964.

<sup>4</sup> G. Anders, *Besuch im Hades. Auschwitz und Breslau 1966. Nach "Holocaust" 1979*, München, C.H. Beck, 1985.

This methodological choice helps highlighting some problematic issues that give account of the past but, at the same time, say something about the possible diseases that are nestled today in the folds of established democracies. This is the case of the reflection on totalitarianism as “ideocracy” – developed by Gianluca Vagnarelli – which reminds us, echoing Arendt and Todorov, that mankind cannot be thought of as an abstraction, but it represents a set of different individuals. If you think about it as an abstraction – whether it is people, nation, “race” or other entities used in the metaphysical sense – it is easier to commit in its name crimes of all sorts, as we keep seeing every day. It is possible to resist to all-embracing abstractions that try to bury and erase the history of a particular territory and its inhabitants, as Darius Juodis said about Lithuania, by paying a heavy price. The resistance against asphyxiated logics, single thoughts and parties, unanimity that engulfs all dissent, demands an awareness difficult to mature in extreme circumstances. Even in less dramatic situations, as it happened in Italy after the war, the difficulty or unwillingness to get an idea of the real political situation in the former Soviet Union is demonstrated by the way in which the national press welcomed the publication of *The Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksandr Solženicyn, as attested by Silvia Casilio in her contribution. Lanfranco Di Genio in his essays gives us an account of the blanket of silence that Western countries dropped on Soviet history, insisting also on the systematic use of fiction and falsehood by the communist regime.

Surely, in the study of the history of a political regime and its crimes, historiography must remain the high road, as recalled by Costantino Di Sante in defining the cardinal points of the history of the Soviet Gulag. However, if we take care of the burden that time gave us, trying to make sense of it, we are allowed to use new digging and penetration tools. The past can be a signpost, a compass for today, if its memory activates our feeling, expanding the scope of our imagination. We need bridges between the phenomenal world and the life of thought, because the lessons of the past can illuminate a path. If literature, pictures, movies,

are able to act on the memory letting us hear the wail that comes from the past, then that path will be less uncertain. It is time to determine which works will continue to “talk” over their “here and now” providing analogies, quotations, metaphors, with which a thought that can live without abstractionisms, can held tight to the world.

This is the case of Vasily Grossman that in his famous *Life and Fate* writes, about the Soviet camps, what today continues to be a warning to every country that considers democracy as a becoming and not a possession: «That which is alive has no two copies. Two people, two shrubs of dog rose, cannot be equal, it is unthinkable... And where violence seeks to erase diversity and differences, life goes out»<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> V. Grossman, *Vita e destino*, Milano, Adelphi, 2013, p. 13.



Tomasz Kizny

## Gulag photographs: image and memory

Contrary to what may be expected, historical photographs depicting the Soviet Gulag exist in a significant number, counting up to a total of tens of thousands of images. However, the overwhelming majority of the currently known photographic records of Soviet repression were created for needs and under control of the Stalinist regime. Gulag photographs were taken either for the purposes of Soviet propaganda or in order to document “the great constructions of Socialism” made by prisoners, or were used by the security services as a means of internal reporting in the Gulag system. Some were also taken for camp commanders’ private purposes, as mementos of their time in the camps.

If the enormous atrocities committed in the Gulag framework were recorded by a camera, these images have not been unearthed yet; more likely they were never taken at all. Photographs of human misery and suffering in Soviet concentration camps are missing – they find visual representation only on the sketches and drawings of camp prisoners<sup>1</sup>.

There is, for example, not one piece of photographic evidence of what happened in the Gulags following Nazi Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union, when the number of fatalities in the concentration camps reached its peak. 351,360 prisoners died in 1942,

<sup>1</sup> Y. Kiersnovska, S. Reichenberg, W. Shuhayev, N. Getman, R. Goryelov, L. Kropyvnickyy, M. Sokolov, B. Svshnikov, M. Rudakov, J. Sooster and others.

that is 25% of the total number of prisoners in all the Gulag<sup>2</sup>. However, this belies a darker statistic with fatalities reaching 60% in some camps. There are no photographs that document this grim period in which one quarter of all Gulag prisoners died and a further 25% were close to death. A common leitmotif in the accounts given by prisoners is the descriptions of malnourished, frozen bodies piled up like logs ready for a hasty burial with only a prison number tied to their big toe. But these images remain only in the memory of prisoners. Death in the camps was a common occurrence with nearly two million people losing their lives behind the wire fences of the Soviet labour camps but to this day we do not even have a single photograph of a malnourished or emaciated dead prisoner. Not a single photo tells us of the horrible journeys which lasted for weeks in unheated cattle cars, with little provision of food and water and no medical care, so that a death-toll was unavoidable. There are no photographs of the horrors of daily life in the camps, of the cruelty of criminal fellow-prisoners.

The majority of Gulag photographs come from the intense propaganda campaign during which prisoners, that is “class enemies” were “re-educated” under the banner of “perekovka” or “re-forging” through work in labour camps for the good of socialism. This complete mystification depicting the slave labour of innocent people as a new, humanitarian penal policy in the “motherland of the proletariat” was set in motion to portray the camps as a unique initiative where criminals would become wilful citizens of the Union of Soviets in the joyful atmosphere of the large construction sites. The enthusiasm for advertising the Gulags as a “humanitarian invention” reached its zenith at the beginning of the 1930s. It is at this time that thousands of photographs were taken documenting the rise of the “great constructions” realised in the Gulags framework. For example a special

<sup>2</sup> S. Sigachov, M. Smirnov, D. Shkapov, *Sistema miest zaklucheniya v SSR 1929-1960*, in N.G. Okhotin, A.B. Roginsky (eds.), *Sistema ispravitelno-trudovyykh lagerei v SSSR, 1923-1960*, Moscow, Spravochnik, the Centre for Research and Information – Memorial, 1998, p. 46.

Photo-Film Bureau was part of the camp's administration of the White Sea-Baltic Canal construction in 1931-1933, of which it took 5,600 photographs. It was the same at other Gulag building sites. The photographs say a great deal about the working conditions of the prisoners and the huge projects that were realised by the Gulag, but camps are missing in these pictures. At the same time, scores of agitprop films started to be made: the 90-minute "Solovki" about the camp in the Solovetsky Islands (1928); a film about the White Sea-Baltic Canal (1933); the two-part "Kolyma" (1934); the four-part "Storming Ukhta" (1935); "The Stalin Moscow-Volga Canal" (1937) and others. In order to magnify the greatness of "perekovka", the best Soviet artists were brought in under the stewardship of Maxim Gorky, glorifying the slave labour of the camps. Many artists also played their part in this deception. Aleksander Rodchenko, one of the founders of constructivism, the father of Soviet design and a world-renowned artist, took photographs of the White Sea-Baltic Canal in his own innovative, avant-garde style characterised by slanted, dynamic frames and untypical angles. At the time, Rodchenko was the artistic director of the glossy "USSR in Construction", which in terms of publishing quality was in no way worse than American "Life". In the Autumn of 1933, soon after the opening of the Canal, whose construction took the lives of 12,000 human souls, Rodchenko produced an avant-garde layout for the December edition of "USSR in Construction", which was dedicated to the White Sea-Baltic Canal and featured a new aesthetic form of expression, making use of photomontage and collage created from his photographs.

The camps constantly increased in number and in the late 1930s slave labour became an integral part of Soviet industry and the number of prisoners reached 2 million. What is more, the domestic political situation underwent momentous changes. Stalin overcame opposition in the party and purged it of Bolsheviks from the time of the October Revolution, gaining absolute power. A new era ensued in which the Gulag and the "perekovka" vanished from the public eye becoming a taboo subject.

The strategy of agitprop offensive was replaced by secrecy and silence. Period of photographing and filming of the construction sites in the Gulag came to an end. Due to the fact that photographs were no longer deemed to be necessary for the purposes of Stalinist propaganda, one can assume that during the decades of silence that reigned, no photographs were taken in the Gulag. However, when the USSR fell at the beginning of the 1990s and Soviet archives were partially opened up, in the Gulag section of Central State Archive of the October Revolution<sup>3</sup> in Moscow over 100 albums with photographs were discovered. Any researcher who believes they might find photographic evidence of the horrors of the Gulag in the top-secret Soviet archives will be sorely disappointed. The albums were attached to reports in order to show off to the top brass how well the camp was doing, in particular its economic activity, praised together with cultural and sports activities and the decent living conditions of the camp. The photographs consistently disregard and overlook the dark side of life in the camps, however, taken as whole, the albums say a great deal about the Gulag. The photographs of prisoners working in factories, in kolkhoz collective farms, mining for natural resources, building canals, railways, pictures of the camp's eating areas, washhouses, nurseries for children born in the camps, and even prisoner theatres and sport competitions held in the camps altogether help us to visualize and comprehend the complex nature of the Gulag system.

Of the 3,000 or more photographs found in the Gulag albums, only a few show emaciated prisoners, known in camp jargon as “dohodyags” – ones on the verge of death or “goners” equivalent of “muselmann” in the Nazi concentration camps. Each one of these pictures, with no exceptions, were taken in the camp hospitals. The people depicted in them are evidently malnourished, but due to the fact that they were photographed in the medical

<sup>3</sup> Presently known as the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), these were the archives of the Main Prison Administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR (GUMZ), the official name of the Gulag in 1960 prior to being dissolved.



facility, the message which the camp functionaries are attempting to portray is clear: we take care of prisoners. These photographs are unique as they offer us a sliver of the essential truth about the Gulag, but at the same time the message embodied in this images “we care for prisoners” is particularly deceptive. Nearly two million people perished in the Gulags, not because someone sentenced them to death but just due to the fact that no one “cared for them”; human life had no meaning. The inmate was nothing but an anonymous component in the production process and his corpse was nothing but production waste.

Photographs taken outside of the control of the Stalinist regime are a rarity. Two Poles who had been released from Vorkutlag in 1955 decided to undertake the high-risk operation of documenting the Gulag. Stanisław Kiałka took photographs of the camp situated near Coal Mine No. 9-10 from the top of a nearby slag heap, whereas Bernard Grzywacz took a 360 degree panoramic shot of Vorkutlag from the same vantage point. In the photographic iconography of the Stalinist Gulag, these photographs hold a special place, they are unreservedly authentic and truly documentary. They were taken in spite of the totalitarian regime in order to record the image of the Gulags, show it to the world and bear witness to the truth.

Our perception of the Gulag photographs is obscured by a key question concerning their authenticity and requires constant questioning to what extent what we see in the photograph has been manipulated by the Soviet authorities, deformed for the purposes of ideology and to what extent it reveals the truth of past reality. The photographic legacy of the Gulags does not contain an unambiguous visual message that can directly speak to its viewer. The way the photographs are perceived depends on a basic knowledge of how Gulag system operated, allowing us to understand something of its real context and meaning.

In fact, the Gulag photographs require ethically and historically minded viewers, they ask them to look again at the prisoner in the background pushing a wheelbarrow and consider who that person might have been: an academic, a Tsarist officer, an

Orthodox priest or a disenfranchised farmer. What was his later fate? Did he survive the coming winter? Was he shot during the Great Terror or did he “only” have to face another sentence in the Gulag? Did he survive Stalin’s death and was he able to then return home? Did he have anyone to return home to?

The photographic evidence of the Gulag that is left, allows us to realise the complexity and multi-faceted nature of “a world part” (G.H. Grudzinski) of Soviet camps. However, if by documentary photography we mean photography that scrupulously documents reality, then in general these photographs do not fulfil that basic criterion. They consistently overlook the most significant fact of Gulag life, that is the pain, suffering and tragedy of millions of human souls. Lack of such images explains why the Gulag photographs cannot play a role in making us aware of the scale of the crimes committed by the Soviets, as it is for the photographs of Nazi concentration camps taken after they were liberated by the Allies. Our purpose is not to compare the Nazi death camps with what Aleksandr Solženicyń called the “murderous camps” of the Soviets, but to become aware of the role that photography plays in pervading social consciousness and creating collective memory about past mass crimes.

In his essay about four photographs from Auschwitz secretly taken in Crematorium V in 1944, Georges Didi-Huberman writes: «In order to know, we must imagine for ourselves [...] Let us not shelter ourselves by saying we cannot, that we could not by any means, imagine it to the very end. We are obliged to that oppressive imaginable». This sentence is a reference to the crimes committed by the other totalitarian regimes. The verb “imagine” stems from the word “image” and the term itself is defined as “to form a mental image of something unknown”, also “to understand something”. As well as first-hand accounts and drawings of former prisoners, Gulag literature, the work of historians, the image of the Gulag – though distorted and incomplete – can provide an important stimulus for attempting to imagine the “unimaginable” or more precisely this “oppressive imaginable” we are obliged to imagine. In order to know.

Costantino Di Sante

The road to Gulag. Chronicle of the Soviet concentration camps system

This archipelago is wedged into another country and flecks it, is included in it. It invests its cities, is suspended above the streets, but some have not noticed it at all, many have heard about it vaguely, only those who were there knew everything. However, as if they had lost the power of speech in the islands of the Archipelago, they have kept silent.

A. Solženicyn, *Gulag Archipelago*

*Gulag (Glavnoe upravlenie campej)*: «Central direction of camp», this is the new name given in 1930 to the administration of the concentration camps managed by «State Political Directorate of the Soviet Union» (Ogpu)<sup>1</sup>. In 1934 the term *Gulag* is included in Soviet official texts. Only after the 20<sup>th</sup> congress of the Communist Party in 1956, when Krusciov denounced the crimes of Stalinism, the repressive system is recognised by Soviet authorities<sup>2</sup>. In the Seventies, after the publication in the West of the book by Aleksandr Solženicyn *Gulag Arcipelago*, it becomes

<sup>1</sup> At the beginning Soviet camps are officially called *Konzentracionnyje lagerja* or in short *konzlager*. Since 1934 this term is substituted by the phrase «correctional labour camps» (*ispravitel'no-trudovoj lagerja*, ITL). A.J. Kamiński, *I campi di concentramento dal 1896 ad oggi. Storia, funzioni, tipologia*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1997, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> E. Dundovich, F. Gori, E. Guercetti (eds.), *Gulag. Storia e memoria*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2004; L. Razgon, *La nuda verità*, Napoli, L'Ancora del Mediterraneo, 2004.

the term that generally defines the whole concentration camp system of USSR<sup>3</sup>.

The evolution of such system could be summarised in five big stages: 1918-1922 «the period of the civil war»; 1923-1929 «the period of the General Directorates of detention places»; 1930-1940 «the period of *Gulag*»; 1941-1953 «the period of the productive concentration complex»; 1954-1960 «the period that starts with Stalin's death and ends with the closing of the Ministry of home affairs of USSR»<sup>4</sup>.

1. «*Those who do not work, should not eat*». *The beginning of the system*

The Russian penal system already in the Ninetieth century provided that a person «harmful to the social order» could be arrested without warrant and sentenced to administrative exile. With this system, which did not provide any trial, potential political opponents, instigators and later «revolutionaries», including the Bolsheviks, were punished. The exile of the convicts could last from one to ten years, to serve in a remote place of the empire. Sending convicts in extreme areas, as well as being an instrument for punishment, also served to bring new residents to depopulated areas that were rich in natural resources. In addition to the prisoners sent into internal exile, there were also those sentenced to forced labour (*katorga*). Those were 28,600 people in 1916 in the areas of eastern Russia that had to be economically exploited.

This, along with the prison system, is the repressive complex that was inherited by the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution

<sup>3</sup> Since the Seventies, «the bureaucratic acronym *Gulag*», has become and is used as «political, moral, scientific concept» to indicate the whole Soviet repressive system. N. Davis, *Introduzione* in T. Kizny, *Gulag*, Milano, Mondadori, 2004, pp. 9-11 and O.V. Chelevnjuk, *Storia del Gulag. Dalla collettivizzazione al Grande terrore*, Torino, Einaudi, 2006, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> M.B. Smirnov, S.P. Sigačëv, D.V. Skapov, *Il sistema dei luoghi di reclusione in Unione Sovietica, 1929-1960*, in M. Flores, F. Gori (eds.), *GULag. Il sistema dei lager in URSS*, Milano, Mazzotta, 1999, pp. 80-81.

of 1917. In the months following the seizure of power by Lenin, the first fields are created for former Tsarist officers, for soldiers who do not want to serve in the Red Army, for the counterrevolutionaries and the «millionaire saboteurs».

In May of 1918, with the start of the civil war, new detention places are set up. The lack of room in the old prisons leads to the requisition of barracks and buildings to hold the great number of convicts. The network of detention places for political opponents will be organised and managed by the Pan-Russian Extraordinary Committee (Včk)<sup>5</sup> e by the Central Committee for prisoners and refugees. Since the beginning, some labour camps are also set up, mostly within monasteries, managed by the extraordinary Committee (Čeka) of Governorates<sup>6</sup>.

After the attack against Lenin (5 September 1918) the *soviet* of the People's Commissariat promulgated the «Decree on terror» providing the committees with a new instrument for punishment, the concentration camps:

It is essential to ensure the safety of the Soviet Republic from class enemies by isolating them in concentration camps, while all those who have dealt with organizations of whites, with plots and mutinies, should be shot<sup>7</sup>.

The Central Directorate of forced labour was the section that, within the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, was in charge of managing the compulsory labour. Compulsory labour which, under the slogan “those who do not work should not eat”, will be included in the constitution of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, adopted on July 10, 1918<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> The Pan-Russian Extraordinary Committee was dissolved in February 1922. In its place they created the State Political Directorate (Gpu) which, the following December, with the rise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, was reorganised as Joint State Political Directorate (Ogpu).

<sup>6</sup> The political police (Čeka), founded by Feliks Dzeržinskij, changed its name in 1922, while its officers, the Čekists, kept being called so, even after the birth of the Gpu.

<sup>7</sup> M. Geller, *Il mondo dei lager e la letteratura sovietica*, Torino, Edizioni Paoline, 1977, p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 56.

During the civil war, extraordinary Committees developed throughout the country becoming the principal institutions of USSR's administrative power. In this chaotic phase which will last until 1921, in the labour camps are sent the «class enemies», who for the new Soviet State are the bourgeois, the land owners, the priests and other suspicious elements<sup>9</sup>.

We can summarise the detention structures into five types of camps: special purpose camps; common type; production type; for war prisoners and transit<sup>10</sup>. In this period, when the purposes of these camps are not yet clear, there are three different authorities (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs – Nkvd, Včk e Nkju<sup>11</sup>) which oversee these camps<sup>12</sup>.

The novelty is represented by the use of such detention places for the re-education of the inmates through work. Because of this, in the new penal code of 1922, it will no longer be called forced labour but «corrective labour»<sup>13</sup>.

At the end of 1920, there are 21 active structures, one year later the recorded camps are about 80. The total number of inmates exceeds 70,000, of which the largest number is made up of common criminals, counterrevolutionaries and deserters. The political re-education through labour of prisoners takes place in workshops and farms established within the camps.

The camps become real schools of work and indeed paragraph 31 of the Regulation for the prisoners states that: «All inmates are sent to work immediately after their arrival in the camp and they will carry out physical work during all the time they spend

<sup>9</sup> A. Applebaum, *Gulag. Storia dei campi di concentramento sovietici*, Milano, Mondadori, 2010, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> J.J. Kotek, P. Rigoulot, *Il secolo dei campi. Detenzione, concentramento e sterminio: 1900-2000*, Milano, Mondadori, 2001, p. 105.

<sup>11</sup> Before the Nkvd and Včk constituted their camps, all detention places depended from the People's Commissariat for Justice (Nkju) with its two sections the Prisons Direction and the Punitive Section.

<sup>12</sup> Centro studi «Memorial», *Il sistema dei lager*, in Flores, Gori (eds.), *GULag. Il sistema dei lager in URSS*, cit., p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> Geller, *Il mondo dei lager e la letteratura sovietica*, cit., pp. 99-101.

in the camp. The administration of the camp determines the type of work»<sup>14</sup>.

Despite these provisions, the Cheka is not able to control the mass of prisoners and despite the nationalization of the workforce (in April 1919), labour productivity remains very low. For these reasons, in 1922 the system is reorganized. The camps that are too close to residential areas are closed and the «Special purpose Camps of the North» are set up in the Solovki Islands.

## 2. *Solovki. The experiment of the Gulag*

In May of 1923 the Orthodox monastery of the Solovki islands in the White Sea, is transformed into a «special purpose camp»<sup>15</sup>. Directly managed by OGPU, in its early days accommodated politicians, counterrevolutionaries, common criminals and prostitutes<sup>16</sup>. In later years, even peasants, elements considered socially dangerous, habitual criminals, Russians returned from abroad, Chinese students, clergy of all denominations, speculators, political and social activists. In a few years, from 1923 to 1925, the inmates went from a few hundreds to 6,000<sup>17</sup>.

In its 16 years of operation, it was closed in 1939, in addition to the already mentioned categories, in the camp were imprisoned many Russian intellectuals and other national minorities: Belarussians, Ukrainians, Poles, Tatars, Turkmen, Georgians, Jews.

<sup>14</sup> *Codice penale*, 1919, n. 20, art. 235; *ivi*, p. 51.

<sup>15</sup> The monastery, built in the fifteenth century on the island of Great Solovki, is one of the largest in Russia. In 1974, the islands became a park and there was set up a State Museum on the history and architecture of Solovki, but without any mention of the period in which it was home to the *Gulag*. In 1990 the monks returned to the islands and the Orthodox Church has restored part of the monastery which since 1992 has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Memorial association and the Museum of Solovki have made a permanent exhibition, «The field of special purpose of Solovki 1923-1939»; Kizny, *Gulag*, *cit.*, pp. 36-39.

<sup>16</sup> J. Brodskij, *Solovki. Le isole del martirio. Da monastero a primo lager sovietico*, Milano, la Casa di Matriona, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag*, *cit.*, p. 51.

The local islands had been identified as suitable to set up labour camps. So, in the archipelago of Solovki, was born a whole network of camps and sub-camps that, with a fully centralized management, which was referred to as «Special purpose camps of the North» (Slon)<sup>18</sup>.

The Solovki became a sort of experimental camp, where the OGPU put into practice new ways of deprivation of liberty and coercion. The structures, built to be used for a long time, became the symbol of the Soviet system for re-education through the use of forced labour. In 1926 the Soviet penal code is reformed and among the approved changes is Article 58, relating to «counter-revolutionary crimes»<sup>19</sup>. This and the following paragraphs give the opportunity to the police to arrest anyone who is suspected of being a «saboteur» or an «enemy of the people»<sup>20</sup>.

The «marketing» of the system is based on the condition that one is adequately fed only if they are able to work. According to this conception, the inmates of Slon are divided into three groups according to their physical characteristics: suitable for heavy work, suitable for light work and invalids. This system causes the weakest to be deprived of food and to get sick or die<sup>21</sup>. According to authorities, this method is advantageous because it leads to the re-education of the man who «has done wrong», psychologically bending him, promising an increase of even a few grams of his already meagre ration: food «is the thread that binds them to life»<sup>22</sup>. These and

<sup>18</sup> Kotek, Rigoulot, *Il secolo dei campi*, cit., p. 107.

<sup>19</sup> R. Stettner, *Il GULag. Profilo del sistema dei lager staliniani*, in G. Corni, G. Hirschfeld (eds.), *L'umanità offesa. Stermini e memoria nell'Europa del Novecento*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2003, pp. 186-192.

<sup>20</sup> G. Gozzini, *La peculiarità del sistema concentrazionario sovietico*, in Flores, Gori (eds.), *GULag. Il sistema dei lager in URSS*, cit., p. 46.

<sup>21</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag*, cit., pp. 58-65.

<sup>22</sup> Geller, *Il mondo dei lager e la letteratura sovietica*, cit., p. 242. For an overview see Kotek, Rigoulot, *Il secolo dei campi*, cit., pp. 141-149; J. Rossi, *Manuale del gulag. Dizionario storico*, Napoli, L'ancora del Mediterraneo, 2006, pp. 234-236 and pp. 319-322.



other coercive rules used in the archipelago set the precedents for the evolution of the system<sup>23</sup>.

In 1930, while the correctional labour camp system is unified under the name of Gulag, the camp of Solovki reaches an average attendance of 65,000 prisoners, increased to about 72,000 in 1931. The attendance drops to just over 15,000 for the mass transfer of prisoners in the construction site of Belomorkanal, a channel to join the White Sea with the Baltic Sea<sup>24</sup>. The fortress of the monastery was renovated and converted to «Special purpose prison», while the entire archipelago became a section of the White Sea-Baltic correctional labour camp, known as Belbaltlag.

In the construction of Beromolkanal, the absence of any kind of technology and the need to save money, lead workers to dig tunnels by hand, to use timber and stones instead of iron and concrete. The primitive and inadequate tools used for its construction make the working conditions of prisoners extremely harsh. It is believed that at least 15,000 prisoners died in the construction of the canal, not counting those who were released because sick or injured due to accidents at work, and died shortly after. The experience of the Belomorkanal brings the inmates to define themselves *zek*, namely «prisoners of the channel»<sup>25</sup>.

The rush for its realization and the chaos prevailing during the work led to the construction of a canal too narrow and shallow to be crossed by large ships loaded with materials. Despite these catastrophic results, the work was exalted by the regime's propaganda. For the Soviet leaders, the construction of Belmorkanal was proof that the system of Gulag worked.

<sup>23</sup> F.D. Liechtenhan, *Il laboratorio del Gulag. Le origini del sistema concentratorio sovietico*, Torino, Lindau, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Smirnov, Sigačëv, Skapov, *Il sistema dei luoghi di reclusione*, cit., pp. 60-61.

<sup>25</sup> Kotek, Rigoulot, *Il secolo dei campi*, cit., p. 112.

### 3. *The “de-kulakization”. The consolidation of the system*

In 1929 the Soviet regime launches five-year plans that provide for the forced industrialization and the process of collectivization. In 1930, the entire system is reorganized<sup>26</sup>. Part of the camp passes under the central control of Ogpu and the others under the direction of Nkvd of the individual republics. New structures are established throughout the Soviet territory, especially in areas of extreme eastern borders, in Kazakhstan and Central Asia. In this period, characterized by the Stalinist policy of the «great leap», we are witnessing an escalation of terror, with the number of inmates rising from 179,000 to 334,300 in 1933.

The secret police in 1931 also controls those sentenced to “special confinement” that is, those who are forcibly relocated from one region to another with the obligation to settle in the new place of destination assigned. Most of the «special resettlements» are special deported *kulaks* (*specpereselency*) that, in the Bolshevik propaganda, are identified as «rich peasants-owners, exploiters of the poor peasants»<sup>27</sup>. During the period of forced collectivization, from 1927 to 1937, the majority of the population of concentration camps is made up of *specpereselency*. What is called the forced «dekulakization» of the countryside includes two different fates for the convicted farmers. Those who are identified as terrorists who carry out anti-Soviet activities are sent to the Gulag. The less dangerous are deported to areas far from their native country and forced to become part of the collective farms called *kolkhoz*, where they are obliged to work in agriculture and in deforestation works<sup>28</sup>. During the forced «dekulakization» 600,000 properties are expropriated and more than 200,000 families are deported. While the Soviet government continues to seize and collect wheat in the State deposits,

<sup>26</sup> Kamiński, *I campi di concentramento dal 1896 ad oggi*, cit., p. 94.

<sup>27</sup> Literally, the word *Kulak* means «fist», but it was used to identify the rich farmer that employed day labourers and hired hand and, more in general, for all the farmers who were against the collectivisation campaign.

<sup>28</sup> Chlevnjuk, *Storia del Gulag*, cit., pp. 13-27.

hundreds of thousands of peasants are starving<sup>29</sup>. The areas most affected by these measures, the Ukraine, the Volga region, the Caucasus and central belt of Black Lands, are also affected by famine. What is called the «agrarian reform through extermination» produces between 6 and 7 million deaths. The political use of the famine (1931-1933), for liquidating the kulaks as a class, is implemented through a meticulously planned project: with the mass deportations, the expropriations, the refusal and the omission of any type of aid<sup>30</sup>.

The system of the Gulag, as we have seen, now serves not only to educate but, after the experience of Beromolkanal, also to achieve the major economic and social programmes of the state. Together with the collectivization campaign, projects are carried out using forced labour for economic exploitation and colonization of the extreme territories of the USSR. To exploit the rich deposits of gold and tin of the Kolyma River, which runs in the North-East of Siberia for 2,600 km, in 1932 is established the most famous Soviet Gulag, the Kolyma. The activity of this camp lasts until 1956, in nearly 25 years about a million prisoners are committed to the work of mining and to create the infrastructure needed to transport materials.

The Kolyma Gulag system is certainly the most well-known both for its longevity and for the testimonies that have arrived to us, including that of the writer Varlam Šalamov<sup>31</sup>. Among the Stalinist camps it stands out for the harshness of working conditions and the harsh climate, the winter temperatures often drop to minus 45 degrees below zero. The Kolyma camps will be called by Solzhenitsyn «the ovens of a polar Auschwitz»<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> R. Conquest, *Raccolto di dolore. Collettivizzazione sovietica e carestia terroristica*, Roma, Liberal Edizione, 2004; G. De Rosa, F. Lomastro, *La morte della terra. La grande «carestia» in Ucraina nel 1932-33*, Roma, Viella, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Ivi, pp. 65-96.

<sup>31</sup> V. Šalamov, *I racconti di Kolyma*, Torino, Einaudi, 2005.

<sup>32</sup> A. Solženitsyn, *Arcipelago gulag*, Milano, Mondadori, 1995, vol. II, p. 47; Kamiński, *I campi di concentramento dal 1896 ad oggi*, cit., p. 100.

In Kolyma also operates a large company for the colonization and exploitation of north-eastern Siberia, the Dal'stroy. Established by the OGPU, the company will be incorporated in 1934 by the NKVD and subordinated to the Minister of Internal Affairs of the USSR<sup>33</sup>. Its goal is to exploit the gold mines and the various mineral resources of which Siberia is rich<sup>34</sup>. Despite these machinations, the system is developed on the model already tested in Solovki. Immediately after the war, the Kolyma is filled with former Russian prisoners accused of being traitors and members belonging to the nationalist movements. Ukrainian, Baltic, Polish, Hungarian, Romanian, Czech, German and Japanese prisoners were deported to the Siberian Gulag. In 1952 the attendance reaches nearly 200,000 units only to go down the following year, thanks to the amnesty for common prisoners issued after the death of Stalin. Between 1957 and 1958 with the closing of the Directorate of the camps of rehabilitation through labour of the Northeast, also the Kolyma ceases to function<sup>35</sup>.

#### 4. *From stabilization to the «Great Terror»*

In 1934 the entire system of the Gulag is unified under the direction of NKVD which controls 14 camps. The number of prisoners in the camps reaches 725,000 units, since 1923 the population has increased by about 23 times. Most of the prisoners (over 200,000) are interned in Dmitlag for the works of the Moscow-Volga canal. Other small camps, with an average attendance of 5,000 units, are used to build infrastructures, railways, in deforestation and especially in agriculture. Farming and labour in the small workshops, are also intended for prisoners sent to the places of special confinement to colonize the most extreme territories of the USSR.

<sup>33</sup> Rossi, *Manuale del gulag*, cit., p. 102.

<sup>34</sup> Smirnov, Sigačëv, Skapov, *Il sistema dei luoghi di reclusione*, cit., p. 57.

<sup>35</sup> Ivi, pp. 60-63.

On December 1, 1934 one of the men closest to Stalin is assassinated, Sergej Mironovič Kirov (aka S.M. Kostriko). Stalin used the murder of Kirov to get rid of his former political opponents and, from February 28 to March 27, 1935, to expel from the cities the so-called «former people»: entrepreneurs, merchants, officials, former Tsarist officers, who had managed to escape the persecution of the twenties. The special Commission of NKVD sends to confinement and in the Gulag 11,072 people (4,833 householders and 6,239 members of their families) accused of being «terrorists» or «counterrevolutionaries»<sup>36</sup>.

The campaign against the common delinquency, in the mid-thirties, also leads to the increase of convicted children. The deportations and the socio-economic transformation of the USSR cause a significant rise in abandoned children. Several children have lost their parents and find themselves alone on the street, due to the significant deterioration of living conditions, many live on the margins of society and are easy prey to delinquency. The Soviet authorities punish these children sentencing them to internment in common orphanages or in collection centres or in reformatories, while those who are already 16 are imprisoned in jails or sent to the Gulag along with the adults<sup>37</sup>. In December 1935 it was established in Sarov the first work colony for minors. While on the previous April 20 was approved by the Politburo the «capital punishment (shooting)» for children over 12 years of age.

In the following months about 160,000 children are arrested, of which 62,000 are sent to collection NKVD centres. In the following year 156,000 other children are detained. The increase in convictions leads to the emergence of several work colonies for minors. In 1937, 38,000 children are interned there and are employed in the production of machine tools, furniture, knitwear, musical instruments, metal beds, spoons and photo paper. Only minors convicted in the work colonies, once they come of age,

<sup>36</sup> Chlevnjuk, *Storia del Gulag*, cit., pp. 102-106.

<sup>37</sup> Rossi, *Manuale del gulag*, cit., pp. 36-37.

manage to regain freedom. Most continued to serve the sentence in the Gulag<sup>38</sup>.

The Stalinist punitive system stabilizes until 1936, although alternating periods of peace and harder times with waves of terror. The situation changes in the period called the «Great Terror» between 1937 and 1938, because the mass repression is decided centrally and it strikes indiscriminately<sup>39</sup> all those who belong to those groups of people deemed by the Soviet leadership as potential enemies of the regime<sup>40</sup>. Among the categories affected by the «Stalinist terror» there are also dozens of Italian antifascists<sup>41</sup>.

The number of Gulag goes from 17 active at the beginning of 1937 to 31 in the following year. Nine more camps are set up in desert areas for the construction of military bases, power plants, roads and railways. The living conditions in the Gulag worsens considerably. Many scholars believe that by this time they are actual death camps<sup>42</sup>.

In 1938 the bigger camps had reached a no longer manageable size and had many and varied activities. To be able to make the most of them, central authorities decide to dismember them or rearrange them according to the specific specialization of the Gulag: those of Vorkuta for the construction of mines and for coal mining; those of Uchta-Ižma for the extraction of oil and copper; those of Kotlas-Vorkuta for the construction of the railway in the north and those of Ust'vymskij for the deforestation.

During the «Great Terror», the mortality rate in the camps, because of the shootings, arbitrariness and repression, increases up to 6.7%. In 1937 those shot are more than 350,000, while 800,000 are those sent to the camps, bringing the population up to two million inmates<sup>43</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> Chlevnjuk, *Storia del Gulag*, cit., pp. 137-143.

<sup>39</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag*, cit., p. 123.

<sup>40</sup> Chlevnjuk, *Storia del Gulag*, cit., p. 159.

<sup>41</sup> E. Dundovich, F. Gori, *Italiani nei lager di Stalin*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> Chlevnjuk, *Storia del Gulag*, cit., pp. 190-205.

<sup>43</sup> R. Conquest, *Il grande terrore*, Milano, Bur, 1999.

The social cleansing implemented with the «Stalinist purges» also affects the same camp commanders. Being accused of belonging to the organization of the «Trotskyites right wing», various directors, leaders and rulers of the fields are executed: «the *Gulag* swallows its founders»<sup>44</sup>.

### 5. *The World War, Stalin's death and the end of the system*

The specialization leads to an expansion of the productive sectors and to a further division of the great Gulag. In 1940 53 correctional labour camps are active with about 1.3 million inmates and 425 «corrective labour colonies»<sup>45</sup>. In 1941, the system is reformed again. With the birth of the People's Commissariat for National Security (NKGB), the production function is merged with that of the punitive camp, it will be created a single integrated and hierarchical concentration camp structure that will remain unchanged until 1953.

War brings the suspension of all works that are not necessary to the war effort<sup>46</sup>. The goal of the Soviet authorities is also to be able to mobilize the most useful men for the army. Only in 1941, 420,000 people are released from the camps before the expiration of their sentence. Throughout the period of the conflict, 840,000 prisoners of the Gulag will be used for wartime needs. Practice that followed also for prison inmates, once released, they are no longer sent to the camps or in the colonies, but at the frontline. In addition to these reasons, the presence of inmates also decreases because the courts replace prison sentences which included the concentration camp, instead sending the condemned to combat zones.

This labour shortage is compensated for by the increase in working hours. The new situation leads to a worsening of the living conditions in the camps with an increase in mortality rates.

<sup>44</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag*, cit., pp. 124-129.

<sup>45</sup> Gozzini, *La peculiarità del sistema concentratorio sovietico*, cit., p. 45.

<sup>46</sup> Smirnov, Sigačëv, Skapov, *Il sistema dei luoghi di reclusione*, cit., pp. 70-72.

Only in 1942, the mortality reaches 25%: about 248,877 prisoners out of 1,096,876 die.

During the war, the number of women interned grows significantly, from 13% in 1942 to 30% in 1945. On average, the presence of female prisoners in the Gulag was 15-17%. Many were interned because they belonged to the same family of a recluse and, while at the beginning of the system they lived in separate sectors of the camp, in the thirties facilities were built exclusively for women<sup>47</sup>.

After the retreat of the German army from the occupied areas of the USSR and the subsequent capitulation of Nazi-Fascist regimes, the Soviet concentration camps are filled with prisoners of war. In 1946 they are 1,800,000, among which there are many collaborators of Nazi troops, and not only German, Romanian, Finnish and Japanese, but also ethnic groups belonging to the republics of the USSR (Chechens, Tatars, Cossacks, Ingush, Kalmyks, Armenians, Bulgarians and Greeks). Reprisals hit nearly a million people belonging to those minorities who, along with half a million Germans (*Volksdeutsche*) of the Volga, for the most part are sent to forced labour camps in Siberia and Kazakhstan. Fate wants that they included many veterans who had returned from the Nazi concentration camps, who were accused of unworthiness for having surrendered to the enemy<sup>48</sup>.

The discipline of war is retained even after the end of the conflict. In 1948 the directions of the Gulag, which since 1946 under the jurisdiction of the Interior Ministry (MVD), are over 90 and the inmates detained in the camps, colonies and prisons are about 2,000,000. In the spring of 1950 the number rises to 3,000,000<sup>49</sup>. This increase is determined by the policy of "Sovietization" of the peoples of the USSR. Massive deportations affect the inhabitants of the Baltic states, Ukraine and Moravia. Conse-

<sup>47</sup> Rossi, *Manuale del gulag*, cit., p. 117; Applebaum, *Gulag*, cit., pp. 327-354.

<sup>48</sup> Gozzini, *La peculiarità del sistema concentrazionario sovietico*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>49</sup> Centro studi «Memorial», *Il sistema dei lager*, cit., p. 27; Applebaum, *Gulag*, cit., p. 483.



quently, the number of camps continued to grow and in 1952, including existing ones and those that are being built, a total 175 of structures is recorded<sup>50</sup>.

In 1953, with the death of Stalin, the system is reorganized once again. After the Berija's amnesty of March 27, more than a million people are liberated. Are excluded from the measure those convicted for «counterrevolutionary crimes»<sup>51</sup>. The camps, which then have decreased to 81, except those special ones where political prisoners are confined (about 260,000), pass under the direct control of the Ministry of Justice<sup>52</sup>.

In 1954 the special camps institution is closed and underage prisoners are freed. The number of inmates decreases by nearly 300,000 people. In the following year, after the liberation of «Soviet citizens who had collaborated with the enemy» and that should serve sentences for less than ten years, also German prisoners convicted of war crimes are released. While other foreign prisoners are allowed to return home, towards the end of 1958 also Japanese citizens are released. Meanwhile, the camps still active have gone down to 37, and the system of the Gulag is renamed «Central Directorate of the colonies of re-education through labour». In subsequent years, the Soviet authorities, to conceal the presence of the camps in the official documents, use the words «institutions», «colonies», «plants»<sup>53</sup>.

Towards the end of the Fifties the largest camps are dismantled, including those of Dal'strol and Noril'sk. The whole economic system, which had been the basis for the formation of the camps, is incorporated by the relevant ministries<sup>54</sup>.

The «Central Directorate of the colonies» is abolished in the Sixties but the camps continued to operate albeit with an essentially penitentiary aim. In the Seventies, although the attendance dropped to a few thousand, the camps are still used as a tool

<sup>50</sup> Smirnov, Sigačev, Skapov, *Il sistema dei luoghi di reclusione*, cit., p. 77.

<sup>51</sup> Kotek, Rigoulot, *Il secolo dei campi*, cit., pp. 115.

<sup>52</sup> Smirnov, Sigačev, Skapov, *Il sistema dei luoghi di reclusione*, cit., pp. 78-80.

<sup>53</sup> Kotek, Rigoulot, *Il secolo dei campi*, cit., pp. 116.

<sup>54</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag*, cit., p. 532.

of repression against dissidents and «nationalists». The reform of the code of «corrective labour» distinguishes the camps in general and special. Only after Gorbačëv's perestrojka, in 1986 the pardon is granted and most of the prisoners are released. In the following year other inmates receive the pardon and over 2,000 inmates are released from psychiatric hospitals. In 1988, the last political prisoners are released and the last Gulag, the one of Perm', is permanently closed<sup>55</sup>.

<sup>55</sup> P. Battisti *et. al.*, *Storie di uomini giusti nel Gulag*, Milano, Mondadori, 2004, p. 311; Koteck, Rigoulot, *Il secolo dei campi*, cit., pp. 116-117; Applebaum, *Gulag*, cit., pp. 582-583.

Natascia Mattucci

The power of imagination. Literature of the inhuman

1. The memory that we preserve of the tragic and exemplary events of the XX century, such as the Shoah or the Gulag camps system – without trying to identify apical moments within an alleged scale of evil – is linked to the time and way in which these events were transmitted to the ones that did not experience them directly. We know a lot about the Nazi totalitarian system, about the industrial-scale mechanisms of death sentencing and destruction of the differences that they managed to set up, thanks to the accounts of witnesses, the work of historians and the increasing interest in the Shoah showed by the movie industry during the last thirty years. Even the pseudo-theories of denial and revision of the Holocaust, that struggle to lessen the tragic importance of the fact and to question its uniqueness, have contributed, despite their actual intent, in keeping alive the debate on the memory of Shoah, involving also the younger generations. The same did not happen for the Soviet concentration camp system and for the network of camps which for a long time made up its framework. To understand the amnesia and silence characterizing this historical events, it can be useful to start from the conceptual tools that we can learn from the stratified literature that has been produced on the study of the Shoah. It is not the aim of this reflection to analyse the analogies between Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism, much has been already written on this subject. It could be useful, though, to approach the Gulag system, often considered periph-

eral in the history of the twentieth century, making the most of the extensive literature that is available on the Shoah.

The amount of analysis carried out on the meaning of witness and memory gives us precious elements for reflection for an understanding also of the Gulag system. In the preface of *I sommersi e salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*), Primo Levi mentions what appears to be a leitmotif also in the interviews the writer from Turin released: the prisoners' recurring dream of going back home, recounting their tribulations to their loved ones and not being believed or even heard<sup>1</sup>. This recurrent dream leads us to the issue related to the difficulty of talking and testifying about the enormity of what has been experienced and to the fear that this experience could fall into oblivion. This topic is connected to the topic of the proofs, the places and the stories of the survivors which, in the case of exemplary tragedies, has to be the main material for the reconstruction of the genealogy of events. The history of an "armed century", such as the twentieth century, is the result of a setting period, a normal and desirable process, thanks to which the facts can emerge with their chiaro-scuro and their perspective. Only after many years we came to understand the exemplarity of the Nazi massacre which is going to be remembered as a real watershed in the human history and culture. The fear and difficulty in recounting and testifying this experience – which often comes up in the few documentaries on Gulag devoting space to the interviews of witnesses and their families<sup>2</sup> – and the many obstacles that were placed along the path to having a public memory of those facts, show us that we have a long way to go towards an understanding of Soviet totalitarianism. This has been highlighted by Irina Shcherbakova, who points out the fact that the memories of the former prisoners are the main source to reconstruct what happened in the Soviet camps, with all that follows, because human memory, as Levi

<sup>1</sup> P. Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, in M. Belpoliti (ed.), *Opere*, Torino, Einaudi, 1997, vol. II.

<sup>2</sup> See <<http://www.lastoriasiamonoi.rai.it/puntate/solovki/969/default.aspx>>.

put it, it is not carved in stone, but is subject to deterioration and alterations mostly due to psychological and physical repression<sup>3</sup>. The slow process of reconstruction of the memory is far from being an exact photo able to accurately reproduce the past.

In his literary testament, Levi with farsightedness warned us from the traps of “remembering”, because as much as it is true that memory is a muscle that is kept active and trained through exercise, it is also true that a memory which is evoked too often and expressed in the form of a story tends to set into a tested, even stereotyped form of experience<sup>4</sup>. A memory cleaned up to the bone risks, with time, to become a substitute for the actual experience. The places of the Shoah have been for a long time non-representable and unspeakable. The Shoah has become a subject for literature and movies, subtracting the concentration camps from the shadow in which post-war culture had placed them. Nowadays, many people are questioning the overproduction of literary and cinematographic works which led to justify even fabrication and false witness. Annette Wieviorka, author of *L'ère du témoin (The Era of the Witness)*<sup>5</sup>, believes that Auschwitz risks becoming “illegible”, “a mute place”, and appearing as a protective screen for the fears and hopes of individuals and collectivities once it is turned into a place for liturgical pilgrimage and official commemorations<sup>6</sup>. To prevent the memory of a fact from becoming a substitute of the fact itself, and its symbol, concept or metonymy from obfuscating its experience, it is necessary to re-position the event in its historical context and to question its current function in the public debate on memory. To recover the experience of such places means to give them back to

<sup>3</sup> I. Shcherbakova, *Remembering the Gulag. Memoirs and Oral Testimonies by Former Inmates*, in E. Dundovich, F. Gori, E. Guercetti (eds.), *Reflections on the Gulag. With a Documentary Appendix on the Italian Victims of Repression in USSR*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2003, p. 187.

<sup>4</sup> Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, cit., pp. 1006-1007.

<sup>5</sup> A. Wieviorka, *L'ère du témoin*, Paris, Plon, 1998; it. tr. *L'era del testimone*, Milano, Cortina, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> A. Wieviorka, *Auschwitz e la memoria di Auschwitz*, Seminaire de Formation, Université d'Hiver Italienne, Memorial de la Shoah di Paris, january 2012.

history. That is what Tomasz Kizny has been trying to do with his photographic work *Gulag*, documenting through images what for many years had represented a self-contained universe, lost in the immensity of the Soviet territory<sup>7</sup>. His work is a testimony to a long research through the places of memory, with photos from the past come to light from the state archives, personal photos of the survivors and contemporary images of those places provoking the imagination of the observer.

Levi wrote that, generally, retrospective re-elaboration of the past cannot concern past events already judged by history, but is instead allowed for the reasons which led to commit those acts. The reasons, the states of mind, even the conditions of possibility, are an ephemeral matter, subject to deformation. They can also be suppressed and denied and, not surprisingly, the mindful wishing to become unmindful succeeds, because the best way to defend one-self against the invasion of memories is to prevent their entry, placing a sanitary barrier along the border<sup>8</sup>. If it is easier to prevent the recording of a memory than to get rid of it after it has been recorded, then it is also possible to make our way through the karstic war against memory, which comes down to the tampering of the truth, that totalitarian systems have led. Manipulation, deletion and indifference surrounded, and continue to surround, the Soviet concentration camp universe, though, as written by Marcello Flores, the term “Gulag” seems to have acquired a certain citizenship in the contemporary world<sup>9</sup>. We know that the acronym Gulag, referring to the central management of the camps, was transformed over time into a noun, becoming the base of the Soviet repressive system<sup>10</sup>. As the existence of

<sup>7</sup> T. Kizny, *Gulag*, Milano, Mondadori, 2004. See also T. Kizny, *La grande terreur en URSS 1937-1938*, with D. Roynette, Lausanne, Les Editions Noir sur blanc, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, cit., p. 1013.

<sup>9</sup> M. Flores, *Presentazione*, in Id., F. Gori (eds.), *GULag. Il sistema dei lager in URSS*, Milano, Mazzotta, 2002, pp. 11-12.

<sup>10</sup> J. Rossi, *Le Manuel du Goulag: dictionnaire historique*, Paris, Le cherche midi, 1997. Gulag, *Glavnoe upravlenie lagerej*, stands for “Central Directorate of the Lager”. It is the name taken by the administration of the concentration camps of the Ogpu of USSR in 1930, when they were renamed correctional labour camps. In 1934, with the

camps (Lager) and correctional work was already known in the Thirties, at least in an enclosed area, it is only the appearance – in the Seventies and in the western territory – of the testimony contained in *Arkhipelag Gulag* (*The Gulag Archipelago*) by Aleksandr Solženicyn to raise the curtain on a deadly political system. We have learned from the testimony and the work of historians that, since the 1920s, with the transformation of the monastery of the Solovki into a camp for political prisoners, the system of internment camps grew enormously, especially with the exacerbation of the Stalinist repression, and that millions of prisoners passed through them, many of whom perished for the inhuman conditions of work and life. The archipelago of Solovki was a laboratory experiment for what would become a system, a structure of camps with a variable topography<sup>11</sup>.

The history of the Gulag does not lend itself to a linear reconstruction, because of its both quantitative and geographical metamorphosis, its extension and specialization that have changed according to necessary adaptations – real mutations – that the production system demanded and the political ideology legitimized. The exploitation of forced labour of prisoners through a wide and capillary system-camp allowed them to industrialize the country quickly and to plan the economy, creating major public works and exploiting the deposits of the subsoil (channel of the White Sea, exploitation of gold deposits of Kolyma, construction of railways, just to name a few). It should be clear then, that the construction of the camp-system is not the shadow of the Soviet political system nor its pathology, but is the intertwining of the economic and the repressive systems, inseparable from the history of the country itself. Summarising, the Gulag is constitutive part and parcel of the system that directed and created it, and it is also an essential part of the history of the last century. Although the

dissolution of OGPU and the transfer of its functions to the NKVD of USSR, also the Gulag was passed to the People's Commissariat.

<sup>11</sup> F.D. Liechtenhan, *Il laboratorio del Gulag. Le origini del sistema concentratorio sovietico*, Torino, Lindau, 2009.

publication of the writings by Solženicyn or the stories by Varlam Salamov have certainly helped the public opinion approach such an extensive and varied structure, the delay in the studies and in the disclosure of these facts cannot help but raise questions. The attitude of disinterest that for decades has affected the Gulag, the inability or unwillingness to make it a subject of scientific analysis, makes us wonder about the causes of this repression and inhibition of the memory. Norman Davies pointed out that the word Gulag, although widespread, is free of the poignancy and emotion that we feel when we refer to the Nazi extermination camps<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, the names of the largest camps administered by the Gulag such as Solovki, the White Sea Canal, Vorkuta, Kolyma or Vaigač, remain unknown to most people, unable to evoke some physical place that really exists and to activate a memory. This indicates how these deadly and liberticidal places continue to remain peripheral not only geographically, but also in the Twentieth-century's catalogue of the sites devoted to dehumanization.

A careful reconstruction of the European historical dynamics should go back to focus on the function of the “concentration camp universe”, a term coined by David Rousset for Nazi concentration camps and then extended to the Soviet forced labour camps, and to the “camp” paradigm. Although there are many similarities between the two systems, looking at their ways of identifying the enemy we must point out that, while the Nazi apparatus puts to death humans on the basis of their biological-racial label, condemning the alleged inferior races as subhuman, the Soviet system sends to the camps a multifarious and changing typology of enemies of the people, a result of the siege-syndrome of the new revolutionary regime and of a paranoid attitude concerning that hunt for the hypocrite that characterized the degenerative phase of well-known revolutionary processes.

<sup>12</sup> N. Davies, *Introduzione* in Kizny, *Gulag*, cit., p. 2.



A comparative approach, therefore, can be extremely useful to understand uniqueness and differences<sup>13</sup>, in this perspective, it should be emphasized that the Soviet concentration camp universe took on a shape determined according to two characteristics: one is the internal purge of the ruling class, the other is attributing a productive role to the forced labour of the inmates. In the Soviet Union the concentration camp system was fully organic in the architecture of the state and did not have an emergency or parallel character, as it was in the Reich. In addition, the forced labour of the inmates, which in the theoretical and propagandist line had the function to re-educate the counterrevolutionary subjects, had a productive role which was decisive to pull the country out of the doldrums of backwardness.

Further analogy between the two schemes, which are worth analysing herein, relates to the process of dehumanization implemented through the camp system. Giorgio Agamben, in a now famous text, *Homo sacer*, refers to the “camp” as to the place of the absolute realization of the *conditio inhumana*, not explicable in terms of anomaly, but rather as *nómos* of the modern political space<sup>14</sup>. The field of analysis of Agamben is the National Socialist legal one, but we think some of his considerations can be an instrument of analysis useful to penetrate even the Gulag system. What emerges from his reflections is how the camp gradually abandons its state of exception – a temporary suspension of the legal order in a situation of danger – to settle in between the rules perceived as normal. The camp represents the place of hybridization of fact and law, rules and exceptions, legal and illegal. It is an indistinctive zone in which inmates, right from the start, are deprived of all legal and political status and reduced to bare life, a purely biological nucleus that can easily be killed. In Soviet labour camps, mass death constituted the result of natural

<sup>13</sup> G. Gozzini, *Le peculiarità dell'universo concentrazionario sovietico*, in Flores, Gori (eds.), *GULag. Il sistema dei lager in URSS*, cit., p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> G. Agamben, *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, Torino, Einaudi, p. 185.

consumption to dispose of congestion and overcrowding, to be watched with indifference. The normalization of the political and legal system of the Soviet camps was widespread, as it was vital for the management of power itself. The central management of the camps, with its complex and pervasive branching, was a structure needed for the preservation of a power that obtained consent relying mainly on fear and threats. Because of this the structure, while having a flexibility that suited the flow of inmates, maintained a stability and permanence that formed the backbone of the regime. In this normalizing perspective should also be considered the executions, which represented a deterrent for a long time used by the regime against alleged enemies of the State.

Agamben wrote that the correct question to ask with respect to the crimes committed in the camps is not how it was possible to make this kind of atrocities against human beings. It is far more useful to search for those policies and legal mechanisms that had allowed the progressive deprivation of their rights and prerogatives to the point that committing a crime against these individuals did no longer appear as a crime<sup>15</sup>. The legal basis of the Gulag was created stretching art. 58 of the criminal code that came into force in 1926, which regulated the crime against the state and the conquests of the revolution. It was a ductile article that opened up the possibility to arrest anyone; it remained in force until 1959, tightening up in 1934. The offenses contained in it, divided into 14 paragraphs with the related penalties, concerned activities aimed at bringing down or weakening the Soviet state, threatening its security and its economic and political achievements. Among those, treason, sabotage, counterrevolutionary activity, damage to the economy, silence on the counterrevolutionary activity (failure to report), with sentences ranging from imprisonment to execution<sup>16</sup>. We are faced with a restructuring of the penal system functional to the demand for labour and the

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, p. 191.

<sup>16</sup> Liechtenhan, *Il laboratorio del Gulag. Le origini del sistema concentratorio sovietico*, cit., pp. 90-94.

establishment of a totalitarian regime, able to determine the life of individuals in such a pervasive way, that these could not find any refuge from the control that the state exercised on the public and private sphere. Soviet society, therefore, took on the structure of a concentration camp universe despite maintaining a legal facade.

It has been emphasised how the totalitarian experience consists mainly in constant fear of physical violence, of arrest, because terror is used as a means of ordinary administration. Twentieth-century's totalitarian regimes pursued the intent to build new societies, re-formulating the boundaries of the human, transforming the very idea of humanity and dignity, physically eliminating entire and actually existing human aggregations, identified on the basis of arbitrary categorizations suggested by the dominant ideology and subsequently translated into state law<sup>17</sup>. Not dissimilar to what happened in Germany, the Soviet state dismissed entire classes of undesirable thanks to the combination of dominant ideology, decision-making process of the leadership, the daily work of the secret police. The population that transited in the Gulag system – arbitrarily made up of common criminals, politicians, alleged counterrevolutionaries and saboteurs – could not understand the reasons for a structure so large and sometimes meaningless from a strictly utilitarian point of view.

Hannah Arendt has shown how, to reach the completion of the process of total domination, the totalitarian logic needed to be welded to an ideology that would prepare the ground for the process that structured the regime, adapting people's minds to the law of movement. In this direction, the ideologies of racism and dialectical materialism transformed nature and history, from the firm ground supporting life and human action into gigantic forces whose movements ran through humanity, dragging along each

<sup>17</sup> V. Zaslavsky, *Il nemico oggettivo: il totalitarismo sovietico e i suoi bersagli interni*, in Flores, Gori (eds.), *GULag. Il sistema dei lager in URSS*, cit., p. 30

individual<sup>18</sup>. In spite of any political purpose, these ideologies always ended up claiming the superfluity of someone or something for the development or progress of the species. To immobilize the men so to give free rein to the movement of nature and history intervened the terror. Through its use it was possible to proceed to suppress individual plurality for the well-being of the species, because each individual could potentially re-activate that space of freedom that is intolerable in total domination. Michel Foucault noted that while in the Nazi system the state took it upon itself to biologically protect the race in a grand apologetic narrative, in the Soviet one the old question of the social struggles was sterilized by the hygienic imperative of a society that had to be cleaned up of all, broadly speaking, deviants. In this way, the raucous chant of the races in struggle, that seemed about to launch a revolutionary scenario, became the administrative prose of a state that protected itself in the name of a social asset to be preserved in its purest form<sup>19</sup>.

The combination of ideology and legal system, typical of totalitarian states, shows how the law can play a role of immunization in the community. To mark the boundaries of its identity, be it racial or class boundaries, the law protects the community from contamination and risks of expropriation<sup>20</sup>. Therein lies the contradiction of a right seen as appropriation: to affirm what is “owned” by the community, you must necessarily deprive it of what “is not common”. The law retains its community identity only displacing its meaning, that is, making it less common. The terror was an intrinsic element to the Soviet totalitarian regime because it was necessary for that social and anthropological metamorphosis which required not only the elimination of enemies,

<sup>18</sup> H. Arendt, *On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essays in Understanding* (1953), in J. Kohn (ed.), *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954. Uncollected and Unpublished Works by Hannah Arendt*, New York, Harcourt Brace and Co., 1994.

<sup>19</sup> M. Foucault, “*Il faut défendre la société*”. *Cours au Collège de France*. 1975-1976, Paris, Gallimard-Seuil, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> R. Esposito, *Immunitas. Protezione e negazione della vita*, Torino, Einaudi, 2002, pp. 26-27.

but of entire categories of citizens considered an ontological threat, beyond their behaviour (considered as rivals for their very existence). In the Nazi case, the immunizing logic appeared also in its function of medicalization, when they employed the exterminating gas against Jews-lice, but also in the Soviet regime, similarly, the enemies of the people had to be exterminated like pests. Characteristic of the Soviet structure was also the political use of the famine as an instrument of normalization of the classes in the countryside, putting in place a plan of social engineering to achieve mass murders through deportation, expropriation, deprivation and negligence<sup>21</sup>.

For what concerns the Soviet system, the ideology thus provided a scale to distinguish between “socially close” and “socially alien” categories, in the language of the regime. The socially alien ones were destined to disappear in the course of historical development as an obstacle to the social process, the completion of a perfect society that could not fail to leave “social deaths”<sup>22</sup> along its path. Arendt has explained in her *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that the logic of ideology is like a straitjacket in which the movements are jaded and inexorable<sup>23</sup>. In the Soviet ideology, the Party, with its means, has the function of accelerating the dialectical process assuming the role of executor of social condemnations that had already been decided by history. Men, trapped into the spiral of this ceaseless historic becoming, could only choose to be either perpetrators, or victims of this law and, by virtue of the same inexorable principle, those who at one time were perpetrators, another time were victims. The ground for this relentless human destiny was prepared through the close fusion of deductive logic and ideology.

<sup>21</sup> Gozzini, *Le peculiarità dell'universo concentrazionario sovietico*, cit., p. 49.

<sup>22</sup> Zaslavsky, *Il nemico oggettivo: il totalitarismo sovietico e i suoi bersagli interni*, cit., p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York, Brace and Co., 1951; II ed. New York, The World Publishing Company, Meridian Books, 1958; III ed. New York, Harcourt Brace and Word, 1966.

2. For a long time the judgment on the Gulag and the Stalin's regime was affected by anti-fascism and an international climate in which the sources of the news were not always direct. At the end of the Forties, the excuse of lack of information could not stand any longer and Rousset denounced the existence of the Soviet camps<sup>24</sup>. In his view the reality of the camps was not serious because one suffered and died in them, but because one had to live inside them. The system of labour camps, especially the Special camp, enabled man to live for years in conditions of decay and loss of self-respect. A country that is equipped with facilities of this kind is doomed to moral decay: it dehumanizes prisoners, but at the same time, it highlights the corruption of the regime itself. The concentration camp world's aim was to immunize from contact with alleged enemies through their confinement, also geographical, but in fact, it activated an inevitable contagion. As it happened with other tragic events, difficult to even mention, literature has succeeded, more than other tools, in raising awareness of historical reality and human tragedy through empathy. Attempts to question the fact of the Soviet concentration camp universe and its centrality in the history of the USSR are still persistent, especially after the Nineties. Moreover, unlike what happened with the Shoah, there is no interest for these facts on the part of the cinematographic industry and still there is not a transnational literature of the Gulag as inhumane dimension<sup>25</sup>.

How can literature have a key role in activating the memory and reflecting on dehumanization? Even in this case some reflections by Arendt could support us along this path. For Arendt, literature is a source through which it is possible to penetrate the essence of a phenomenon, and shed new light on its meaning. Narrative can sometimes unveil the secret truth of events better than history. Not because it describes or dominates with realism,

<sup>24</sup> M. Flores, *L'Occidente e il GULag*, in Id., Gori (eds.), *GULag. Il sistema dei lager in URSS*, cit., p. 98.

<sup>25</sup> M. Martini, *Il GULag e la letteratura: storia di un genere mancato*, in Flores, Gori (eds.), *GULag. Il sistema dei lager in URSS*, cit., pp. 85-93.

but because the plot of individual acts acquire a meaning in the retrospective reading of the facts, when one suffers once again for a past suffering that the memory is able to reactivate. For this reason, in distinguishing the different meanings deposited in a word, historical experience should never be separated from the support of a gallery of works of art, a real goldmine for imagination<sup>26</sup>.

Thus, there is a close link between literature, imagination and historical events, especially tragic ones. The burden that the story of dramatic events imposes on us can be sustained, according to Arendt, by virtue of the gift of an “understanding heart”, which allows us to continue to live with others in the same world. Understanding has to do with the power of imagination, one that focuses on the darkness of the human heart and the particular opacity that surrounds all that exists<sup>27</sup>. When referring to the essence or nature of a phenomenon, as in the case of totalitarianism, we actually allude to an inner core that can be penetrated only by imagination, if one is in possession of an inner compass that allows orientation, putting things at the right distance. Understanding is thus fuelled by that attitude able to portrait the different positions in which the world may appear. The understanding of facts that would appear incomprehensible at first glance, can be activated and nourished through the human faculty of imagining experiences that they have not experienced first hand.

However, the ability to construct mental images, which allow us to be where we are not and to mentally live something which we did not actually experience, is not given once and for all. Lynn Hunt, in a particularly lucid work dedicated to the history of human rights, has highlighted how the ability to imagine the others’ feelings like ours can be named in terms of empathy.

<sup>26</sup> H. Arendt, *On Humanity in Dark Times. Thoughts about Lessing*, in *Men in Dark Times*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1968.

<sup>27</sup> H. Arendt, *Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties in Understanding)*, in J. Kohn (ed.), *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954. Uncollected and Unpublished Works by Hannah Arendt*, cit.

The originality of the study lies in its ability to read how this identification and empathy in others, beyond the social differentiation, is the basis of the spreading of human rights and how it could have literature as its glue<sup>28</sup>. Hunt offers a reconstruction of historical nature, referred to the eighteenth century, but that may be useful in this discussion because it emphasizes that if no fertile ground had been prepared by literature, the first speeches against the violation of human rights would have fallen on deaf ears. The novel has affected human rights because it has encouraged psychological identification. Literature, through persuasive description, allows us to take a leap into the imaginary lives of others, identifying with the feelings recounted. This identification is a vehicle for empathy, allowing us to be with our thoughts and feelings where we are not physically, in the place of others.

Fiction then opens to the presence of an ideal reader who finds himself involved in a sentimental plot that links him to society. This inclination towards identification and empathy, also allows it to instil principles. On a field sown with this kind of feelings human rights, with all the difficulties that are known to us, developed. Literature, imagination, the diffusion of an empathic involvement are held together and direct the not-dissimilar others to feeling. Equality can be learned through a simulated experience of identification, powered by an involvement that only the imagination is able to activate. The strength of imaginary identification, to put one-self in the place of others, even if only through one faculty, is clearly demonstrated by Arendt with an example related to the way of narrating the terrible events of the First World War. Years later, after the event and after a mass of detailed descriptions that had not managed to really convey that experience to those who had not lived it, the publication of the novel *A Fable* by William Faulkner showed that only art can unravel the meaning of an event by finally making us exclaim: "Yes, this is how it was"<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> L. Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights. A History*, New York-London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Arendt, *On Humanity in Dark Times. Thoughts about Lessing*, cit.



A plot becomes a real event only when it is experienced a second time through that suffering, or upsetting emotion, that memory can stir when it acts retrospectively.

There is a tragic effect in each repetition of the event that affects the abilities related to our feelings. Our sensitive and imaginative faculty, as Günther Anders wrote, are flexible and should be adapted to the products, even the harmful ones, that technology allows us to realise<sup>30</sup>. Maybe a possible way towards this expansion of feeling, not immediate nor linear, is the one that goes through art, in a very broad sense. Arendt had guessed this, making literature and art an actual tool for her philosophical activity to be used to penetrate the meanings of events, just think, in addition to the call to Faulkner, about her use of Kafka, Brecht, Conrad, Dostoevskij, just to name a few. It is a further testimony of this the stylistic code used by Levi in *If This Is a Man*, a work full of literary references in which the author does not just tell, but makes a quiet study of the human soul. It is perhaps the very poetics of Levi, together with the ethical-philosophical considerations crossing his text, to make the young reader of his memoir of Auschwitz still exclaim: “Yes, this is how it was”. It is a silent exclamation, told to himself, able to activate a silent dialogue with oneself expanding the feeling and putting the readers in a situation that they have not really lived but can imagine.

It is also what happens to the reader of *Kolymskie rasskazy* (*Kolyma Tales*) by Šalamov<sup>31</sup>, stories that describe in an essential style the reality of the labour camps of Kolyma – particularly inhospitable region of Siberia, but home to rich mineral deposits – and the process of degradation of the human being that occurred there. It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss which authors should be counted within the Soviet concentration camp literature. However, Šalamov’s stature is revealed in the construction

<sup>30</sup> G. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen, I. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, München, C.H. Beck, 1956.

<sup>31</sup> V.T. Šalamov, *Kolymskie rasskazy*, London, Overseas publications interchange, 1978; it. tr. *I racconti di Kolyma*, 2 voll., Torino, Einaudi, 1999.

of a unique, full-bodied work, yet stripped down from the point of view of language, in which the narrator takes on many names giving life to a variety of stories<sup>32</sup>. The stories are like shards of a vase, fragments of life that the author, nearly emptying himself, has scattered on the pages without no intention of recomposing them in a linear plot. Šalamov goes to the bottom, almost surgically, of every detail of the Kolyma, in every single story, without providing the disoriented reader with a compass, not knowing exactly whether the story will be continued or the track is lost, as in one of the pictures by Kizny, *The dead road*, emblem of the totalitarian foolishness.

The Kolyma is the dominant dimension of death, for inmates who have arrived at their final destination but that have already experienced a premature death of the feelings. Šalamov speaks of spiritual dullness, frost that penetrates into the souls of men, because in Kolyma senses were frozen, shrunken (Levi writes about a shutdown of the soul that precedes the anonymous death). It is an analysis that has more than one trait in common with that investigation of the psyche and the inhuman, that Levi took first in *If This Is a Man* and then in *The Drowned and the Saved*. At the centre of the writings of the two authors we find a careful description, not emphasized, of dehumanization and spiritual dullness. To Šalamov, it is a long and relentless descent into hell punctuated by subtraction. In the camp, the human condition gradually loses its ontological status to be impoverished by mere adherence to the body and its needs, as Lévinas had guessed reflecting on the essence of Hitlerism<sup>33</sup>. In inhumane climatic and work conditions, when cold, hunger, “work-standards” to be respected, mark endless days, the bonds of solidarity between people freeze like their souls. When it is reduced to a mere bundle of reactions, «no bond of friendship can be born with hunger, cold and insomnia [...] for that to happen, for friendship to prove

<sup>32</sup> Martini, *Il Gulag e la letteratura: storia di un genere mancato*, cit., p. 92.

<sup>33</sup> E. Lévinas, *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme*, «Esprit», 26, 1934, pp. 199-208.

to be real, one has to build its solid foundations before the situation, the living conditions have arrived at that extreme limit beyond which humans have nothing left of the human and there is only suspicion, anger, lies»<sup>34</sup>.

In *If This Is a Man* Levi writes that material cares as well as polluting pure happiness, in the same way distract the attention of the inmates from the tragedy that loomed above them, fragmenting and undermining their awareness<sup>35</sup>. It is the discomfort that keeps us afloat in the void of despair, and Šalamov describes this bulky weight of corporeality and its needs, stressing repeatedly how, in the grip of cold, you could not think of anything, on the contrary some moral force is retained in the eyes of others as long as you have physical strength<sup>36</sup>. The inmates of the camps, both Soviet and Nazi camps, personally experience the condition of being shackled to their body mentioned by Lévinas, that precipitates the spiritual life down to simple biological fact, with all the inevitability that this entails. If the weight of existence lies on a previous nailing of the body, to which one cannot escape, whether it is a weight measured by a racial scale or working performance, then you can understand how in the eyes of totalitarian states strong men were better and more valuable, more worthy of respect than weak men.

Levi also calls into question the imagination of readers, so that they can try to understand what happened in the camps, when he writes, «Now imagine a man who, together with his loved ones, is taken away from his house, his habits, his clothes, everything, finally, literally everything he has: it will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and discernment, as it happens easily, to those who have lost everything, to lose themselves»<sup>37</sup>. The life or death of an empty shell you can decide light-heartedly, based on the mere use, if not on pure

<sup>34</sup> Šalamov, *I racconti di Kolyma*, cit., vol. I, p. 24.

<sup>35</sup> P. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, ed. by A. Cavaglioni, Torino, Einaudi, 2012, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Šalamov, *I racconti di Kolyma*, cit., vol. I, pp. 43-44.

<sup>37</sup> Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, cit., p. 19.

chance. There are several expressions used by Levi to try to make us imagine a human being reduced to a shell: remains of an insect, army of larvae, dance of lifeless men. They are names that try to describe human beings reduced to their last stage, empty inside, that will die with indifference (as in the case of Null Achtzehn)<sup>38</sup>. To give us an outline of the detention Šalamov speaks of waste, slag, remains of men that the mine discharged in the hospital or the morgue<sup>39</sup>.

In the story by Šalamov appear, in many circumstances, the *dochodjaga*, namely those about to die, prisoners now reduced to a flicker that barely drag themselves around the workplace, exhausted by fatigue and hunger. Šalamov's almost dead are tragically similar to Levi's Muslims (*muselmänner*)<sup>40</sup>, described as *men in dissolution*. They are figures that, although incorporated by the crowd, remain in their opaque solitude and their disappearance leaves no trace in the memory of anyone. *Dochodjaga* and *muselmänner* represent the peculiarity of the totalitarian camp<sup>41</sup>. Those about to die are those who do not have access to the grey area of compromise, the one of the prominent, criminals, of those who learn other scales of value. The Drowned, the subdued, have followed orders to the letter, going down the slope of death without resistance until they reach the bottom. Their fatigue is a death of the soul, a social death that condemns them to invisibility and insignificance.

The lesson that the camps for human annihilation give us is primarily moral, as Levi showed in *The Drowned and Saved*. They are tragic laboratories, whose extreme tension increases the grey line of people ready for compromise and collaboration. Their analysis goes beyond the circumstances of the extermination and looks therefore at human ambiguity. Deadly orders feed on the small and large complicity of those who serves a regime, of

<sup>38</sup> Ivi, p. 33.

<sup>39</sup> Šalamov, *I racconti di Kolyma*, cit., vol. I, p. 152.

<sup>40</sup> Ivi, p. 45.

<sup>41</sup> Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, cit., p. 76.

subordinates, who give their consents because anyway someone else would do it. Šalamov also writes that in the camp inmates learn flattery, falsehood, baseness of all kinds, large and small<sup>42</sup>. Their moral barriers were put aside and if they were to regain the freedom, they would realize how each of their interest has been reduced and impoverished.

Levi and Šalamov are tangible examples of how literature could be a precious exercise to expand our imaginative ability. Their writings allow us to *feel* the deep meaning of those events, even though through the wail of memory. Šalamov wrote that the prose of the future must have something different from the past after such events<sup>43</sup>. Then he adds that literature needs *reliability* to have the power, to raise that empathy able to make the reader exclaim: “Yes, this is how it was”.

<sup>42</sup> Šalamov, *I racconti di Kolyma*, cit., vol. I, p. 179.

<sup>43</sup> Ivi, p. 120.



Lanfranco di Genio

## The subtle utopia

We did not want to know about Gulag, we did not want to see it, we believed in propaganda, which described the arrested as “enemies of the people”. We hated them. We went out on the streets with banners that said “Death to Trotskists dogs”. We shouted at the meetings, demanding death sentence. We were a mob.

Sergej Kovalev, *Former inmate at Kolyma, human rights activist in Russia and member of the Duma*

Twenty-five years ago, in 1989, to the general amazement and incredulity, the Berlin Wall collapsed, crumbling on itself with no bloodshed, and with it, the various Communist regimes of East Europe, up to the final fall of the Soviet regime in 1992. It was a succession of small peaceful revolutions that we, as Westerners, witnessed in astonishment, barely understanding their epoch-making nature, especially since all this happened in the din of the bicentennial of the French Revolution, in the wake of that Third World movement that characterized the 70s and 80s, and at the same time only a few months after the horrendous massacre in Tiananmen. On this side of the Wall, the communist universe, except for a small circle of people, represented, due to a lack of direct contacts and information, a riddle, a nebula, where, on the one hand, utopias, hopes and dreams of an ideal society were still projected, while on the other hand the usual anecdotes and stereotypes regarding the provision of consumer goods of which

we had plenty, circulated – and still circulate now. The issue of human rights and the repressive nature of the Communist regime, then as now, was pushed into the background, obscured, sometimes even mocked. Those few dissidents who could communicate with the outside world were viewed with suspicion, portrayed as reactionary, therefore unreliable, since they would demolish the conditions of a possible alternative to the model of Western society.

Aleksandr Solženicyn, despite being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, was subjected from the start to a defamatory campaign, in perfect Soviet style, aimed not so much at denying the horrifying truth about the communist repressive machine built on the creation of Gulag, which the writer and former inmate had unveiled for the world in his magna opera *Gulag Archipelago*, but rather at discrediting the man, humiliating him morally and intellectually, portraying him as a sinister individual, a retrograde, reactionary and bigoted Russian nationalist, a slimy residue of Tsarist Russia. This is the deformed image that the press of Italian and Western left-wing intelligentsia gave of him, with a few exceptions, to mitigate the impact of scandalous revelations about the repressive communist system and its countless violence. The widespread and oiled Soviet-Communist propaganda-machine and his host of servants loyal to the party (and countless left wing sympathizers) scattered in various countries, was always able to systematically sabotage the revelations that were detrimental to its cause, the fake dream it wanted to embody, the liberation of mankind from oppression, exploitation and injustice.

Consequently, *The Gulag Archipelago*, which revealed to the world the horrors of the Soviet concentration camp universe, did not get, at least until the 90's, the recognition and dissemination it deserved. By denigrating the man they had managed to discredit his work, but not to deny its content. By reading it people would have found out that the much-reviled writer had been a fervent Communist who had, however, made the mistake of criticizing the great Stalin because he had sent his soldiers to



slaughter, regardless of the loss of many lives. This meaningless massacre, Solzhenitsyn had seen it with his own eyes at the front-line, where he had earned the rank of lieutenant for his courage and his skill.

After all, since the outset of the communist era, by virtue of this dream that was never to be broken, all the attempts to denounce the criminal nature of the communist system – in the way it was being constructed and imposed – had mostly failed.

The free and democratic Western world, apart from the traditionally anti-communist “right wingers”, had always behaved as an accomplice, often serving as a sounding board for communist propaganda. Not even the great intellectuals, such as the French writer André Gide with his *Retour de l'URSS*, published in 1936, or the work of Croatian dissident Ante Ciliga, who had escaped the Soviet prisons, *In the country of the big lie*, published in 1938 in Paris, managed to dent the faith of the militants and, above all, the wall of silence and lies that, with a clever and devious propaganda, was being built around the Soviet regime. Besides, most of the Western left wing intellectuals, except for a few commendable exceptions, have always defended, for their “love for the cause”, the communist modus operandi.

This is the furrow along which Soviet history has dragged itself in Western countries, and in general the history of communism, until its fall in the late '80s: a story punctuated by a blanket of silence, of tepid denounces, sometimes abrupt and traumatic separations (or expulsion), of contorted changes of mind, of a long political and intellectual strain in order to justify and deny reality, the truth about a brutal, violent and criminal system. An arrogant belief in their own moral and intellectual superiority has prevented them from accepting the existence of those who opposed the communist dictatorship and violence. By virtue of the victory over Nazism, it seemed almost sacrilegious to acknowledge the moral right to resist against Communism. Opponents were nothing but dirty fascists, petty bourgeois or bigoted clericals.

The same reaction there was when, at the end of the 70s, the great revolt of the shipyard workers of Gdansk in Poland

broke out, led by leader Lech Walesa. They were demanding the right to strike and to establish a free trade union in a country whose communist government had elected itself, like an absolute monarchy of the 18th century, as the only true, “absolute” representative of the workers. It was an inconceivable possibility.

Moreover, the election of a Polish pope in the Vatican, immediately triggered the usual anti-clerical propaganda. But times had changed and, without us realizing it, both in the West and in the East, the communist regimes of Eastern Europe were imploding. The cracks had started to show and the strength of the Polish movement *Solidarność* could not be denigrated and distorted with the usual defamatory campaign that had worked so well for decades. Those who resisted and opposed the communist regime were the workers, poor “socialist” factory workers, which claimed the rights they did not have and better living conditions. Together with the workers, the Polish citizens resisted and fought, demanding the end of the regime, of the communist one-party and the birth of democracy.

The underground magazine “*Dementi*” (which means “to belie”) was founded, to inform the public and refute the lies and propaganda of the regime that, in the meantime, under the leadership of General Jaruzelski had enacted special laws in order to contain the uprising.

The resistance of *Solidarność* was able to cross the borders of the Iron Curtain and finally find the solidarity that was also needed in Western Europe, the solidarity that had been missing for decades.

The grotesque make-believe of socialism as home of all workers, could not go on any longer. That tragic imposture, which for decades had dazzled and deceived millions of people around the world, was close to its end. They could no longer continue to shamelessly “pretend and lie” through the propaganda and the repression of citizens. The failure was obvious for everyone, apart from some tough Stalinist who still believed in the purifying qualities of purges and social selection.

Pretence and falsehood were the characteristic features of the communist system. Since its birth, lying, hiding and repressing had been the pillars for the conservation and consolidation of power.

Ideologically founded on the Marxist interpretation of history (the history of mankind is the history of class struggle), after the rise to power, ruthless persecution of enemies became one of the main objectives of the Bolshevik-Communist leadership group, which was literally permeated by legitimacy of revolutionary violence, a phobia that will accompany it throughout its entire life, with the systematic creation (and ideological certainty) of a ubiquitous enemy to be pursued (the class enemy, the enemy of the people, trotskist, bourgeois, saboteur, spy etc.). A practice that prompted the regime – which was led, during the crucial years of its consolidation, by a ruthless and bloodthirsty individual as Stalin was – to increase the use of violence against its own citizens, humiliating them, or arresting millions of them and deporting them to forced labour in the Gulag, slowly managing to forge a society paralyzed by terror.

The Russian actor Lazar Vieniaminovic Szeriševskij, arrested at the battlefield in 1944, aged 17, and deported to the Gulag as the son of an enemy of the people, in an interview with Polish photographer Tomasz Kizny, evoking the years of the great repressions, murders and deportations, which lasted until the death of Stalin, says that “the whole country was acting”. A dramatic symbol of this tragic fiction were the theatre plays that were set up in the Gulag for the entertainment of officers, commanders and all the “free” staff who worked in the fields.

For those people, – says L.V. Szeriševskij – who lived beyond the arctic circle and were bored to death and nostalgic, who sometimes found some relief in drinking, theatre was a bright light in their otherwise not so bright lives – I am asking you to understand this – they had been subtracted to their normal lives too. Although we were on the opposite side of the barricade – as weird and absurd as it may sound – our estrangement brought us closer. When we were in the shacks they would shout at us, hit us or lock us up in a cell, but when they were seated in the orchestra, they would laugh and applaud us. Us! The prisoners. In those moments, not only we did not

feel the anguish, but we also felt like we had some sort of power over those people's hearts. In the shack he has power over my life, my destiny, my body, but here at the theatre – I have power over him, I make him laugh or cry.

The camp theatre was an absurd world. A reversed world like an image in the mirror, in which there was a separate hierarchy of values and a different reference system. The fact is that many people, not only artists and not only in the camps, but throughout the system, grew up in a condition of lack of freedom and could not imagine any other chance for social relation, or could only imagine it in theory. They were imprisoned inside. They could not understand that the lager is a sort of Russian “matrioska”, a cage within a cage.

The whole country was acting, playing for Stalin and his collaborators, who kept Russia in a grip of steel. Do you think it was easy for Stanislavskij to enact Bulgakov? He had to beg for Stalin's permission.

Actually, even before being arrested, many people from the world of arts had their wings clipped. Before the arrest they were already at collision point, a situation of conflict in which there was no longer any real creative freedom. Mejer'hold for example. Even then they were already acting in front of their torturers. Like in the Kremlin, for Stalin's management team. They were driven by the conviction that it was very lucky to be able to act in front of the Stalinist leadership and, in addition, they were paid very well for those plays. Once they ended up in the camps they kept serving that very system, which then showed itself in its completely clear and brutal nature.

But – deep inside – they were already prepared for that<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, the sudden fall of the Berlin Wall, with cohorts of citizens of former DDR, who were given 100 DM each to go shopping in West Berlin, helped reinforcing the thesis of Economism, more convenient and simplified and, after all, neutral, to the detriment of the thorny issue of human rights violation, with its corollary of abuse, extortion and daily humiliation. Just think of the freedom of movement that we take for granted. Soviet and DDR citizens had to be in possession of an internal passport and a special permit from the police to move within their own country, and to leave the country they even needed an exit visa. Were we aware of how dangerous it was for those East Berliners, who, in the night

<sup>1</sup> Interview with the Polish photographer Tomasz Kizny, author of the photo exhibition *Gulag*, published in the magazine BZ1999, *La Lunga Ombra del Gulag*, November 2005.

of November 9th, 1989 opened the breach, defying the police? They, for their part, knew how powerful and ruthless the repressive communist machine could be. They were aware of the danger and the risks they ran; images of the tanks in Budapest, Prague, Warsaw and Beijing were in everyone's mind. Both in Beijing and in Berlin people were fighting, risking their lives for democracy and freedom and not for a pair of blues jeans or a bottle of coke. Surely this partial interpretation has heavily influenced the relations between Western and Eastern Europe, also preventing a proper reflection and understanding of that political experience, which not only had been a failure, but had also been absolutely and ruthlessly destructive. It is in this sense that the reconstruction of the complex history of the Gulag as a system, as a constitutive and founding element – and therefore not as a deviance or a betrayal – of the socialist society, and as a mirror of the “free” Communist society – almost like a prelude of the Gulag – is useful in revealing the traits and the inherently repressive and evil nature of the Communist regime and system, which for decades has been cleverly hidden by propaganda, by the connivance of many intellectuals and the bad faith of the leaders of the western communist parties, by the isolation of the socialist community from the rest of the world and, not least, by the reluctance of many communist militants to acknowledge the messages, the truths, that sometimes came from the socialist homeland.

But, above all, what has been used, from the outset, is the acceptance, and in some cases even love, for the logic of the inevitability of revolutionary violence, which had been preparing the ground for some time: no revolution can take place peacefully, without spilling blood.

Hardly anybody was aware of how horrible its consequences could be. This can be deduced from the stories and testimonies of those survivors who have had the courage to do a *mea culpa*. It was only in the Gulag that they realized the criminal nature of Communism and Marxism-Leninism.

Is with a great moral and intellectual honesty that Jacques Rossi, former agent of Komintern, sentenced to 10 years in the

Gulag, when meeting an old kulak who tells him the story of his persecution, remembers how, in 1932, while traveling in Western Europe on behalf of the Komintern, had snubbed with superficiality the news about the persecution of the kulaks and only now he feels deeply ashamed about it:

It is 1940, in one of the many labour camps of Gulag's huge empire. He, Nikanor, is in his ninth year. As far as I am concerned, it is only my third year. A young French Communist, I am starting to get rid of Marxist and Leninist illusions, now that I am facing the Soviet reality as it is shown by the Gulag and, above all, after having learned the thousands of biographies of my fellow inmates, who come from every different class of the Soviet society. About Nikanor, he is an old Russian farmer, son of a family of servants, witness of the revolution of 1905 and of the one of February 1917, as well as of the coup d'état of October 1917; he has never nourished any illusion. I listen to him. He speaks slowly, in a monotone voice, with no emphasis. He just lists a long series of events. Almost like a report. I have been listening to him for a while and I am astonished.

«The first one died two or three hours after being born, the other one survived until the following morning».

Nikanor talks about the twins who were born in 1931 in a goods wagon. They were his last two sons. The wagon was part of a long convoy that was taking hundreds of families towards an unknown destination, they were peasants families known as «kulaks». Every member of the family was forced to leave, from the newborn babies to the infirm grandparents. Pregnant women included. Armed soldiers had surrounded the village and the commissary had ordered the peasants to collect all their belongings. What was left – land, houses, cattle, furniture, clothes, tools and so on – had become property of the kolchoz. Without paying any indemnity.

The story told by Nikanor, who goes on with the detached tone of a reporter, makes me feel sick to my stomach. Suddenly, some memories start to surface [...] It was long before beginning my career as a Gulag prisoner, I was a clandestine for the Komintern and I was on a mission somewhere in western Europe. Local newspapers had published a shocking article about collectivisation in Russia. And now I was hearing the same story from Nikanor. Here and there I even wondered whether he had read the same article. Obviously at the time I had denied, with indignation, that vile defamation against the first nation of workers and farmers in the world. I remember that even the most honest bourgeois could not believe it at the time. More or less, let's say this *en passant*, like the public opinion worldwide had reacted in 1943 to the first information about Nazi's crematoriums.

So is it like that, have I collaborated to all this? It is very painful to admit it. Even now I still feel terribly ashamed<sup>2</sup>.

Also Solženicyn, in different occasions, is ashamed of his own passivity in front of the abuses he had witnessed when he still was a “free” man.

Not everyone felt ashamed, someone even accepted and tried to justify their own imprisonment. In the short story *The faith of the Stalinist*, Rossi tells us about a one of kind case, where a deportee, a staunch communist and Stalinist, despite his years of detention, the abuses and blows he had to endure, still cannot come to term with the tragedy he is living. He deeply believes that his sacrifice is the price to pay for the safeguard of the communist homeland attacked by capitalistic countries. A deportee of a Nazi camp would never have even dreamed of “believing” something like this.

When I found myself in that cattle car – he told me one day – I believed that the Party had decided to send some trusted militants to the Far East, with the task of neutralizing a plot organized by the Japanese imperialists, about which our apparatus had been informed. To deceive the Japanese service, the Party had decided, with farsightedness, to lead us there disguised as a normal convoy of prisoners, and to make it even more believable, they were treating us as true enemies of the people<sup>3</sup>.

More disturbing still, however, are the stories of Varlam Šalamov where, at times, one could glimpse the shadow of Primo Levi: in both we perceive the same, precise psychological study of man in extreme conditions, of those dark forces that sustain him or do not sustain him: «In Auschwitz survived only the worst, that is, those that could adapt better»<sup>4</sup>.

Hungry and exacerbated, I knew that nothing in the world could ever induce me to suicide. Just then, I began to understand the essence of the great

<sup>2</sup> J. Rossi, *I contadini*, in Id., *Com'era bella questa utopia. Cronache dal Gulag*, Italian translation by C. Saletti, introduction by F. Sessi, Venezia, Marsilio, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Rossi, *La fede dello Stalinista*, in Id., *Com'era bella questa utopia. Cronache dal Gulag*, cit.

<sup>4</sup> P. Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, Torino, Einaudi, p. 64.

spirit of life: a quality of which man is endowed to a superlative degree. I saw our horses getting worn out, dying [...] the North, the heavy work, poor nourishment, beatings, that's what made them die; and although all this affected them a thousand times less than it affected men, they died earlier. It was then that I realized the most important thing, and that is that man did not become man because he was God's creature, and not even because he had two hands with that extraordinary finger that is the thumb. But first of all, because he was physically stronger and more resistant than any other animal, and secondly because he was able to put his spiritual principle happily at the service of the physical principle<sup>5</sup>.

This is the unvarnished representation of a man struggling for survival, to meet his basic needs, eat, drink, rest, dose forces, avoid heavy work (passing it on to weaker and naive fellow-in-mates), in order to keep alive the body-box, that physical casing that contains our soul, whose pain is repressed, suffocated and covered by this ruthless struggle to stay physically alive.

This cruel representation of man had been field-tested, shattering the religious and also humanist sublime conception of man, that focuses on his spirit, his soul, his intellect, his heart, the sense of his existence participating in the collective destiny of humanity, his being "with" the other, and almost despises his being purely body, made of flesh, blood and bones, that to live needs to be fed, drink and rest. Facing the fierce reality of the facts, from real life and not the result of literary fiction, our naive idealism in the strength of the soul, in our rich inner selves, sublime and eternal, takes a hit, a real punch in the stomach.

Reduced to a primitive state and stage, man is first of all an animal if not the strongest of all animals.

It is interesting to note how similar to Levi's is Russian writer Šalamov's narrative approach, accompanied by his ability to grasp the essence of the human soul, but, unlike Levi, he has always considered himself a proper writer. Emerging author before his arrest, after 15 years of Gulag his artistic activity had been seized by the Gulag forever. In both authors words weigh like rocks,

<sup>5</sup> V. Šalamov, *Pioggia*, in *I racconti di Kolyma*, Torino, Einaudi, 1999, vol. I, p. 32.



in both the same painful reminder that, for its universal value, pierces like a needle the living flesh of the reader: «Everyone took leave from life in the way that best suited them. Mothers staid up to carefully prepare the food for the journey [...] If they killed you tomorrow with your child, wouldn't you feed him?»<sup>6</sup>.

I was sitting on the suitcase that, in obedience to the eternal human vanity, I had taken with me when they came home to arrest me. Everyone, everyone was carrying personal effects: suitcases, backpacks, rolled up blankets [...] Much later I have realized that the ideal kit for an inmate was a canvas bag with inside a wooden spoon. Everything else, even a pencil stub or blanket is just a nuisance. You can say whatever you want, but at least they have taught us properly the contempt for private property<sup>7</sup>.

It is the same Man that we are talking about. There are no “other” on the face of the earth. As much as it can be problematic to compare the Nazi concentration camps to Soviet Gulag, is once again thanks to literature that we can discover, through the dramas that upset the individual lives of men and peoples, the similarities, as well as the differences that however, in both cases, lead us back to our being in the world.

A poor and fragile human being at the mercy of events, literally crushed by the force of the repressive state machine, able to transform evil into work to make it humanly acceptable and bearable. The arrests, torture, deportation, violence were simple production targets. The men were just “items” at the mercy of greedy officials, who only performed their job. Between an interrogation and another, between one session of torture and the other, Solženicy'n says, the investigating Commissary would retire somewhere with his mistress, after phoning his wife, telling her that night he would not return because he was busy interrogating dangerous counterrevolutionaries. This way he would also pocket the production bonus for the night. It is painful to see that in this area the production “quota” has always been met or even

<sup>6</sup> P. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2005, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> V. Šalamov, *Attracco all'inferno*, in *I racconti di Kolyma*, Torino, Einaudi, 1999, vol. II, p. 858.

exceeded. This was not the case, however, in the economic field, where they always had to lie.

These are the poignant truths that emerged from what was to be the workers' paradise, the land of the Soviets. It was actually another "planet", as Rossi calls it ironically in one of his stories:

Brought back to our barracks after ten or twelve hours of work, we gobble down our slop, the famous soup of the Gulag. Exhausted, we lie down on the wooden boards. Tight against each other as herring in barrel, we fall asleep in less than no time.

Tireless, the speaker repeats with his hoarse voice the wise words from Moscow. The Tass agency rattles off the news from abroad: somewhere police dispersed with unheard brutality a peaceful demonstration of workers, while another flood has submerged entire villages, causing hundreds of deaths among peasants. Elsewhere, class justice, under the orders of the Capital, has condemned innocent workers to three or four years in prison!

In the barracks, those who still cannot sleep, listen without even dreaming of making a comparison with their situation. Out of the one hundred and fifty prisoners who are here, no one ended up doing less than ten years in prison! And many were charged fifteen or twenty. With absolutely false accusations. And, to make matters worse, we were not convicted by a court, but by virtue of a simple administrative arrest. These victims of "class justice" and the same speaker who speaks from Moscow, for us are on another planet! We are in 1940. Ten years earlier, young communist militant in Pilsudski's Poland, I found myself having to answer for my clandestine activities to capitalistic justice [...] Cross-examinations, lawyers, defender's harangue, defence witness, forty pounds of brochures as proof of guilt, and [...] a sentence of nine months of imprisonment. But, did it really happen? Today, in my Gulag barrack, I hardly believe it. It is another planet<sup>8</sup>.

On this land, from the far eastern tip of Siberia, the infamous Kolyma peninsula, to the warm and temperate Western Europe, lingers, along with the Nazi concentration camps, the long shadow of the Gulag. An archipelago that was and is primarily an immense geographical space – 5,000, 7,000 12,000 km, depending on where you want to go – almost impossible to reach, if not for intrepid travellers, like the Polish photographer

<sup>8</sup> Rossi, *Un altro pianeta*, in Id., *Com'era bella questa utopia. Cronache dal Gulag*, cit., p. 177.

Tomasz Kizny or, as in the past, for the deportees. Who will ever adventure to visit these places, where thousands of frozen bodies are buried? Perhaps one day, in a better century, an archaeologist will discover the bodies and, perhaps, if he manages to reconstruct their story, he will understand the cause.



Gianluca Vagnarelli

Totalitarianism as ideocracy

It is thanks to the work of Hannah Arendt and, in particular, her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, that we have come to a complete definition of the category of totalitarianism as a new political form, different from the traditional models of political despotism<sup>1</sup>. For Arendt totalitarianism is structured in the relationship between single party system, terror and ideology, creating an unusual form of domination, able to penetrate areas of life not previously invested by the bond of political subordination. If tyranny was characterized by fear, the essence of totalitarianism is the terror and, with it, the overcoming of the classical boundary lines that, in the history of political thought, had allowed governments to distinguish between legal and illegal, legitimate or expression of arbitrary power<sup>2</sup>.

The terror is reflected in the reality of the unstoppable law of historical movement, giving effect to sentences already handed down by a higher court, and because of this, Arendt writes, in this context guilt and innocence become meaningless concepts<sup>3</sup>. The culprit is guilty only objectively, as an obstacle to the unfolding of the unstoppable law of historical movement and any subjective fault is irrelevant. The «enemy of the people» is a «criminal without a crime», for objective necessity, and it is this condition

<sup>1</sup> A. Martinelli, *Introduzione* to H. Arendt, *Le origini del totalitarismo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2009, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Arendt, *Le origini del totalitarismo*, cit., pp. 631-632.

<sup>3</sup> Ivi, p. 636.

that explains the passive resignation with which many of the victims, unlike the real opponents of the regime, reacted to the sentences that were imposed on them<sup>4</sup>.

If terror is the essence of totalitarian government, its principle of action is the ideology. In totalitarianism the idea becomes a tool of interpretation, total explanation and emancipation from experience, process of deduction from a premise assumed as given, banning of contradictions, logic intended as a process, giving up that freedom that is implied in the ability to think<sup>5</sup>. This combination of ideology and terror is identified as the element characterizing the two totalitarian variations of Nazism and Stalinism. In particular, starting from ideology, and the role it has played in the generation of evil in the twentieth century, we will develop our analysis of totalitarianism. A study that identifies ideology not as an *a posteriori* justification of terror, but as *the precondition to its action*. To do this we will refer to Stalinism and to other Marxist dictatorial experiences, some of them defined as *post-totalitarian or integral totalitarisms*, to highlight the link between the violence they generate and the Promethean will to incorporate reality inside categories prepared by ideology. In short, we will approach totalitarianism starting from its ideocratic character.

### 1. *Ideology as the metaphysics of power*

The disappearance of humanity overwhelmed by the dictates of ideology is a recurring theme in the analysis of Václav Havel. According to Havel, in the taxonomic attitude proper of ideology, it is not reality that acts on the thesis but is the thesis that structures reality. More than from the actual power, it draws strength from the thesis and it largely depends from it. Generalizing the experience of the socialist republic of Czechoslovakia, and making

<sup>4</sup> Ivi, p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> Ivi, pp. 641-646.

it an archetype of his analysis, he comes to define such a system as post-totalitarian, not because it lacks the proper elements of totalitarianism but because it is totalitarian in a way so substantially different from classic dictatorships to which, traditionally, the category of totalitarianism is associated<sup>6</sup>. For Havel, among the features that in the post-totalitarian systems differentiates the supremacy of political bureaucracy over a levelled off society, there is precisely the possession of an ideology which, because of its logical structure, its concision and easiness to be understood, takes the form of a secularized religion<sup>7</sup>.

For the drifters that, in the era of the crisis of metaphysical and existential certainties, of the loss of meaning of the world, were in search of a meaning to be given to their experience, ideology provided an «accessible abode», able to answer all questions, a comfortable and reassuring mental house<sup>8</sup>. In return, it required acceptance without conditions, it required the removal of every doubtful attitude, it demanded the banning of conscience and responsibility by delegating the use of reason to superiors in the perspective of an identification between the centre of power and truth<sup>9</sup>. However, this process of «social self-totalitarianism», while allowing us to give a clear meaning to life, it penetrates and deeply scars the human condition<sup>10</sup>. It is in this hypnotic and consolatory fascination exerted by the totalitarian idea, that Havel identifies one of the key elements of *post-totalitarianism*.

According to the playwright, the extraordinary manipulative skills that the power has manifested in Eastern Europe countries dominated by the socialist regimes, cannot be explained only by referring to the «physical» basis of power, the centralized and nationalized monopoly of all major control levers of the social body, but it requires taking into account another element. The extent of subjugation that these regimes have managed to

<sup>6</sup> V. Havel, *Il potere dei senza potere*, Milano, La casa di matrona, 2013, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

produce was also the result of an investment made on the *meta-physical lever of power*, on the aspect of ideas<sup>11</sup>. The force of ideology represented a mechanism so perfect and invasive for the manipulation of the entire society, without which it would not be possible to understand the high pervasiveness of such systems. Havel effectively represents this element through the example of a zealous greengrocer.

Among the goods on display in the window of his shop, a greengrocer sported a sign saying «Workers of the world unite!». Why did he do it? What appeal does he find in the content of the slogan? Is it because he really intends to support the movement of unification of the world proletariat? For conformism? For fear?

The slogan, Havel writes, has the function of a signal, it is relevant for the value of its significant, not for its obvious meaning. «In words it would sound like this: I, greengrocer XY, am here and I know what I have to do; I act like you expect me to; you can trust me and I cannot be accused of anything; I am obedient and therefore I have the right to a peaceful life»<sup>12</sup>. This message has two specific goals: to keep away informers that, in the absence of the “right” signal, may cause trouble for the greengrocer, but mainly it aims at representing the seller as a good socialist in the eyes of power<sup>13</sup>. The semantic content of the sign is indifferent to the merchant, what he really wants is to be recognised as someone conforming to society and its values, in line with the view of the imperatives that, visually, appear on buildings and on the streets helping to strengthen the foundations of the system.

But so far, the ideological dogma, as subtly dominating as it is, it is no different from a modality of use of the power of a conventional type, of a taxing kind. What makes ideology a sophisticated device that can guarantee the integrity of power is a second element: *the fact that it presents itself as a noble form of false consciousness*. The signal that the sign contains, Havel

<sup>11</sup> Ivi, p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> Ivi, pp. 37-38.

<sup>13</sup> Ivi, p. 37.



writes, it is not directed only to the informers or to superiors of the greengrocer, but also to his own conscience. It «[...] helps men to hide the *lowest* foundations of their obedience and therefore the *lowest* foundations of power. It conceals them behind the facade of something *elevated*»<sup>14</sup>. This uplifting mask is precisely ideology as “the world of appearance”, as a call to something supra-personal and disinterested that enables the man to deceive himself, to consider himself a worthy and moral human being while leading a life that is unworthy and immoral. Ideology is the alibi that covers the fear, the veil that envelops the failure in life, is an illusory way of relating to the world, capable of arousing in men the conviction of being in tune with the human order while reinforcing the support for an inhuman regime<sup>15</sup>. Ideology operates as «external action», but at the same time internal, structuring the power by acting as its psychological alibi, as a means able to make the man a victim and accomplice of the post-totalitarian system, and it is thanks to this metaphysical order that the physical manifestation of power is able to last, get stronger and exist<sup>16</sup>.

Ideology, then, as a principle of cohesion of the system, not only a dictate of power, but a pivotal and concrete support to it. Until when though? If ideology operates as a *surplus* of physical power, the questioning of the post-totalitarian system can only be done starting from a work of de-ideologisation. For Havel, only when people choose to live in the truth abandoning the «pseudo-life» to which the post-totalitarianism condemns them, the foundation of the order imposed by force will begin to falter. In such a situation, dissent can only take the form of verbal offense, the act of insubordination and breaking of a social pact based on falsehood<sup>17</sup>. It is at this point that the beginning of a process of change will become inevitable. «Life in the truth, therefore, in the post-

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> Ivi, pp. 42-43.

<sup>17</sup> D. Badnjevic, *L'Isola Nuda*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2008, p. 159.

totalitarian system does not only have an existential dimension (it restores man to himself), noetic (it reveals reality as it is) and moral (it is an example), but has also a *political* dimension»<sup>18</sup>. Just because in the post-totalitarian system the truth is capable of performing, more than in other systems, the role of power factor, of authentic political force, it is from this that a truly independent social and political life may arise, but this, writes Havel, implies the radical refusal to continue to live a lie. For the Czechoslovak thinker, one of the reasons that led to the defeat of the Prague Spring was precisely the fact that, in the «ultimate questions», even the Dubcek government was defeated by ideology, failing to assert the supremacy of reality “pure and simple” over ideological pseudo-realities, never completely managing to get rid of the «world of appearance»<sup>19</sup>.

## 2. *Totalitarianism as ideocracy*

If the reference to the analysis carried out by Havel has allowed us to highlight the role of ideology as intensifier of power and, conversely, how a process of liberation can only start from the non-ideological choice of living in the truth, in the case of the Cambodian revolution ideology is instead manifested in all its lethal power. In Democratic Kampuchea, as Cambodia was called between 1975 and 1979, after the seizure of power by the Khmer Rouge, the revolution becomes a dream of purity in the form of forced displacement of population from the cities to the countryside, going back to rural life as an ideal of a pristine existence, an integral communism to which the «new people» coming from urban areas would have to be re-educated or otherwise punished with death<sup>20</sup>. An experiment in social transformation as intended by Rousseau, which had no equal in the speed and radicalism with which it was carried out and that led, in a span of just four

<sup>18</sup> Havel, *Il potere dei senza potere*, cit., p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> Ivi, p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> R. Panh, *L'eliminazione*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2014, p. 137.

years, to the death, according to the most conservative estimates, of a million and a half people.

Unlike other historians, Panh considers the crime against humanity perpetrated in Cambodia not as a particular crime, to be attributed, in some way, to a tradition of rural violence difficult to eradicate or to the quietism generated by Buddhist beliefs, but as a fact of universal value that can elucidate the mechanisms of production of the inhumane that are put into practice also in other totalitarian contexts<sup>21</sup>. For this reason, his analysis deserves to be mentioned.

For Panh a political regime responsible for genocide like the Cambodian one, cannot simply be defined “regime”, but more properly a state of *non-habeas corpus*, a condition of deprivation of corporeality, of denial of individuality and dissolution of the ego into organization<sup>22</sup>. The reference to «integral totalitarianism» refers to a situation in which all the interstices are occupied by the imperatives of power, in which the logic of control extends from family to work, from science to memory, from language to feelings («Khmer Rouge slogan “We must not have personal feelings”»)<sup>23</sup>. But in the Cambodian case, totalitarian entirety and perfection justify themselves also due to the absence of any border between places of segregation and social universe. It is the entire Cambodian society, not a part of it, to be confined and subdued to the rehabilitative device of labour camps. The social engineering project carried out by Pol Pot postulates a new foundation and regeneration of such depth as to require the intervention of the segregating mechanism not for a specific segment of the population, but for the social body in its entirety. The state borders end up corresponding to the guarded perimeter of a huge internment camp. Decisive, in this context, is the role played by ideology.

The senselessness and violence that dominate the lives of millions of Cambodians between 1975 and 1979 have at their

<sup>21</sup> Ivi, p. 186.

<sup>22</sup> Ivi, p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> Ivi, p. 104.

roots the conception of the revolution as a palingenesis, the belief that ideas are able to crush everything, to achieve the unachievable through a voluntarism that is able to impose itself on reality inductively, dominating it completely and making it disappear. Marxism elevated to science, deprives the revolutionaries of any political nature, turning them into mere technicians, professionals equivalent to engineers or doctors, called to inoculate healthy ideas in a sick social body that needs to be regenerated. The ideocratic nature of the Cambodian regime lies in these elements<sup>24</sup>. The lifeless body of a young woman who died with her son in her lap after atrocious suffering and useless requests for help, because no one has dared to call at her bedside a doctor – who is considered a member of a cursed class –, is, in the eyes of the author, the victory of doctrine, which with its commandments organizes life, producing death and generating an existence slave of ideology<sup>25</sup>.

The first victim of ideocratic schematism is life, that is categorized, mathematized and deprived of its singularity and uniqueness. For Angkar, the name that the Khmer Rouge gave to the anonymous state entity born after the revolution, there are no individuals, but «elements», neutral matter gathered for practical reasons, the function of which is to achieve the ideal of a united people, homogeneous, melted in a nameless mass in which the individual disappears becoming unidentifiable. The leveling and conforming pressure invests the social condition as well as aesthetics, transforming the urban class in anonymous rural mass and banning colourful clothes<sup>26</sup>. The “technicians” of the revolution have the task of purifying this indistinct mass from its “toxic” elements, of amputating the parts corroded by the disease of the old society, doing whatever is necessary to preserve the ideal of purity and immaculacy<sup>27</sup>. The genocide begins with this ideal background. The Khmer Rouge exterminated Chinese,

<sup>24</sup> Ivi, p. 64.

<sup>25</sup> Ivi, p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> Ivi, p. 63.

<sup>27</sup> Ivi, p. 136.

Vietnamese, members of ethnic minorities, but mostly Khmer because of the difference that their lives represented compared to the standard set by the doctrine.

Next to the loss of any political nature, intended as the ability to maintain plurality, Cambodian integral totalitarianism also deprives the revolutionaries of all their humanity. The inability or unwillingness demonstrated by Duch, director between 1975 and 1979 of the S21 extermination and torture centre in Phnom Penh, to recognize *in detail* the crimes of which he was author, originates from his ideological attitude, from a language, which is still the cold and military one of Angkar, full of doctrine and with no relation to the empirical reality of the men and women of flesh and bones that were eliminated. Existences that, before disappearing in mass graves, have faded away in the concepts of their captors<sup>28</sup>. Duch is unable to talk about what he did, to name the tragedy of his people, because abstraction has annihilated his senses. Ideology has detached him «in a lasting and monstrous way» from human society<sup>29</sup>. By persisting in “picking out” from human beings the factors suitable to ideological categorization, he has lost the ability to see them in their uniqueness, in their individuality irreducible to concepts, in their load of suffering and death. Or, more simply, he refuses to remember them.

The case of Democratic Kampuchea shows, perhaps better than other totalitarian or para-totalitarian systems, as in a context in which politics takes on pantoclastic traits, revolutionary terrorism finds in ideology not an *a posteriori* justification of its crimes but the *primus movens* of its action<sup>30</sup>. If determinism oversees the unfolding of history, disasters have a sense of Promethean realization of the revolution, the inhuman but necessary sacrifice for the conquest of superior goods. In this perspective, the eschatological nature of Marxism would carry an evolutionary conception

<sup>28</sup> Ivi, p. 186.

<sup>29</sup> M. Djilas, *La nuova classe. Una analisi del sistema comunista*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1971, p. 164.

<sup>30</sup> A. Orsini, *Anatomia delle brigate rosse. Le radici ideologiche del terrorismo rivoluzionario*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2009, p. 50.

of revolution, for which the future society must mature within the present one, awaiting the advent of the new era, fuelled by a romantic faith in the positivity of the upheavals<sup>31</sup>. A sacralisation of politics that takes on the traits of religious fanaticism, implying acceptance of a temporary evil in view of a greater good, evil in which the means are purified by the purpose<sup>32</sup>.

It is the absolute value attributed to the ultimate end to explain the desire to do, admitting crimes that he had never committed, a last service to the party before dying. The absurdity of the accusations and the confessions extracted through torture in the dungeons of the Lubyanka can acquire, even in the eyes of the victims, a sense, if seen through the implacable logic of historical necessity, of a history that knows no causality or unexpected, making inhumanity the means to achieve humanity par excellence. In his last letter written to Stalin before his death, to which he had been sentenced after a show trial, Bukharin, Marxist theoretician and prominent leader of the Soviet Union, wrote: «I was not born yesterday and I know that the big plans, big ideas and the great interests come first, and it would be mean to pose the question of me as a person on the same level of the historical and global tasks that burden primarily on your shoulders»<sup>33</sup>, ending the letter with words of “endless love” for the cause and for the party.

Both in the regime of Stalinist terror as well as in the one established in Cambodia by Pol Pot, the elimination of the enemy becomes administrative act of an already written reason, taking the form of the killing of impure thought. The level of penetration and conditioning of consciences exercised by ideology finds its paradoxical manifestation in the conflict, which manifests itself in many of the victims, between self-preservation and safeguarding of a social order that they had helped to build, and for

<sup>31</sup> R. Aron, *L'oppio degli intellettuali*, Torino, Lindau, 2008, p. 76.

<sup>32</sup> Orsini, *Anatomia delle brigate rosse. Le radici ideologiche del terrorismo rivoluzionario*, cit., p. 69.

<sup>33</sup> L. Jurgenson (ed.), *Lettere al boia. Scrivere a Stalin*, Milano, Archinto, 2011, p. 93.

which they had agreed to become, in turn, executioners. As much in the perpetrators as in the victims this absolutism of faith turns into moral relativism.

### 3. *The violence of abstraction*

An investigation aimed at analysing in-depth the ideocratic nature of totalitarianism would require a serious study of the relationship that, in the tradition of political philosophy, there was between abstraction and the construction of a social order. A study that cannot be carried out here, which is why we will only briefly cover it starting from an assumption: the refusal of a medicalising interpretation of the totalitarian phenomenon.

Thus, totalitarianism should not be interpreted as a disease but as a revelation of the contradictions inherent in the philosophical and political history of modernity. In particular, it is in the Machiavellian break from the Platonic tradition founded on justice and virtue, that should be traced back the emergence of a political rationality that no longer meets the rules of morality, but those of necessity<sup>34</sup>. Moving from this break and the emerging problem in modern political thought of how to ensure the political order threatened by the inconstant nature of luck and the selfishness of men, a gap forms between two traditions of thought<sup>35</sup>.

One sees the social body as a community, the other as an aggregate of individuals pursuing their own selfish interests; the first considers the citizens as joined to each other in the totality of the state and the nation, while the other considers them as private individuals who work for purely selfish reasons; one is aimed at the protection of individual rights and supports processes of gradual reform, the other claims the need to reshape the political society according to the logic of the *tabula rasa*<sup>36</sup>. It is

<sup>34</sup> M. Terestchenko, *Le «moment machiavélien»*, Preface a Id., *Leçon de philosophie politique moderne. Les violences de l'abstraction*, Paris, PUF, 2013, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Ivi, p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> Ivi, p. 18.

in the second of these traditions that, for Terestchenko, the first signs of what he called the violence of abstraction should be identified.

The conflict between the rational-legal construction of the state and the foundations of a nation as a substantial community in *ethos* and *ethnos*, the evolutionary attitude of the philosophies of history, the subjective voluntarism of modern rationalism, the planning and the political artificiality inherent to modernity, would place the individual as the one Lord of reality, pushing him to hypostatize the idea in the political community<sup>37</sup>. According to the French thinker, the political tradition that goes from Spinoza to Rousseau, from the revolutionaries of '89 to the positivists of the nineteenth century, up to the Marxists, despite the sometimes radical differences in their positions, seem united by the desire to organize society as a human artifice generated by reason<sup>38</sup>. However, a political order aimed at realising the Cartesian project of a rational foundation of reality, the platonic search for the city as a work of art, might lead to violence in the name of the supposed truth of purely speculative and abstract principles. According to Terestchenko, it is in particular the desire to realize the organic unity of the social body, society as One, that carries the signs of terror and annihilation of freedom<sup>39</sup>.

For Forti, if you were to sum up in one sentence the essence of totalitarianism, you should say that it is the manipulation of reality until it disappears in the subsumption of an idea taken as unquestioned premise, logic generating a dynamic that annihilates any reality, physical or biological, which is actually, or even just potentially, in a position to contradict the starting assumption<sup>40</sup>. The Moscow trials succeed in their aim to discredit the victims because they stage, with strong educational values, the clash between counter-revolution and collectivization, industri-

<sup>37</sup> S. Forti, *Le figure del male*, in Arendt, *Le origini del totalitarismo*, cit., pp. 37-39.

<sup>38</sup> Terestchenko, *Le «moment machiavélien»*, cit., p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> Forti, *Le figure del male*, cit., p. 39.



alization and the party and by doing so they carry out a de-construction of the conflict of power within the Bolshevik Party<sup>41</sup>. In this symbolism, admitting the political dignity of the positions of the accused would have meant admitting the possibility that socialism, *as a doctrine* more than as a State, could be destroyed. It is against this danger that operates the dehumanization of victims that, in the words of the prosecutor Visinsky, takes the form of animalisation (the accused described as «rabid dogs») making less problematic the subsequent elimination of those who are no longer men.

Benjamin Constant has indicated precisely in the victory of the *esprit d'abstraction* the origin of the tyranny of modern times, in that levelling and generalizing logic that, swallowing in all-inclusive categories the entire social universe, sacrifices real beings to abstract beings. The abstraction of the new man has his counterpart in the asthenia of life. On the contrary, Constant warns us, defending the rights of the different parts we can defend the whole nation and, with it, the human condition<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> N. Werth, *La Terreur et le Désarroi. Stalin et son Système*, Paris, Perrin, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> B. Constant, *Principes de politique*, Paris, Guillaumin, 1872.



Darius Juodis

## Lithuanian and Ukrainian Partisans in fight and imprisonment

The majority of Lithuanian political prisoners imprisoned in the GULAG labour camps were members of the anti-Soviet resistance. They were former partisans, their messengers, supporters or people suspected of assisting partisans.

In Lithuania the armed anti-Soviet resistance started in the late summer of 1944. The Red Army invaded the territory of Lithuania as part of its efforts to force the German Army to retreat and this was followed by the establishment of the Soviet government. The first Soviet invasion took place in June 1940 and in the August of 1940 Lithuania was incorporated into the Soviet Union as a result of the secret agreement with Germany, the so-called Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The secret protocols of the pact divided the spheres of influence in Eastern Europe between Nazis and Soviets. The three Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), Western Belarus, Western Ukraine and other territories fell under Soviet influence. The Soviet side started implementing its plans with respect to the Baltic States in October 1939 and took the final action aimed at incorporation in June 1940.

In 1940, the Soviet side tried to establish an image of legitimacy with respect to all its rearrangements carried out in Lithuania. But the Sovietisation that ensued, together with repressions against the local population, caused deep dissatisfaction among Lithuanians. As a result, in autumn 1940 underground organisations began to be founded. The increasing amount of arrests caused a growing sense of insecurity among the population. Many found

the deportations to Siberia, carried out in June 1941, particularly shocking. Between 1940 and 1941, the Soviet government deported or imprisoned around 23,000 Lithuanians. People were also shocked by the massacres carried out by the Soviets in various locations in Lithuania in June 1941, just after the outbreak of the Soviet-German war. Such reprisals were responsible to a great extent for the anti-Soviet uprising and for the extent of the uprising of June 1941.

However, the Nazi occupation authorities in Lithuania did not recognise the Lithuanian interim government formed during the uprising. The Nazi government, which replaced the Soviet government, did not have any intention of restoring statehood to Lithuania. The national Lithuanian underground did not organise an armed struggle against the Nazi occupation authority, limiting itself instead to various forms of unarmed resistance (publication of underground press, printing and distribution of proclamations, boycott of resolutions of the occupation authorities etc.).

The late 1941 saw the establishment of the Lithuanian Freedom Army, an underground organisation, which eventually started preparing for the struggle against the Soviet government. Underground organisational structures were secretly established and guns were stock and piled. The result of this was that the partisan movement, which started in 1944, was both organised and spontaneous. It was organised because some of the participants had been preparing for the struggle in advance. It was spontaneous because it was a direct response to the forced mobilisation of Lithuanian men to the Red Army and the Soviet reprisals. Those who fought in the ranks of partisans believed that after the defeat of Nazi Germany, the United States and other Western countries would come to their aid, and with the help of these foreign forces, Lithuanian statehood would be re-established. These hopes failed, but many partisans cherished them till their death.

Many participants of the anti-Soviet armed underground were residents of rural areas, therefore the resistance was stronger in rural areas. Without the support of Lithuanian villages, the organised partisan movement would not have lasted for nearly

10 years. Discerning underground partisan commanders understood the significance of a united underground struggle and started uniting the movement. Between 1944 and 1946, in the face of significant losses, the partisans were able to create partisan military structures in the areas where they operated. Finally, in 1949, after many efforts, a single command, called Movement for the Struggle for Freedom of Lithuania, was established. But at the time, the partisan struggle weakened. The organised partisan movement continued until 1953, when the last of the larger partisan detachment headquarters were destroyed. The last fighters were killed in the 1960s. In total around 20,000 members of the underground movement or people considered in various ways to be part of the movement have probably perished.

In addition to the armed struggle, there was unarmed resistance. Partisans published various publications (newspapers, collections of songs and poetry) and proclamations. With the diminishing armed struggle this form of resistance became more dominant. This was the struggle for people's self-awareness. Many underground organisations operating in towns used this form of unarmed resistance.

The Soviet side portrayed the partisans as, and called them "bandits" (the more "scientific" term, "bourgeois nationalists" was introduced later on) and various measures were taken to fight against partisans. The Soviet security carried out Chekist military operations and used a secret network of agents, with whose aid partisan units were uncovered and liquidated. In order to demoralise and disperse the movement, in 1945-1946 legalisation campaigns were announced. The partisans were encouraged to surrender with the promise of personal freedom and reprisals against those who failed to surrender. To what extent the Soviet promises of freedom were real is totally another matter. Those partisans and their supporters who had been arrested were interrogated in various ways; torture and information collected about other resistance fighters were used to extract forced confessions. After the interrogations, the more active partisans were sentenced to death, others – to a long time in prison.

The Criminal Code of Soviet Russia was applied in Lithuania in the post-war period. It was used to convict members of the resistance. Convictions were passed by military tribunals or the so-called Extraordinary Meetings, which passed sentences in absentia (those convicted did not even formally attend the meetings). In both cases the sentences were known before their announcement at the closed meetings. Usually, Article 58 of the Criminal Code was applied with respect to the Lithuanian population. It provided for the so-called “counter-revolutionary crimes”. Sentences were strict – from 10-25 years in labour camps to the death sentence. In 1944-1947, partisans and their supporters were usually sentenced to 10-15 years in labour camps (except for some active members of the resistance who were sentenced to death). In 1947-1949, capital punishment was suspended in the Soviet Union and replaced with 25 years of imprisonment. This was the punishment imposed on partisans, their messengers and supporters. At the beginning of 1950, capital punishment was resumed and the practice of sentencing partisans and their supporters to 25 years of imprisonment remained. After the military tribunals passed sentence, the convicts were transported to “special” labour camps. The largest of these were in Vorkuta, Karaganda, Magadan, and Mordovia, and it was to these that the majority of Lithuanian political prisoners were sent.

Partisan families and the families of their supporters were punished collectively. For example, in 1945-1947 most of the deportees to Siberia were relatives of partisans. The largest deportations took place in 1948 (code name of the operation – *Vesna* [Spring]), when around 40,000 people were deported, in 1949 (code name – *Priboj* [Surf]) when over 32,000 people were deported, and in 1951 (code name – *Osenj* [Autumn]) when around 16,000 people were deported. During these years, smaller scale deportations also took place. Not only people who supported or were suspected of supporting the partisan movement, but also people who could potentially resist the forced agricultural collectivisation (expropriation of land) were deported. The majority of Lithuanian residents were deported to Siberia (Krasnoyarsk

Region, Irkutsk Oblast, Buryat-Mongolia and other locations). Between 1944 and 1953, around 186,000 people were detained and imprisoned and 118,000 were deported from Lithuania.

Conditions in the labour camps were severe. Discipline was strict, the work was gruelling and dangerous (in mines, forest logging operations, construction), the climate was harsh, there was a constant shortage of food and what was available was of poor quality. In addition there was the risk of lawlessness from the real criminals imprisoned in the camps. Consequently, thousands of political prisoners did not survive or suffered impaired health. Imprisonment conditions improved only after 1953, when the Stalin era ended. Then the discipline became less strict, living conditions improved, life inside the camps became less regimented and prisoners could receive packages and write letters more frequently. One symbolic gesture was the elimination of prisoner numbers – although imprisoned, inmates could use their real names. The first amnesty of the Soviet government was declared in 1953, but the Lithuanian political prisoners were released from prison and deportees were released from their places of deportation in larger numbers only after 1956. Indeed some members of the resistance movement were only released in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Jonas Kadžionis, a former Lithuanian partisan, who would not consider any compromise with the Soviet government, spent 25 years in a labour camp and was only released in 1978.

There was a larger anti-Soviet armed resistance in western Ukraine, where the movement was far from spontaneous. The development of the movement started in the 1920s after the establishment of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalist (OUN). Ukraine did not have statehood (the territory of the current Ukraine was under the USSR and Poland), so Ukrainians fought for freedom. In part, their aspirations at the time were supported by Lithuania. Magazines and brochures were printed in Kaunas, the then interim capital of Lithuania. Ukrainians nurturing national aspirations formed in the territory of Poland and began to fight against the local authorities. In 1939, following the secret

German-Soviet agreements, Poland was divided and its Ukrainian part was incorporated into the USSR. This was when Ukrainians suffered Soviet repressions.

Changes took place in the resistance movement of Ukrainians. The above-mentioned OUN split into two: the radical part and the moderate part. At the outbreak of the Soviet-German war, the radical OUN declared independence and formed a government. The Nazis, however, did not recognise the government and began to stage reprisals against members of the organisation. Members of the OUN again went underground and established an organisational structure. The strongest structures were formed in western Ukraine. The armed struggle began as a direct response to German reprisals. The Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) initiated by the OUN led the struggle. These organisations also continued their struggle against the Soviet government. The Soviet government used similar measures to those used against Lithuanian partisans. Similar reprisal and suppression methods were also used. According to the Soviet Security, in 1944-1945 around 103,000 people may have died and 110,000 were arrested. A large number of these people could have been unarmed. Between 1944 and 1951, 203,000 Ukrainians were deported<sup>1</sup>. Those Ukrainians who resisted the Soviets, were also sent to labour camps and deported to Siberia.

We do not possess specific information about the direct contacts between Lithuanian and Ukrainian partisans after WWII. Ukrainian historian Volodymyr Vjatrovich states that the members of the Ukrainian resistance tried to move to Baltic countries, but they came face to face with the Soviet security forces and had to go back<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> O. Vovk, *Paskutinis karinis ir politinis sąjūdis dėl Ukrainos nepriklausomybės*, Genocidas ir rezistencija, Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras, Vilnius, 1997, vol. II, pp. 7-12.

<sup>2</sup> V. Vjatrovič, *Ukrainiečių sukilėlių žygis į Baltijos šalį*, Genocidas ir rezistencija, Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras, Vilnius, 2006, vol. I, pp. 116-120.



The paths of Ukrainians and Lithuanians crossed in labour camps and places of deportation. Representatives of both nations had many similar goals and a common enemy. Therefore, it was not difficult to reach a consensus. The memoirs of former Lithuanian political prisoners often mention Ukrainians as comrades in arms with whom they built personal friendships. They were primarily united by a common fate behind bars. As Jonas Žičkus, a former Lithuanian partisan and prisoner of a labour camp recalled, «the group of prisoners consisted of people of different nationalities: Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Ukrainians and others. We all shared the burden equally and our relations were normal»<sup>3</sup>. They were friends on a human level. As remembered by Danutė Ulozaitė imprisoned for resistance activities, «we cut hay with scythes and dried it and the Taiga resounded with our songs. It was a lot of fun. We lived like one family. Ukrainian and Russian women were friendly, they learned Lithuanian words and we learned their songs»<sup>4</sup>.

Lithuanians and Ukrainians celebrated religious holidays together although these were kept low key. Former political prisoner Balys Juknevičius recalled: «Christmas came – not the first and not the last in prison. All those from the Baltic States celebrated Christmas Eve together. The Ukrainians were our guests. On Christmas morning the Ukrainians went out to work under Lithuanian surnames and Lithuanians stayed behind to celebrate Christmas. The Chekists were surprised that all the Lithuanians went out to work during their holiday, while the Orthodox Ukrainians stayed in the barracks»<sup>5</sup>. This is how they showed their solidarity for each other.

Sometimes there were problematic situations in the labour camps. Leonas Vilitis, a member of the resistance movement,

<sup>3</sup> J. Žičkus, *Nueitas kelias*, Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras, Vilnius, 1999, pp. 116-117.

<sup>4</sup> *Laisvės kovotojų prisiminimai VIII*, Sudarė Romas Kaunietis, Margi raštai, Vilnius, 2014, p. 131.

<sup>5</sup> B. Juknevičius, *Liudija grįžę*, Lietuvos politinių kalinių ir tremtinių sąjunga, Laisvės kovų archyvas, Kaunas, 2002, vol. XXXI, p. 206.

remembers how the labour camps administration tried to set the different nationalities up against each other, because of the fear of unification and uprisings. Vilutis recalls a conflict between Lithuanians and Ukrainians in the labour camp that was incited by the camp administration. The Lithuanian and Ukrainian sides were armed and were just waiting for a skirmish, but it was resolved peacefully and the camp administration was not satisfied. According to his recollection, «after that test Lithuanians and Ukrainians joined forces»<sup>6</sup>. Their friendly relations only strengthened. There is evidence that the Lithuanian and Ukrainian political prisoners fought together against the lawlessness of the real criminals in the camp and won<sup>7</sup>.

Unification was politically motivated. Camp administration and the real criminals referred to Lithuanians and Ukrainians derogatively as “fascists”. This encouraged further unification against a common enemy. The unity of both nations was seen during the uprisings in labour camps, in which Lithuanians and Ukrainians took an active part. During the uprisings prisoners fought for their rights. Pranas Skeiveris, a former member of the underground organisation, recalled the following about the uprising in Kengyr in 1954 (in which Lithuanians and Ukrainians took part and Ukrainians were elected to the council of the uprising): «The united front of the prisoners during the uprising was a huge political and national consensus. An evening of friendship among nations was later held, during which we recalled common battles against the Crusaders and we realised that our common goal was the fight for freedom»<sup>8</sup>. Cooperation between Ukrainians and Lithuanian was also noted at the uprisings in Norilsk and Vorkuta in 1953. Bronius Zlatkus, a political prisoner, testifies to the situation in the Norilsk labour camps, where there was a friendly relationship between Lithuanians and

<sup>6</sup> L. Vilutis, *Likimo mozaika, Lietuvos politinių kalinių ir tremtinių sąjunga*, Kaunas, 1992, pp. 189-190.

<sup>7</sup> A. Lisauskas, *Iš pragaro angos*, Vilnius, 1996, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> *Laisvės kovotojų prisiminimai VIII*, Sudarė Romas Kaunietis, Vilnius, 2014, vol. I, p. 75.

Western Ukrainians, and they joined forces. Starting from 1952, resistance groups were formed to examine the situation in the camp<sup>9</sup>.

Examples testify that representatives of both nations fought in various ways for the independence of their countries and never forgot their aspirations. Such interests were not at cross-purposes, but they became the basis of a united front during imprisonment.

<sup>9</sup> B. Zlatkus, *Norilsko vyčiai*, Lietuvos politinių kalinių ir tremtinių sąjunga, Laisvės kovų archyvas, Kaunas, 2003, vol. XXXIV, p. 17.



Filippina Calafati

The space of memory. Reflections on the didactics of the Gulag

1. *History, memory and consciousness*

The fact that the Soviet Gulag has troubles acquiring a suitable or even participated memorial dimension is also reflected in the slow reception that the Italian school education system continues to show for such a tragic and troublesome chapter of contemporary history. A chapter that for a long time has been placed at the margins of the curricular learning experiences, in all different types of schools, so that it cannot even claim the right to stand next to the Shoah, as an indispensable civil warning. While the historical debate on the complex system of Soviet persecution followed paths for implementation more or less increasing<sup>1</sup>, since the *perestrojka*, the path of the memory of these events seems to be stuck in a dimension of time and space that is far away and difficult to reach. The concealment of events, made possible, before the Nineties, by the closing of Soviet archives and by obstructionism against research, it is perpetuated through the use of a deeply heterogeneous memory of Stalinism, which is both memory of the Revolution and of the Gulag, of the “great Patriotic War” and of the totalitarian regime. On this double track, the public thematising of events

<sup>1</sup> H. Kaplan, *The Bibliography of the Gulag today*, in E. Dundovich, F. Gori, E. Guercetti (eds.), *Reflections on the GULAG. With a Documentary Appendix on the Italian Victims of Repression in the URSS*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2003, p. 225.

and experiences appeared as a form of struggle against a system that could not yet be stored as past nor put at a distance. Therefore were considered harmful the words of Aleksandr Solženicyn, Vasily Grossman and Varlam Šalamov, three of the most credible voices denouncing the horror.

The process of elaboration of the memory of Stalinism in the collective consciousness began in the years of Gorbačëv, when associations of former deportees began to form and many requests were made for the rehabilitation of victims. At the same time a debate was opened on the state of historical studies, focused on the assessment of the seventy years of Soviet regime<sup>2</sup>. This movement was then abruptly stopped under President Yeltsin, which marked a turning point. The criticism of the events and the appropriation of the repressed past have given way to a strong rehabilitation of the national tradition, consolidated with the Putin government. The shame connected to the awareness of what Stalinism was, has given way to pride for the country's history, to which both the Tsar and Stalin belong<sup>3</sup>. Today, more than twenty years after the disintegration of the USSR, memory continues to be opposed and resized by a systematic work of censorship that is not necessarily exercised through repressive forms, but thorough blatant attempts at defamation. A network control system persists, aimed at removing dangerous models and attitudes and at reshaping mentalities and behaviours within people's consciousness, producing a sort of invisible mechanism of spontaneous revision<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> N. Werth, *La trasparenza et la mémoire. Les soviétiques à la recherche de leur passé*, «Vingtième siècle», January-March 1989, pp. 13 ss. Werth provides us with a thorough reconstruction of the two opposed positions in this debate: on one side the "revisionists", whose most inveterate exponent was Jurij Afanasiev and who extended their criticism to the entire Soviet period, in its very nature and continuity; on the other side, those who Afanasiev defined «the eclectics of the everything and anything», who saw in the past a mix of shadows and lights, continuity and discontinuity.

<sup>3</sup> M. Ferretti, *La memoria mutilata. La Russia ricorda*, Milano, Corbaccio, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> M. Zalambani, *Censura, istituzioni e politica letteraria in URSS (1964-1985)*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2009, p. 9.

Exemplary in this regard is the attempt to denigrate the figure and work of Solženicyn, recently implemented by the editor of the newspaper «Literaturnaya Gazeta», Yuri Poliakov, which aims at desacralizing the authority of the Nobel Prize writer, witness and dissident, whose study in schools comes to be defined as «a serious mistake»<sup>5</sup>. The antinomy that often exists between history and memory, between objective narration and emotional memory and which, according to Enzo Traverso, is linked to a different modality of processing the past<sup>6</sup>, appears to be amplified, in the Soviet case, by a lack of awareness of the civil society.

The phenomenon of memorial obsession<sup>7</sup> which, along with the danger of creating stereotypes, seems to have invested the memory of the Shoah and from which Primo Levi had already warned us in his *The Drowned and the Saved*<sup>8</sup>, it is almost reversed in the case of the Gulag and the Stalinist persecutions, that remain unaffected by the dose of rhetoric that is almost necessary to unblock the amnesia<sup>9</sup>. While on one side we must deal with the risks inherent to a kind of entrepreneurship of memory that is increasingly becoming the setting for a disposable history<sup>10</sup>, on the other, one cannot escape the duty to investigate thoroughly the horror that still belongs to us, also focusing on a rituality that would not tarnish the sense of the remembrance. Such a commitment must inevitably pass through school education, and teaching must be reshaped in its manner and form, in

<sup>5</sup> N. Lombardozi, «Via Arcipelago Gulag dalle scuole russe» ora Solgenitsyn torna ad essere Nemico, «La Repubblica», September 28<sup>th</sup> 2014, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> E. Traverso, *Il passato: istruzioni per l'uso. Storia, memoria, politica*, Verona, Ombre Corte, 2006, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, pp. 10 ss. On the subject of “abuses of the memory” see, among others, T. Todorov, *Memoria del bene, tentazione del male*, Milano, Garzanti, 2001 and V. Pisan-ty, *Abusi di memoria. Negare, banalizzare, sacralizzare la Shoah*, Milano, Mondadori, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> P. Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, Torino, Einaudi, 2006, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Ivi, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> An interesting literary experiment on the commercialisation of memory is the novel by T. Reich, *Il mio Olocausto*, Torino, Einaudi, 2008.

its ideological assumptions and learning objectives. The dialogue between the different areas of historical research and educational experimentation appears in this case all the more necessary, but also more difficult and delicate. It is not enough to affirm the peculiar character of a historical event, it is also necessary to explain it and decant it, eliminating misunderstandings, ambiguities and misrepresentations, which may arise from a purely absolute statement.

The teaching of history cannot be reduced to simple illustration of an event, but it implies a social, political and ethical reflection on our values, on our relationship with the past and our behaviour in the present. Even if we established a strict functional distinction between processing places and transmission tools of historical knowledge, we could not avoid the pitfall of incompleteness, and often inadequacy of such knowledge. Teaching the Soviet concentration camp system means, basically, trying to convey the meaning of an event, which does not have an immense literature about it, about which we do not know, unlike in the case of the Shoah, almost everything. An event whose internal mechanism has not been explored, broken down and analysed in depth, that has not yet settled in the scholastic tradition, but it has all the characteristics of an alternative memory to the deportation and extermination of the Jews.

Kolyma, Solovki, Vorkuta, Vaigač Island, as much as Auschwitz, are places and moments that force us to a new relationship with history, a critical relationship with the totality of the past that has made us what we are today. Knowledge of the Soviet concentration camp system plays a decisive role for a formal and civic education that is fully aware of the need for affirmation of critical thinking against all forms of social and cultural conformity. The school should then act both on the ground of the more consolidated historical discipline and on the more mobile field of memory, trying to draw a privileged space of action within the educational activity. A memory that does not want to rely on improvisation requires a composite and daily work, not limited to



the activities organised for official celebrations<sup>11</sup>, but declined on several occasions for knowledge: the study handbook, the historiographic analysis, hearing the witnesses, viewing the images, the use of the web, reflections on all sources of historical reconstruction. Reading and observing the evil is not enough to understand it and refuse it. First of all, there must be an exercise of investigation on the mechanisms that fuel it, on the accounts done by its authors before then the ones by scholars, a critical revision of the events that can be incorporated in their own cultural codes and, above all, a change in the hermeneutic view. Mending the inextricable plot of history, memory and civic consciousness is believed to be an inevitable duty of teaching, intended both as an expansion of knowledge and as a means of transmission of collective memory.

The keystone in the process of synchronization between memory and consciousness can be found in the communication of the experience of the Gulag and the ways in which it can enter the imagination and awareness of the young students. If, as Levi reminds us, the lack of communication is not only a «language monster», but a real fault that comes from a kind of dangerous mental indolence, communicating becomes an imperative which no one can escape, otherwise they are left only with the choice of the ambiguity that is often accompanied by silence<sup>12</sup>. The question of historical communicability appears however connected to that operation of “actualisation” of the memory that is exposed, in many ways, to disputes and controversies due to the risk of a disconnection between the universality of the historical significance and the horizon of immediacy<sup>13</sup>. The lack of a historical

<sup>11</sup> Traverso reminds us how “anti-totalitarian symmetry”, pursued through the institutionalisation of memorial days, is not in itself a guarantee of remembrance. Traverso, *Il passato: istruzioni per l'uso. Storia, memoria, politica*, cit., p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> «Except for cases of pathological incapacity, one can and must communicate, and thereby contribute in a useful and easy way to the peace of others and oneself, because silence, the absence of signals, is itself a signal, but an ambiguous one, and ambiguity generates anxiety and suspicion. To say that it is impossible to communicate is false; one always can», Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, cit., pp. 68-69.

<sup>13</sup> A. Bravo, *Interrogare la memoria al presente*, in E. Traverso (ed.), *Insegnare*

memory as a moment of continuity in the almost spontaneous transmission of certain experiences between generations, must be one of the fundamental assumptions from which to start in order to evaluate whether the methods and forms of dissemination so far adopted and practiced, are still valid or to what extent they should be corrected, whether they are correctable or should be radically changed. We must take into serious consideration the nature of the historical memory of the younger generation, who is living, and is going to live in a dimension of historical time that is not ours, as ours is not that of our fathers and our grandfathers. Historical memory is not transmitted intact and each generation has its own memory. It is not reasonable to assume that today's students, who were born in the mid-Nineties, can fully understand the meaning of a past so distant from their time and their world. We may, however, take action on the formation of a historical memory that has its foundation in experiences, encounters, relationships between generations, with the result of showing that each generation is a carrier of a specific variant of the collective memory. If we question ourselves about what, of all the great baggage of the past, can be activated in the minds of young people to the point of being able to reach their conscience, we cannot overlook all the elements of the phenomenology of the present. The process of "presentification" of the historical past is accomplished through a selective reading of the events, a reconstruction that incorporates in the memory what takes the form of current necessity<sup>14</sup>.

## 2. *An example of teaching the Gulag*

To explore the ways in which an event such as the Soviet Gulag could be declined in the imagination of the students, we intend to dwell on the experience of the teaching workshops

*Auschwitz. Questioni etiche, storiografiche, educative della deportazione e dello sterminio*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1995, p. 66.

<sup>14</sup> L. Canfora, *Il presente come storia. Perché il passato ci chiarisce le idee*, Milano, Rizzoli, 2014.

held, within the European project “Amnesia Gulag in Europe”<sup>15</sup>, with a group of one hundred and fifty students of the fifth year and eight History teachers of the Institute of Higher Education “Einstein-Nebbia” of Loreto<sup>16</sup>, from December 2013 to March 2014, specifying that it is a path also experienced, with methodological similarities and differences, in other high schools in the provinces of Macerata, Ascoli Piceno and Bolzano.

It is a work created with the aim of giving voice and space to the most significant events that have marked Soviet totalitarianism, and structured by the choice of a particular methodological approach, which could be defined multi-instrumental. A choice that is dictated both by the need to supplement the traditional curriculum with the updates of historical research, and by the chance to give students learning opportunity, supported by an innovative and choral representation. One should not forget that the method of representation of the contents always presents some danger for the didactic transmission of historical knowledge<sup>17</sup>. We should always look for educational criteria that would be more functional for a communication of knowledge and messages that it is not unilateral and authoritarian, that does not result in the passive reception of a line of interpretation imposed from above. The teaching plan was therefore carried out through multiple activities, heterogeneous but linked by the common goal to work on the meaning that historical memory, and specifically that of the Gulag, can take on in the present dimension, and how

<sup>15</sup> The European project A.G.E. “Amnesia Gulag in Europe” is coordinated by the Department of Political Sciences, Communication and International Relations of the University of Macerata. It is one of the few projects on the memory of Stalinism funded in the year 2013 by the European Union within the programme Europe for Citizen – Action “Active European Remembrance”. For details see the website <<http://amnesiagulag.eu>>.

<sup>16</sup> It is an Institute of Higher Education composed of two learning paths: the Vocational Institute for the Hospitality industry “Antonio Nebbia” and the Economical Technical Institute “Albert Einstein”. For a complete overview of the activities included in the school’s didactic plan, see the website <<http://www.einstein-nebbia.it>>.

<sup>17</sup> E. Collotti, *Le rappresentazioni della memoria*, in Traverso (ed.), *Insegnare Auschwitz. Questioni etiche, storiografiche, educative della deportazione e dello sterminio*, cit., p. 80.

it can stimulate an active European citizenship, inspired by the principles of democracy, freedom and respect for human rights. The use of a certain type of sources (narrative, archival, oral, iconographic, multimedia) and different procedures for analysis subjected to the students, not only responds to the need to make studying more interesting, or to put students in direct contact with the past, or even to show them the path of the historian, so that they can better assess the results of his research. The procedures for a critical analysis of the sources used in the workshops have been selected primarily to allow the acquisition of specific “historical” thinking strategies, in the knowledge that there is not one thought *tout court*, but that there are as many forms of thought as there are disciplinary areas in which a culture is organized. The use of contemporary conceptual tools must promote the full development of intellectual abilities and emotional faculties of young people, which is why it would be unthinkable and anachronistic now to propose a model of ideological and dogmatic teaching which would be inconsistent with the principles of a democratic school.

The educational project carried out with the classes was divided into three moments of study: information, participated workshop, guided tour of the photo exhibition *Gulag* by Tomasz Kizny.

In the first stage were clarified the fundamental contents of the history of Soviet totalitarianism and the Gulag, starting from a survey about previous knowledge of the students. In the jargon of ministerial educational programming, this would be seen as the moment of analysis of the so-called disciplinary prerequisites, however, having to measure ourselves with a theme almost completely misunderstood, it was decided not to take into account the level of prior knowledge and to proceed with the administration of a start-questionnaire that would test knowledge, impressions, prejudices and stereotypes about Soviet history of the past and present. From the analysis of the questionnaire emerged a picture of almost total ignorance on the fundamental questions, of general confusion if not actual misunderstanding. We acted

upon such a difficult starting situation, with a series of information seminars and studies, aimed at anchoring the memory to a network of accurate and detailed knowledge: geopolitical setting, specific terminology, analysis of the concept of totalitarianism, stages and tools of Stalinism, typology and chronology of the camps, nature and purpose of the concentration camp policy and its changes, the formation of the prisoners' universe, the relationship between concentration camp system and economic policy<sup>18</sup>. They are the minimum coordinates, from which it becomes possible to highlight the peculiarities of the experience and memory, moving away from the danger of placing the Gulag outside of history or of falling into moralistic preaching, with its corollary of adhesions and emotional reactions of rejection. The methodology of the participated lesson was supported by a toolbox consisting of educational audio-visual material of different kinds, manuals and monographic literature<sup>19</sup>. One of the lessons focuses on preparing students to a guided tour of the exhibition by Kizny, to facilitate this, we introduced the biographical profile of the Polish photographer, closely connected to his work, and we gave an overview of the sections of which the exhibition is made up.

<sup>18</sup> Seminars are held in a multimedia room, fully equipped to support an interactive lesson.

<sup>19</sup> For an idea of the didactic materials that were utilised see <<http://amnesiagulag.eu/files/2014/03/AGE-Mattucci.pdf>> and <<https://www.lastoriasiamonoi.rai.it/puntate/solovki/969/default.aspx>>. For what textbooks are concerned, the following have been used: P. Armocida, A.G. Salassa, *Storia Link*, Milano, Mondadori, 2012, vol. III; F.M. Feltri, M.M. Bertazzoni, F. Neri, *La torre e il pedone*, Torino, Sei, 2012, vol. III. Emblematic of the minor role assigned to the history of Gulag in the curricular teaching programmes is the absence, nowadays, of a comparative research on the quantitative and qualitative space given to the Soviet concentration camp system in the history textbooks, when there are various studies on the subject, although exclusively in the perspective of the Shoah. Cfr. L. Gualtiero, G.L. Melandri, F. Monducci, M.P. Morando, D. Pizzotti, G. Ricci, M. Sarti, C. Venturoli, P. Zagatti (eds.), *C'è manuale e manuale. Analisi dei libri di storia per la scuola secondaria*, Viterbo, Sette Città, 2010. For an interesting reconstruction of the work of censorship applied to Russian history textbooks by the Soviet nationalist revisionism cfr. G. Procacci, *Carte d'identità. Revisionismi, nazionalismi e fondamentalismi nei manuali di storia*, Roma, Carocci, 2007, p. 53.

In the phase of the participated workshop, students have taken on the role of management and implementation of activities of group analysis on the topics of the seminars. It was a particularly significant experiment because of a series of papers produced under the supervision of the teachers involved in the project. This work has enabled the emergence of various cross-skills thanks to which the students have developed personal reflections, analysis of narrative texts, in-depth research, poems, drawings, giving life to a concrete form of multidisciplinary path. It seems almost superfluous to point out that it was literature to help the students at this stage of the learning process, as a tool that, like Solženicyn said in his speech for the Nobel Prize, «preserves and maintains within itself the flame of past history, protecting it from deformation and slander»<sup>20</sup>. The analysis of some excerpts from works now considered classics of Soviet concentration camps was an opportunity to meet directly with the authoritative voice of the witnesses, to give vent to that empathy that only art can convey<sup>21</sup>. The examined excerpts were extracts from *The Gulag Archipelago*<sup>22</sup> and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovič*<sup>23</sup> by Solženicyn, *The Kolyma Tales*<sup>24</sup> by Šalamov, Grossman's *Life and Fate*<sup>25</sup>, *Within the Whirlwind*<sup>26</sup> by Evgenija Ginzburg. Starting from the reading of selected texts a set of reflections was structured on issues such as mandatory detention, the journey to the camps, daily life within the camps, loneliness and loss of humanity that marked the experience of those who have experienced the Gulag on their skin. Interesting was the work of comparison between the description of material details of everyday life provided by

<sup>20</sup> A. Solženicyn, *Il grido. Discorso per il conferimento del Nobel 1970*, in D. Padoan (ed.), *Tra scrittura e libertà. I discorsi dei premi Nobel per la Letteratura*, Milano, Editrice San Raffaele, p. 349.

<sup>21</sup> N. Mattucci, *The power of imagination. Literature of the inhuman*, present in this volume.

<sup>22</sup> A. Solženicyn, *Arcipelago Gulag*, Milano, Mondadori, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> A. Solženicyn, *Una giornata di Ivan Denisovič*, Torino, Einaudi, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> V. Šalamov, *I racconti di Kolyma*, Torino, Einaudi, 1999, vol. II.

<sup>25</sup> V. Grossman, *Vita e destino*, Milano, Adelphi, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> E. Ginzburg, *Viaggio nella vertigine*, Milano, Baldini & Castoldi, 2013.

Solženicyn in his story of Ivan Denisovič and by Levi in *If This Is a Man*<sup>27</sup>, carried out by the students starting from the impressions that Levi himself expresses in his conversation with Ferdinando Camon<sup>28</sup>. Worthy of note is also the research work on the experience of Italian prisoners in Soviet camps, focused on reading some salient passages of the precious volume by Elena Dundovich and Francesca Gori<sup>29</sup>, and the production of poems, thoughts and drawings of some students<sup>30</sup>.

The third phase of the learning experience has seen starring Tomasz Kizny, whose photographic installation *Gulag*, thanks to AGE Project, has found a way to be displayed even in Macerata, in the evocative Specola Hall of the Mozzi-Borgetti Library. Students visited the exhibition and were guided in the detailed illustration of the six sections in which it is structured. Some of them ventured in planning an interview to be subjected to Kizny, in order to further clarify assumptions, choices, motivations and impressions that have accompanied the Polish photographer in his long years of research spent, sometimes clandestinely, between public and private archives, in order to communicate directly some important details of a complex history. The teaching value of the installation lies in the skilful construction of a journey through some locations of the vast Soviet territory<sup>31</sup>, which have been the scene of systematic exploitation and the elimination of the lives of millions of individuals. The communication value is certainly not to arouse the emotional shock often induced by the images of the Nazi camps. A strong emotional impact could possibly cause in the observer the immediate rejection of the object of reflection, thereby dooming to failure also the critical exercise. The photographs by Kizny invite instead to a reasoned meditation and trigger the curiosity that pushes the viewer, and in this case

<sup>27</sup> P. Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> F. Camon, *Conversazioni con Primo Levi*, Parma, Guanda, 2006, pp. 53 ss.

<sup>29</sup> E. Dundovich, F. Gori, *Italiani nei lager di Stalin*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> See: < <http://amnesiagulag.eu/storie-emozioni/>>.

<sup>31</sup> T. Kizny, *Gulag*, Milano, Mondadori, 2004.

the students, to question the many premises and procedures that have allowed what happened to happen.

Ultimately, we need to mention two additional activities involving only a small part of the students. As part of the activities of the AGE Project there was a competition of ideas for the realization of an App of Kizny's exhibition, open to all students who had taken part in the educational opportunities for training in preparation for the installation of the exhibition. This contest is to be read as an innovative educational experiment aimed at introducing young people to historical memory through the use of communication tools of the last generation, able to stimulate in an alternative but not exclusive way our cognitive abilities. Another significant learning experience of this path on Gulag was the participation to the video footage of the documentary film *Five winters*<sup>32</sup> by Silvia Luciani, in which some students release real interviews about the meaning of concepts such as memory, memory loss, liability, propaganda and manipulation of consciences. From their answers it appears certainly a greater awareness of the historical dimension of the events learned and, far more importantly, a desire not to drop the questions that the present time asks to the past, not to turn their back to history, to voluntarily take charge of that burden that Hannah Arendt considered the irreplaceable pre-requisite of any true understanding<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> See <<http://amnesiagulag.eu/il-progetto/evento-2/video/>>.

<sup>33</sup> H. Arendt, *Le origini del totalitarismo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2004, p. 80.



Silvia Casilio

Coming to terms with the past through memory, history and oblivion

### *Introduction*

Two modestly dressed men walk along Marx boulevard in Moscow, towards the Zerscinski square. One carries a suitcase and the other has his hands in his pockets. The one with the suitcase folds in a side street, the other mixes up with people, pulling out from his pocket a piece of paper and beginning to read quietly a list of names. Every now and then someone raises a hand. Then the man stops reading and the two disappear together in the side street where the one with the suitcase is waiting [...]. The two men sell books on the black market [...]. Among those censored, the works of Aleksandr Solženicyn currently have the highest quotation<sup>1</sup>.

These lines are not from *Fahrenheit 451* but from an article in «Panorama» of 1974, and the Moscow which is discussed in the article is not a fantasy city, but the capital of the Soviet Union, «mother country of socialism». And if in Moscow, in the second half of the Seventies among the most widely read books there was *Gulag Archipelago*, in Italy, a country that could boast the presence on the political scene of the strongest communist party of democratic Europe, the publication of the book by Aleksandr Solženicyn, dated May 25, 1974, passed almost unnoticed. The book had been published in France just five months earlier and had aroused heated debates among intellectuals across the Alps. In Italy, except for a review signed by Pietro Citati for «Corriere

<sup>1</sup> *Stalin sottobanco*, «Panorama», 426, June 20<sup>th</sup> 1974, p. 94.

della Sera» on 16 June 1974, periodicals and newspapers gave very little importance to the ruthless account that Solženicyn gives of the Soviet concentration camp universe. In an Italy shaken by massacres and where armed groups of terrorists were beginning to operate both from right wing and left wing<sup>2</sup>, the monumental work of the Russian writer, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970, turned out to be very thorny<sup>3</sup>.

We are sorry for Solženicyn, – wrote for example Alberto Moravia on the pages of «Espresso» – who is a nationalist and Slavophile of the best kind, but the horrors he rightly denounced, seem to have been originated by certain historical characters typical of his country, rather than from socialism which, although with some hardship, was one thing in Russia and a different thing in the other communist countries<sup>4</sup>.

The words of Alberto Moravia and the silence that surrounded the release of the book, tell us how difficult it still was in the Seventies for Italian Communists and for much of the left wingers of our country to begin a process of analytical “memorialisation” of their past and that of the CPSU, in order to start a profound renewal of their identity. In this sense the Seventies, and in particular the second half of that decade, are paradigmatic as they were characterized by substantial change in the socio-political context both in international politics and in the Italian scenario. While internationally it was recorded as the moment of maximum detente between the blocs, the Italian Communists began to work to overcome that unofficial formula, the *conventio*

<sup>2</sup> On 28 May 1974, a bomb exploded killing eight people and injuring about a hundred; on 4 August 1974 a bomb exploded in a carriage of the train *Italicus* near San Benedetto Val di Sambro, causing five dead and one hundred and five injuries. The literature on political violence and the Seventies in Italy is almost endless and it is impossible here to give a detailed report about it, but I would take the liberty to refer to my work *Finalmente il cielo è caduto sulla terra! Politica e violenza politica nell'estrema sinistra in Italia, 1974-1978*, Roma, Edizioni Associate, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> See for example I. Alberti, *Così l'Italia censurò Solzenicyn*, «Avvenire», April 13<sup>th</sup> 1999.

<sup>4</sup> A. Moravia, *Gli schiavi della Santa Russia*, «L'Espresso», 36, September 8<sup>th</sup> 1974, pp. 62-63.

*ad excludendum*, which had held the PCI outside the government since the end of the war<sup>5</sup>.

The results of the referendum to abrogate divorce, which resulted in the victory of the No<sup>6</sup>, the somewhat sensational results obtained from the party then led by Enrico Berlinguer in the local elections of 1975 and the Political elections of 20 June 1976, not only excited both party militants and those groups and movements to the left of the PCI, which had been founded after 1968, but also let the leadership of the party and observers of the time glimpse the real possibility of overtaking the Christian Democrats<sup>7</sup>. In fact, as noted by Valentine Lomellini, the gap between PCI and DC in 1976 was tight and it imposed the formation of a government that, on one side, could provide stability to the country and that had, although from the outside, the support of the Communists<sup>8</sup>. In this search for a compromise between the two main political forces of the country, the difficult national circumstances, due to the economic crisis on the one hand and on the other to terrorism<sup>9</sup>, contributed significantly. Eventually, after a heated debate within the Leadership of the PCI, the Berlinguer line of participation in the “no confidence” government of Andreotti prevailed: in the words of Lomellini, Berlinguer resurrected an indication by Togliatti that «the PCI should enter into an area of government» against the reluctance of some members of the Leadership, more favourable to the

<sup>5</sup> S. Pons, *Berlinguer e la fine del comunismo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2006. See also the essays published in A. Ventrone (ed.), *L'ossessione del nemico. Memorie divise nella storia della Repubblica*, Roma, Donzelli, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> See, among the others, P. Craveri, *La Repubblica dal 1958 al 1992*, in G. Galasso (ed.), *Storia d'Italia*, Torino, UTET, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> «La Repubblica» in a supplement of January 14<sup>th</sup> 1986 presenting the section dedicated to the elections of 1976 has the very significant title *Bastò un piccolo voto e l'Italia si tinse di bianco e di rosso*. See also S. Colarizi, *Storia dei partiti nell'Italia repubblicana*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> V. Lomellini, *Il grande terrore, 40 anni dopo: la memoria del PCI tra nuovi e vecchi processi*, in M. Clementi (ed.), *Stalinismo e Grande Terrore*, Roma, Odradek, 2008, pp. 167-183.

<sup>9</sup> See G. Napolitano, *Dal PCI al socialismo europeo. Un'autobiografia politica*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2005.

party keeping its role in the opposition<sup>10</sup>. It was in this context that the PCI began, or rather accelerated, the work of renewal of its image, that was the result of a painful, hesitant, sometimes contradictory and certainly complex process of separation from the «mother country of socialism»: from the contrasts with the CPSU regarding China, the disapproval for the invasion of Czechoslovakia, up to Euro-communism<sup>11</sup>.

Starting from this brief but necessary premise and without any presumption of completeness, this paper will attempt to provide interpretative instruments to understand how the PCI, the largest communist party of the democratic West, “lived” with what was happening in the «mother country of socialism», the USSR, and to understand which path took the process of “memorialisation” of the past of Italian Communists, with regard to the horrors and mistakes made especially during the Stalinist era of the great processes. We will try to answer two questions in particular: what was the relationship between the PCI and the USSR and how the PCI began to come to terms with its past, especially since the nineteen seventies.

### 1. *The PCI and the «mother country of socialism»*

The link with the Soviet Union was very important for the process of construction of the PCI and represented a fundamental element in the character of the organization throughout its history,

<sup>10</sup> Lomellini, *Il grande terrore, 40 anni dopo: la memoria del PCI tra nuovi e vecchi processi*, cit., p. 168. On the debate within the Directorate see F. Barbagallo, *Enrico Berlinguer*, Roma, Carocci, 2006 and E. Macaluso, *50 anni nel PCI*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2003, p. 220.

<sup>11</sup> On the various stages that characterized that process we suggest the already quoted volume by Pons, *Berlinguer e la fine del comunismo*. See also A. Höbel, *Il PCI nella crisi del movimento comunista internazionale tra PCUS e PCC (1960-1964)*, «Studi Storici», 2, 2005; V. Lomellini, *L'appuntamento mancato. La sinistra italiana e il dissenso nei regimi comunisti (1968-1989)*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 2010 and Id., “Praga è sola?” *La crisi cecoslovacca presentata dal Partito comunista italiano*, in S. Casilio, L. Guerrieri (eds.), *Il '68 diffuso. Contestazione e linguaggi in movimento*, Bologna, Clueb, 2009, pp. 111-130.

from the Congress of Livorno of 1921 to the twenty years of fascist government, from the years of post-war Italy – strongly influencing the presence of Communists on the political and institutional scene – to the “turning point of the Bolognina”, which led to the twentieth and last Congress of the PCI in 1991. This bond, over the years, turned out to be at the same time an element of strength but also of extreme weakness. On the one hand, in fact, it made possible the construction of a «robust and compact» identity, strongly anchored to the Soviet «myth», which had strong deep roots «built by the Leadership and by them tenaciously strengthened and lovingly cared for»<sup>12</sup>. The day after the end of the Second World War, the popularity and prestige for the uncompromising anti-fascism demonstrated in the field, not only during the liberation war, but throughout the period of the fascist dictatorship, and the leadership function that communists had had during Resistance and the high price they had paid for this, combined with the close relationship with the Soviet Union – «with the country that, in addition to rejecting the most massive attack launched by the fascists, paying human and material costs higher than the whole ally coalition» – formed the foundation for the construction of that «new party» which Palmiro Togliatti had started talking about since his arrival in Italy in 1944, after almost twenty years of exile<sup>13</sup>. On the other hand, this bond determined that exclusion of the Communist Party from the government, which has already been briefly discussed, with the result that the relationship between opposition and government was influenced more by ideological controversy than by a programmatic opposition. Indeed, especially in the immediate post-war period, the issues related to the dynamics of economic growth and social advancement were transformed into elements of intense political debate only after presentations made «through the distorting lenses of idealization of opposed cultural patterns:

<sup>12</sup> See M. Flores, N. Gallerano, *Sul PCI. Un'interpretazione storica*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1992, pp. 67-83.

<sup>13</sup> A. Ventrone, *La democrazia in Italia 1943-1960*, Milano, Sansoni, 1998, pp. 117-118.

representations of the USSR and the United States, of America and Russia», which turned into real points of reference<sup>14</sup>. The USSR and the socialist countries on the one hand and the United States on the other, became the elements on which social conflict in Italy was centred, which ended up appearing more like a struggle between values and systems than like a conflict of different interests and objectives<sup>15</sup>. All of this had heavy repercussions on the cultural debate. The Italian propaganda of the '40s and '50s, in fact, as Edoardo Novelli writes, was the voice of a politics which was both the perpetrator and the victim of an ideological battle between east and west, between Catholicism and Communism. For example, the Church in the elections of 1948 was in the forefront of the campaign, even assigning to a religious group, the so-called flying brothers, the political counter-propaganda. In 1953, the DC organized the *Afterlife Exhibition (Mostra dell'aldilà)*, a traveling exhibition halfway between an exhibition and a fair, showed around to denounce the living conditions in the countries of real socialism. In the pictures, some movie-extras were recognized, and the attack of the PCI was clear: the photos were fake, and so, if the pictures were false, what they claimed must be false too<sup>16</sup>. As already stated, the PCI worked to build the myth of the USSR: for the elections campaign of 1948, the Press and Propaganda Section produced brochure in which was told, from birth to maturity, the life of Alessio, a Soviet citizen. The story of the life of Alessio was accompanied by the main statistics on the spread of goods, on the eating habits, the level of wages and salaries, the infant mortality, on the

<sup>14</sup> A. Mariuzzo, *Divergenze parallele. Comunismo e anticomunismo alle origini del linguaggio politico dell'Italia repubblicana (1945-1953)*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2010, p. 241.

<sup>15</sup> Flores, Gallerano, *Sul PCI. Un'interpretazione storica*, cit., p. 68. See for example L. Barca, F. Botta, A. Zevi, *I comunisti e l'economia italiana. 1944-1974. Antologia di scritti e documenti*, Bari, De Donato, 1975.

<sup>16</sup> E. Novelli, *La turbopolitica. Sessant'anni di comunicazione politica e di scena pubblica in Italia 1945-2005*, Milano, Bur, 2006, pp. 29-40. On these topics see also A. Ventrone, *Il nemico interno. Immagini, parole e simboli della lotta politica nell'Italia del Novecento*, Roma, Donzelli, 2005.

diffusion of education and so on<sup>17</sup>. These tools for propaganda were supported by the incessant work of the press of the PCI, from «Propaganda» to «L'Unità», which published continuous travel reportages that listed in great detail the achievements of the USSR and the socialist countries, describing a model of technological development structurally oriented to the improvement of living conditions for the whole society<sup>18</sup>. Not being able to give, here, a detailed account of the construction and consolidation of the Soviet «myth» in the Communist cultural identity in Italy<sup>19</sup>, it is sufficient to say that in the Seventies it was still being discussed how the Cold War influenced the cultural discourse in Italy. Giuseppe Galasso, for example, in that fateful 1974, questioned and interrogated journalists and historians on the role and task that intellectuals and scholars had, or should have had, in society.

Emblematic in this regard are the words by Giorgio Bocca:

Despite the interest of readers in history, Italian historiography does not seem to have today the same cultural function that it has in other times or other countries. Perhaps because it is largely academic and party-oriented, which in the Italian context means provincial. Communist and Catholic teachers are very good at quibbling on the thought of Gramsci or Don Sturzo, but are deaf, evasive, cautious when it comes to explaining the Russian, Vatican, American influences, the turning point of the Cominform as well as the NATO membership, the responsibility of the Church in the birth of Fascism and the intervention of Stalin in the breakthrough of Salerno [...] This seems like the worst vice of our historiography: the scholarly, instrumental, academic interpretation made by the distinguished professor, which is so clever, because it manages to disguise Stalinism and every power struggle as an independent ideological debate [...]. [Historians] Sometimes explain,

<sup>17</sup> The brochure is mentioned in Mariuzzo, *Divergenze parallele. Comunismo e anticomunismo alle origini del linguaggio politico dell'Italia repubblicana (1945-1953)*, cit., p. 253.

<sup>18</sup> See C. Mussa *et al.*, *Noi siamo stati nell'URSS*, by the Italy-USSR Association, Firenze, Macchia, 1950; the series of articles by L. Lombardo-Radice, *Se fossi nato in Russia... e invece sei nato in Italia*, published by «L'Unità» since 10 October 1950; A. Ugolini, *Una nuova civiltà*, «L'Unità», May 16<sup>th</sup> 1950.

<sup>19</sup> For an in-depth analysis see F. Andreucci, *Falce e martello. Identità e linguaggi dei comunisti italiani fra stalinismo e guerra fredda*, Bologna, Bononia University Press, 2005; *L'URSS il mito le masse*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1991.

reveal, but more often justify. The proof is that communist historians deal with the PCI and Catholic ones deal with the Catholic movement, each in their garden, among their friends, in their conformism<sup>20</sup>.

## 2. *The Make-over*

In fact, in the Seventies the Communist Party had just begun to rethink itself and was undergoing a substantial renovation of its image, a *make-over*, to quote Valentine Lomellini, which allowed the party to gain the votes of the nascent progressive electorate that saw in the “party of the honest” the only possibility of real regeneration of the stagnant Italian political situation<sup>21</sup>. In this process of “memorialisation”, «Rinascita» was instrumental as it was the press organisation and the place for conceptual and political reflection of the PCI. This weekly publication, already since 1976 and especially after 1978, was an essential point of reference providing a forum for relevant media roundtables promoted among members of the Directorate of PCI. As Lomellini writes, from the analysis of the publication it is not possible to identify a unified theory on Stalinism<sup>22</sup>: while on the one hand many published articles show an ill-concealed impatience towards historians who moved an «ethical refusal towards Stalinism», therefore «Stalin is simply presented as the one who has put in order and industrialized a backward country, but that, however, has killed too many intellectuals, and then ruined agriculture»<sup>23</sup>, on the other hand, it was emphasized the need to

<sup>20</sup> G. Galasso, *E il passato rispose: Presente!*, «L'Espresso», 29, July 21<sup>st</sup> 1974, pp. 46-51.

<sup>21</sup> Lomellini, *Il grande terrore, 40 anni dopo: la memoria del PCI tra nuovi e vecchi processi*, cit., pp. 167-183. Cfr. also S. Colarizi, *Storia dei partiti nell'Italia repubblicana*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> V. Lomellini, *The Great terror in Euro-communists' eyes*, in E. Brussi re, E. Moradellios (eds.), *Memorias y lugares de memoria de Europa*, Madrid, P.I.E. Peter Lang y Fundaci n Academia Europea de Yuste, 2012, pp. 179-195.

<sup>23</sup> R. Di Leo, *Alcuni temi del dibattito sullo stalinismo*, «Rinascita», 6, February 6<sup>th</sup> 1976.



carry out a study of the difficult and contradictory relationship between democracy and socialism. But who was to proceed with this study? The Communist Party claimed for itself the role of scholar and critic «condemning, on the one hand, the anti-Communist and anti-Soviet simplifications and, on the other, the easy pro-Soviet solutions»<sup>24</sup>. Thus, not only an analysis of the crimes of Stalin, certainly objectionable and abhorrent, but the study of the causes that led to such crimes and an overall assessment of the problem of Stalinism<sup>25</sup>. In January of 1978, «Rinascita» hosted a very interesting and intense panel discussion about Stalinism and the “Great Terror” of the Thirties.

We are co-responsible for the Stalinist repression – claimed Giorgio Amendola – And how could we not be, given what the Soviet Union has been for many years for the labour movement? When I speak of shared responsibility, I am not ruling out the moments of great trials, between '36 and '38, nor those other very difficult times beginning in '48. When we accepted the principle of the intensification of the class struggle [...] we virtually implied [...] also certain consequences<sup>26</sup>.

Among those certain consequences mentioned by Amendola were the Gulag, the dead and the pain that fill up the volume that Solženicyn had already started writing in 1958 and which amazingly never or almost never appear in the many articles and in the many reflections published in «Rinascita» and «L'Unità» during those years.

Before concluding this brief review of what we might call «the memories of a past that wanted to come back»<sup>27</sup>, the question that seems to emerge with force is how memory has coexisted

<sup>24</sup> See Lomellini, *Il grande terrore, 40 anni dopo: la memoria del PCI tra nuovi e vecchi processi*, cit., pp. 167-183. See also P. Spriano, *Lo stalinismo*, «Rinascita», 2, January 9<sup>th</sup> 1976; A. Minucci, *Stalin e noi*, «Rinascita», 10, March 10<sup>th</sup> 1978.

<sup>25</sup> *Per capire l'URSS*, «Rinascita», 42, October 27<sup>th</sup> 1978.

<sup>26</sup> Round table: G. Amendola, P. Bufalini, G. Cervetti, C. Ghini, *Non aspettammo il rapporto segreto di Krusciov*, «Rinascita», 43, November 4<sup>th</sup> 1978.

<sup>27</sup> In this way Lomellini entitled, very effectively, a paragraph from her work *Il grande terrore, 40 anni dopo: la memoria del PCI tra nuovi e vecchi processi* previously quoted.

with history and how oblivion was one instrument purposefully used by historians and scholars to build a «myth» that will influence the imagination of millions of people, namely Communism.

### *Conclusions*

Memory, Amnesia, History, Remembrance and Oblivion are terms or concepts historians have to deal with when they reach for their analytical tools in order to recount the past<sup>28</sup>. History, or the «account of the past» is therefore, on the one hand, a memorial practice of events, gestures “worthy” of being saved from oblivion<sup>29</sup>, and on the other it «consists of a set of facts» that historians find in the documents, «like fish on the fishmonger’s counter. Historians collect them, take them home, cook them and serve them in the way they prefer»<sup>30</sup>. When historians engage in the account of the events that have characterized the short century that was at the same time the century of extremism, but also the century of the masses and of the great social and cultural achievements, the twentieth century, this discourse becomes central<sup>31</sup>. It is no coincidence that Giovanni De Luna wrote that the historian of contemporary life has to act as an enzyme: his task would be to ensure that «the past transits into the present», making it digestible and easy to assimilate, nourishing and transmitting knowledge<sup>32</sup>. In this task, the historian, however, has been joined by what we might call a “media history” – print, television and new Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the Internet

<sup>28</sup> At the Festival of Literature of Mantova in 2009, David Bidussa, reflecting on the profession of the scholar and on his supposed autonomy, claimed very suggestively that history is not the past but an account of the past.

<sup>29</sup> See N. Mattucci, *Mondo comune e responsabilità politica. Rileggendo la teoria politica di Hannah Arendt*, Macerata, eum, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> E.H. Carr, *Sei lezioni sulla storia*, Torino, Einaudi, 2000, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm, *The age of extremes. The short twentieth century: 1914-1991*, London, Abacus, 1995. In Italy the volume of the English historian has been published as *Il secolo breve 1914-1991*, Milano, Rizzoli, 2000.

<sup>32</sup> G. De Luna, *La passione e la ragione. Fonti e metodi dello storico contemporaneo*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 2000, p. 11.

and social networks – which has a significant and even a more incisive impact than the one had by academic historiography, both in the construction of social memory and collective imagination and in the identification of the events to “remember” and those to “remove” from the memorial landscape<sup>33</sup>.

Enzo Traverso, reflecting on the past and the necessary instructions for the use of concept-terms such as Amnesia, Memory and History, stated that memory is always inflected in the present, and it is indeed the present, the contemporaneity and, sometimes, current events to determine the selection of the events to remember, their interpretation and their lessons. Furthermore, Traverso, within a wider and more general discourse on the historiographic discipline, identifies, in the process triggered by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the eclipse of Communism from the memorial landscape of our times and the eclipse of all those experiences and movements which, in a more or less heretical way, were inspired by the communist experience during the course of the twentieth century<sup>34</sup>. Compared to the memorial landscape of the last century, the contrast is striking: for millions of men and women of the twentieth century Communism appeared as an alternative that was worth fighting for. In this, Traverso writes, there was deception, illusion, delusion, but it is undeniable that for millions of men and women the word Communism, deeply rooted in the popular classes, was charged with different meanings: it meant emancipation, self-management, anti-Fascism. It meant fighting against injustice and oppression to build a society of equals<sup>35</sup>. This especially in those countries, such as France and Italy, where the respective communist parties after the war made a choice that many scholars have called «historical» and

<sup>33</sup> The literature on the new media is wide, as an example see A. Briggs, P. Burke, *Storia sociale dei media. Da Gutenberg a Internet*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2002; L. Cigognetti, L. Servetti, P. Sorlin, *Tanti passati per un futuro comune? La storia in televisione nei paesi dell'Unione Europea*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> E. Traverso, *Il passato: istruzioni per l'uso. Storia, memoria, politica*, Verona, Ombre Corte, 2006.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

long-term, that is the choice to be a part, from the outside, of the socialist «bloc»<sup>36</sup>. The disappearance mentioned by Traverso kicked off, from a political and cultural point of view, at least two very significant processes for the purposes of this work: on the one hand, in fact, it consolidated a long and sometimes painful process of revision and second thoughts about its ideology and identity, which led in some cases to the disappearance of parties regarded as historical, such as the Italian Communist Party and to a radical change in the political and social discourse in countries like Italy, where the presence of the PCI had strongly influenced the public political and cultural debate in the aftermath of the Second World War<sup>37</sup>. On the other hand, it was the spark that gave shape and substance to a public use of history, which, in the Nineties, was going to animate the political debate and to open new political and cultural scenarios in Italy. It is no coincidence that the publication of *Le Livre noir du communisme* of 1997, by the historian of Communism Stéphane Courtois, published by Mondadori in Italian in 1998, has been used in Italy not so much as a topic to discuss in the academic field, but as a propaganda tool of political election campaigns in the late Nineties, used to discredit the heirs of the PCI in the eyes of the public<sup>38</sup>. As stated by Marcello Flores, the book edited by Courtois was definitely «much debated but little read»: what the media amplified was more the interpretation that the French scholar gives of communism in the preface to the volume, rather than the various

<sup>36</sup> See Flores, Gallerano, *Sul PCI. Un'interpretazione storica*, cit., 1992, p. 67.

<sup>37</sup> F. Alberoni (ed.), *L'attivista di partito. Un'indagine sui militanti di base nel Pci e nella Dc*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1967. Also by Alberoni see *Statu nascenti*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1968 and *Movimento e istituzioni*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1977.

<sup>38</sup> S. Courtois, *Le livre noir du communisme. Crimes, terreur et répression*, Paris, Laffont, 1997. Browsing through the newspapers of that period from «La Repubblica» to «Corriere della Sera» is easy to note how in nearly every article of domestic politics in which Silvio Berlusconi is mentioned, this volume is quoted. Furthermore, in those years the term «communist» starts having a negative meaning in Italy, being used as a synonym for liberticide to label in a derogatory way some more or less institutional figures: is a «communist» the magistrate who investigates on the companies owned by Silvio Berlusconi, as well as the journalist who writes or hosts TV programmes which are critical towards the politics of Berlusconi or Forza Italia.

scientific papers published in the book. Courtois, in fact, in his contribution insists on a radical decontextualization of “crimes”, identifying in criminal terror not just a fundamental aspect of communism, going alongside with greater relevance to those repeatedly suggested by historiography (the planned economy, the party system, the State ideology), but the one true essence of communism wherever it came to power, and not only there. «This conclusion», Flores writes, «is not only out of phase and with no reference to the results of the analysis and interpretations present in the entire volume, but is also a strong and intentional contribution to that “monocausal” historiography that studies on communism have always tended to originate», with the risk that «common sense» might not be influenced by the scientific results of the volume but by the «fundamentalist interpretation» of its editor<sup>39</sup>. The public use that was made of this volume was characterized by the instrumental use of the «fundamentalist interpretation» that concerns the preface to the work, the “number” of the victims of communism and the comparison of these victims with those of the nazism, and the comparison that leads up to assimilation between the two great totalitarisms of this century<sup>40</sup>. This debate has helped to increase the «serious credibility deficit» with which the PCI had had to deal immediately after the elections of 18 April 1948 and which now is a problem to deal with for its heirs and all those who in Italy, but not only there, were somehow inspired by the Communist experience, especially during the past century<sup>41</sup>. «Memories of a past» that wants to come back, and back it is then, and scholars

<sup>39</sup> Review by Flores to the Italian publication «L'Indice», 3, 1998.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>41</sup> S. Luzzatto, *La crisi dell'antifascismo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2004, pp. 8-9. See also *Mentre la casa brucia*, an interesting enquiry carried out by Valerio Riva for «L'Espresso», 33, August 18<sup>th</sup> 1974, pp. 34-37 and 80, after the bomb in the San Benedetto Val di Sangro tunnel, on the role of intellectuals in the society of the Seventies. Particularly interesting is the intervention by Umberto Eco entitled *Sempre pronti a tradire*: «our culture» claimed Eco «will not be anti-Fascist until it will be able to analyse thoroughly the origins of “public” anti-Fascism. This is not about re-making history: is about totally remaking the geography of democratic culture in Italy», *ivi*, p. 36.

still question it, mainly in order to try to understand the past and live in the present, a present that lives with one eye still fixed on that short century that although its brevity has affected lives, and cultural and political systems.

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