

GULAG LEGACY: SPACES OF CONTINUITY IN CONTEMPORARY EVERYDAY PRACTICES

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Although more than half a century has passed since official suspension of the organization called the Gulag (Gosudarstvennoe upravlenie lagerei, State Administration of Camps), the Soviet system of incarceration and internal exile, it still retains its elusive omnipresence and heavy imprint on various aspects of everyday lives in contemporary Russia. As a system of concentration camps, the Gulag was officially established in the 1930s with its territory stretching across the Russian North, Siberia, and the Far East, and into Central Asia. Even though amnesties, mass releases, and reduction of the number of camps officially happened in the 1950s, the system was still functioning until the 1980s (see Bacon 1994). The Gulag was an enormous department within the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) that was involved in the implementation of punitive measures against those who were perceived as posing a counterrevolutionary threat and ideological and political danger to the Soviet regime. The population groups subjected to repression and punishment included a most diverse mix of people, ranging from political dissidents, *kulaki* (rich peasants), private traders, members of certain religious sects, ethnic minorities, and people of bourgeois background to social deviants such as prostitutes, gamblers, tax evaders, embezzlers, and the infirm (Alexopoulos 2003; Kuntsman 2009). NKVD would supply millions of prisoners as a free labor force for gigantic timber and gold industries in Siberia and the building of important roads such as the Kolyma Roadway (Kolymskaia trassa, widely known as "the road of bones"), canals (including the White Sea–Baltic Sea Canal), and railways. In the 1930s the entire production of natural resources and associated industries came under the remit of the Gulag. Gulag prisoners were concentrated in labor camps where they were exposed to slavery and starvation to death (Beck and Godin 1951; Applebaum 2003; Gregory and Lazarev 2003; Barnes 2011). The era of mass repressions went in parallel with the development and proliferation of a pervasive and insidious network of surveillance that involved a rapidly expanding network of NKVD secret agents, collaborators, and informers (*stukachi*) throughout all areas of the former Soviet Union.

The notorious purge against “enemies of the people” started as a defense mechanism and state of emergency in the run-up to the Great Patriotic War. After the war it swiftly transformed from being the exception into the rule or, borrowing from Michael Taussig, a chronic state of emergency (1984:467–497). This state of emergency legitimated the endemic terror exerted by the NKVD against the Soviet population. After the creation of the NKVD in the 1920s, with its *chekist* personnel, the organization would receive different avatars and titles (Fedor 2011).¹ While the NKVD was succeeded by the KGB and, in post-Soviet Russia, the FSB, for their personnel, as Julie Fedor writes, “the term *chekist* has remained constant, and has been used to designate employees of the Soviet, and now the post-Soviet, security apparatus” (2011:2). One of the essential components of the NKVD technologies of terror aimed at the consolidation of Soviet power was a widespread discourse on the public need for identifying, unmasking, and denouncing “an enemy within,” in other words an “enemy of the people.” It was the total social field of secrecy, suspicion, and silence that allowed arbiters and perpetrators of political repression to conduct mass disenfranchisement, deportation, and incarceration for several decades (see Alexopoulos 2003; Verdery 2014).

Given the contested, contradictory, and uneasy relationship between the tragic Gulag past and the post-Soviet present, this special issue explores the nature of continuities between the Gulag past and the present, focusing on how these continuities manifest and unfold themselves through spontaneous or unofficial forms of remembrance, symbolic imagery, and localized interaction with the reappropriated spaces and infrastructures of former Gulag camps and prisons. By exploring the legacy of the Gulag and its contemporary social dimensions this special issue provides access to those aspects of the past that are still being effaced in contemporary Russian society.

GULAG AS A SOCIAL FACT

At present, knowledge of the scale of suffering inflicted by the NKVD and memories of Gulag remain at the edges of public discourse. Despite a very short period of condemnation of Stalinist mass repressions as well as the anti-Stalinist and victims’ rehabilitation movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s, these memories continue to be silenced and denied. In the mass media Gulag is often portrayed as an inevitable part of the history of the Soviet Union, and violence within the Gulag appears as rare instances of horror and unfortunate deaths of political dissidents—some of whom may have been innocent people, but most of whom were true enemies of the Soviet state. This discourse has become prevalent since the mid-1990s as “the cult of *chekist* has undergone remarkable revival ... and the figure of the *chekist* has been

¹ The abbreviation NKVD was used for Soviet domestic law enforcement between 1934 and 1946, however the term is still used in reference to the Soviet secret police more generally. NKVD was preceded by VChK (or Cheka, All Russian Emergency Commission to Combat Counterrevolution and Sabotage) and OGPU (United State Political Department) and, eventually, succeeded by the KGB (Committee for State Security) that in 1995 became the FSB (Federal Security Service).

recast as the hero and the savior of Russian statehood" (Fedor 2011:2). Such deliberate inversion foregrounds the ongoing process of misrecognition and covert denial of the Gulag. Public silence and misrecognition are, to a significant degree, outcomes of an intentional, long-term state policy (Gheith 2007; Alekseeva 2012).

Jehanne Gheith distinguishes several historical reasons for this silence. One of them is that, for decades, Gulag survivors risked severe punishment for talking about their experience in Stalinist labor camps: thus, there was a long silence about the Gulag until the late 1980s–early 1990s. Citing Russian historians, Gheith writes that "not just talking but remembering itself was dangerous" (2007:160). She goes on to state that "the cumulative effect of fear of public remembering, together with the fact that so many families had members who were politically oppressed [had] not just the political impact ... but also the dramatic long-term effect on personal remembering" (Gheith and Jolluck 2011:7). Neither right after Joseph Stalin's death nor later, there have been any public trials, any public accountability, and any international dialogue launched as happened in the case of the Holocaust. Indeed, the policy that aimed at misrecognition and denial of what happened in the Gulag is still to a certain extent being maintained. Consequently, there has been little chance for these memories to reach the point of recognition, reconciliation, and recovery.

I use the term Gulag not only with reference to the camps run by the State Administration of Camps and the whole complex of Stalinist prisons and exile, but as a social fact that fuelled an entire universe of terror and purges. The Durkheimian notion of the social fact is useful in this case, as it refers to the coercive power that social institutions (legal systems, regulations, hierarchies, identities, and roles within established institutions) have over an individual (Durkheim [1895] 1964). It is a kind of a social fact that amounted to, as Katherine Verdery puts it, "the near-total impaction brought about by the ever-proliferating defence of the state secret" (2014:147). The Gulag as a social fact generated long-lasting effects which have been magnified by the ferocious scale of deportation and incarceration, estimated by various scholars as a figure of twenty-five million that passed through its punitive complex (Figes 2007; Gheith and Jolluck 2011). This figure includes a list of entire ethnic groups that were subject to public denunciation as "enemies of the people" and subsequently deported to the so-called *spetsial'nye poseleniia* (special settlements), zones of exile and forced labor. The mass deportation of the Crimean Tatars, Kalmyks, Russian Koreans, Karachais, Chechens, Ingush, Russian Germans, Balkars, and Meskhetian Turks to northern and eastern areas of the former USSR in the 1930s–1940s was associated with a radical move by the Soviet state towards total administrative control over groups deemed eternally disloyal to the state (Martin 2001, 2002; Uehling 2004; Viola 2007; Pohl 2014). Unsurprisingly, the societies affected continue to bear a pervasive sense of traumatic angst and unease despite the passage of time and generations.

The aim of this special issue is to initiate a conversation across disciplines on how to engage with the legacy of the Gulag, focusing on its contemporary social dimensions. The challenges that contemporary scholars (historians, anthropologists, human and cultural geographers, sociologists, and folklorists) face are how to make

sense of, interpret, and analyze the tragic, traumatic, and coercively silenced past when ethnographic studies are literally absent, the archival evidence is inaccessible, available statistical or historical data are inaccurate and chaotic, empirically rich accounts focusing on unmediated experiences of Gulag inmates are scarce, and few deceased victims and survivors have left any biographical sources or accounts of what happened to them.² The incommensurability and incoherence of available first-hand oral accounts as well as the literal absence of documented evidence of lived experiences can be explained, borrowing from Vieda Skultans, by “the victims’ inability to enshrine [traumatic] experience within available narrative structures [and] to transform private grief into public sorrow” (1998:128).

In her analysis of the oral narratives of Latvian Gulag survivors, Skultans considers the life testimonies of those who endured incarceration and slavery in Gulag camps, dealing particularly with illness narratives in which people “complain not only of the painfulness of past narratives but also of the incoherence of their life stories” (1998:xii). According to her, by having failed to have coherent life stories they have failed twice, both as agents and as authors. In other words, a failed attempt to make sense of past suffering, physical hardship, and exile in a personal narrative points to the effects of trauma on the narrator’s identity and his/her perception of time, past and future. If we relate Skultans’s insight to widespread silence about the Gulag among survivors, it becomes obvious that, to a great extent, silence and inability to speak about one’s own experiences of torture and violence are themselves powerful testimony to the depth of suffering undergone by victims.

With very rare exceptions (see literary works by Eugenia Ginzburg [(1967) 2002], Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn [1974], and Varlam Shalamov [(1980) 1995]), it is the ability to distance and detach oneself from an experience that enables one to create a narrative and assert one’s entitlement to victimhood in a written document. However, in this particular case such distance and emotional detachment have hardly been possible—for the political reasons mentioned above and because of the condition of unspokenness. Experiences and memories of violence remain implicit, embodied, and deeply embedded in the psyches of sufferers—this is what makes narrative or any claim of victimhood inconceivable and impossible (see Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; also Caruth 1991; Antze and Lambek 1996; Alexander et al. 2004). Similarly to Skultans, in her discussion of transgenerational transmission of trauma Cathy Caruth posits that violent events are remembered differently from ordinary experiences by the individual and suggests that “for history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs ... that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (quoted in Argenti and Schramm 2010:13). Hence, the issue of unspokenness

² Except, of course, for collections of such materials at the Moscow Memorial Society and its regional branches, as well as in a handful of museums to commemorate the Gulag, including the one in Perm’, that were established in the post-Soviet period (many of these organizations are now under attack from the government, the media, and even the public). Russian-language scholarship on the topic has emerged in the last decade and includes Adler (2005), Kozlova (2005), Firsov (2008), Kozlova (2008), Gnedovskii and Okhotin (2011), and Alekseeva (2012).

raises the question of historical representation, specifically whether history can take into account silenced, repressed, and fragmented memories. Can linear, positivist chronology ever do justice to subjective, unspoken memories of a traumatic, violent past? What discourses and counterdiscourses, as well as objects of truth-making and cultural construction, are available to deal with a hegemony of silence and denial?

MISRECOGNITION, INHIBITION, AND OBLITERATION

In contemporary Russia, specifically in the public sphere of collective memory where the grand narrative of the Soviet state is undergoing a resurgence actively promoted among the lay public and sponsored by circles close to the Kremlin, it seems there is hardly any space for giving impartial, cognizant treatment that would accommodate memories of suffering and hardship of those who went through the Gulag, as well as the intimate family memories of their descendants. This suggests that, if their experiences of suffering and powerlessness have never been recognized—by themselves as individuals and by society—victims would feel forever robbed of agency, since the externally imposed versions of events would “continuously crowd out and overpower their own visions of personal destinies” (Skultans 1998:141).

Apart from all of the aforementioned factors, what makes this entire case especially unsettling is that profound sense of murkiness and inconsequentiality that one gets when attempting to identify who was a perpetrator and who was a victim of antihuman acts. Quite often it was the case that perpetrators would be arrested and incarcerated by their NKVD colleagues and just like their victims would end up serving time in the Gulag camps. So if, in the interest of the state, an individual (perpetrator) informed on a neighbor, colleague, acquaintance, friend, or distant relative to the NKVD—and by doing so subjected the latter to arrest, imprisonment, and subsequent violent death—this would never guarantee that sooner or later this same perpetrator would not be victimized in turn by someone else (see Dorman 2010:344). It is the sheer arbitrariness, opacity, and vindictiveness of the punitive system implemented by the NKVD that effectively maimed and continues to maim people’s sense of history. The system irreversibly damaged any hope for salvaging meaning, consistency, and fair judgment for those who went through the machine of state violence. What is particularly disconcerting about the entire case, with its ambiguities and indeterminacy, is its potential for providing a space for the direct successors of the NKVD to distort perceptions of tragic events and shape public opinion. If ambiguities are appropriated, they can be easily manipulated and turned into “reactionary and revisionist forms of self-justification” (Argenti and Schramm 2010:18).

This potential for obliteration and revisionism provides space for manipulation and rendition of past events in support of ideological interests that seek to monopolize the entire field of memories of repression. For example, recent attempts to reappropriate and create new memories of the repressions have been undertaken by the Russian Orthodox Church. Veronika Dorman documents how the church attempts to privatize memories about the Gulag by channeling representations of a prerevolutionary, medieval past into the Soviet totalitarian era. By associating the victims of

the Stalinist purges with medieval Russian Orthodox martyrs, the church selectively commemorates Russians and those victims who have been persecuted for their affiliation with the Orthodox Church. This analogy of totalitarian repressions with Orthodox religious experience, which instills piety and complicity among followers and turns memory of the Gulag into a site of Russian Orthodox memorial, somewhat trivializes the experience of millions of others (Dorman 2010:327–348). The monopolization of the entire domain of the memories of the Gulag implies a particular effort on the part of state power to distort and manipulate people's perception of the tragic past by imposing the view that victims of the Gulag were mainly Russian Orthodox Christians who require blessing and subsequent canonization by the church (see Rouhier-Willoughby, this issue). This view neglects the fact that many innocent victims of the system had different religious and ethnic affiliations and that the entire domain of Gulag remembrance cannot be limited to one ethnicity and one religious confession. It also distracts attention from the central problematic of the repressions: the irredeemability of the collective trauma inflicted by the Gulag as well as the need to bring its legacy to appropriate recognition and closure.

LASTING RUINS OF THE GULAG

This special issue of *Laboratorium* is a response to Ann Stoler's (2013:1–35) call for special consideration of "tangibilities of imperial ruins." The focus of the issue is the lasting, tangible "ruins" left behind by the Gulag. In particular, it engages with the question of how and in what manner the "ruins" continue to operate, thrive, and affect people's lives (see Ulturgasheva 2012; Barenberg 2014; Mandelstam Balzer, forthcoming).

While attending to the sense of the present saturated with the enduring presence of the Gulag, the contributions examine the invisible and yet palpable tissue which binds the violent past with the complex present. Each article represents an attempt to examine tangible social domains that are participating in the ongoing corrosive process of *ruination* as "sites that condense alternative sense of history ... that [still] weighs on the future" (Stoler 2013:9). At the heart of each account is an affective domain of social memory suppressed and concealed in overlapping conditions of state and criminal violence and "in the subsoil of people's everyday lives" (5): in spatial arrangements of contemporary penal infrastructures and punitive measures (see Pallot, this issue); in the inmate shadow hierarchies, social networks, and labor practices that originated in the Gulag (see Barenberg, this issue; Peshkov, this issue); and in sites of the Gulag victims' violent death and suffering that, at present, partake in the process of reframing of the perception of the Soviet past as well as regional and local identities (see Rouhier-Willoughby, this issue).

Judith Pallot elaborates on how the Gulag's spatial and social arrangements of prison environments are still being utilized and continue to shape the contemporary Russian penal system. Pallot provides a powerful account of the contemporary experience of exile among female convicts. She illustrates how exile, or more precisely "in exile imprisonment" (Piacentini and Pallot 2014), persists as the dominant technol-

ogy of punishment, which has been serving as a precondition for the production of subjects for whom survival would be everything. Since then, exile has become normalized as a category of imprisonment and instituted as a legally distinct penal sanction. A custodial sentence involved removal of convicted offenders to the peripheries, mainly Siberia, the Far East, and Far North. Such a geographical distribution of contemporary prisons is the rump of the Stalinist penal estate inherited by the post-Soviet state in 1991, remaining to the present day. The current network of prisons constitutes the “penal arc” containing large clusters of correctional institutions for convicted prisoners.

Pallot’s discussion convincingly demonstrates that, although the most egregious of the extralegal punishments of the Gulag have mostly been expunged from the Russian penal system, Solzhenitsyn’s description of the exiled person’s experience resonates several decades later among today’s prisoners. Today, as in the past, the method of transportation to prison operates as a “space where the standard degradation routines of confinement—including poor food rations, barking dogs, surveillance, flow control, loss of self and autonomy—are played out” (Pallot, this issue, 36). *Etap* is ingrained in the system’s deep-rooted conviction that the primary form of punishment of all criminals ought to be their forceful removal from any existing social ties, most importantly from their kinship and family relations. Inmates’ experience of *etap* (transportation from transit prison to the destination) involves travel along circuitous routes. This long, physically arduous process of deportation lasts from two weeks to four months, and since transportation frequently takes place at night, it often results in sensory deprivation, visual impairments such as “night blindness,” spatial disorientation, and a general feeling of being “out of place.” Such treatment of prisoners is a deliberate strategy to render them powerless and docile.

The insightful account by Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby examines the process by which three competing ideologies, namely doctrinal Orthodoxy, vernacular Orthodoxy, and Soviet ideology and history, are participating in the process of local identity construction and reconceptualization of memories about the Gulag’s past. While focusing on a localized, idiosyncratic, religious perception of the violent past in the Russian town of Lozhok in Western Siberia, Rouhier-Willoughby illustrates how the memory of the Gulag in this region is being reframed in the postsocialist era. She elaborates on how remembrances, which were rather invisible and clandestine in the Soviet period, have acquired overlapping religious and state ideological undertones in the post-Soviet, postsocialist period. If doctrinal Orthodoxy insists on associating the suffering of the Gulag victims with religious martyrdom, vernacular Orthodoxy emphasizes the places of human suffering (e.g., concentration camps, execution sites, and prisons) as spots of unofficial religious commemoration. For example, Rouhier-Willoughby shows how the Holy Spring of Iskitim serves as a locus to pray and remember all the dead, lay and clergy, among Russian Siberians. At the same time the former Soviet identities and symbols are also being reconceptualized and reshaped within a religious ethos. Referring to Verdery (1999), Rouhier-Willoughby suggests that “postsocialist attitudes toward the dead victims of the socialist system allow people to rewrite history and to give

them a touchstone for coping with the upheavals its collapse brought about" (this issue, 67). Emphasis on Gulag victims as violently martyred religious dead provides a frame for the local population to denounce the Soviet government for its violent past. At the same time, such discourse obliterates the associated guilt of the Soviet authorities built at the hands of the unjustly accused and killed Gulag victims. The exclusive focus on Orthodox martyrs associated with the holy spring signifies that it was their persistent faith and endurance that earned them salvation and forgiveness. As I have discussed above, this discourse, currently perceived as ideologically benign from the authorities' point of view, serves as a safety valve that provides the local populace with the ideological means to negotiate the complex strands of Soviet Russian history in which the Gulag has played an integral part.

Ivan Peshkov's article explores the contemporary experiences of inmates, focusing on a shadow hierarchy of prisoners and considering it in the framework of criminal solidarity which he dubs "criminal cosmopolitanism." He identifies the roots of inmates' solidarity in the legacy of the Gulag, where all inmates, regardless of their ethnic, national, and socioeconomic status, became equal in the face of the violent machine of the NKVD. Despite its cosmopolitan character, Peshkov argues, the convicts' solidarity serves as a crucial component for the maintenance of social hierarchy among convicts. The latter is expressed in a specific criminals' code that does not differentiate convicts according to their places of origin, ethnic background, or racial identity. The principle of differentiation, however, is based on a distinctly criminalized categorization of the inmate population—castes, clans, and gendered roles. Therefore, as in the Gulag, past interethnic divisions do not play a crucial role in a prisoner's placement within the inmates' hierarchy. What matters for an inmate's successful social integration into the world of prisoners is his ability to abide by a special inmates' code (*poniatiia*), showing a special proclivity for loyalty to the community of convicts and for a willingness to exert brutal violence (including rape) in defense of one's own position within the hierarchy.

In his essay Alan Barenberg vividly observes how social networks of former inmates, who have never been allowed to leave for their places of origin, formed entire communities of cities like Vorkuta (the regional Gulag hub of the Republic of Komi in the Russian Arctic). During the process of "dezonification" in the 1950s the boundary between the *zona*, prison, and the non-*zona*, the space for the civil population, became blurry, contributing to an ambiguous overlapping of prisoner and nonprisoner populations. "The fact that buildings under construction did not clearly belong to either category further contributed to this uncertainty over space" (Barenberg, this issue, 99). The city turned into an ambiguously extended space of *zona* where inmate networks have retained their social capital since the Gulag era. Shared experiences of exile and incarceration sustained a network of mutual support and assistance among former inmates, who have also continued to abide by the well-established inmates' hierarchy. Barenberg writes that assistance "could take the form of having a temporary place to stay while looking for permanent housing, a sympathetic consideration for a job applicant, or help finding permanent housing in a dormitory" (this issue, 100–101).

If Peshkov's and Barenberg's accounts show how the Gulag's social networks have maintained social power through the decades after the Gulag and how inmates' sociality is being reenacted through specific codes of criminal behavior and hierarchy, Pallot illustrates how posttrial detention and dislocation serve to reproduce the same modality of incarceration and punitive containment that had been deployed in the Gulag era. Just as in a time machine, contemporary inmates travel the same routes and gain similar experiences of detention, exile, incarceration, and participation in social networks of inmates, confirming once again that the Gulag both as a system of exile and incarceration *and* as a social fact is still alive and thriving. Indeed, long-lasting effects of the Gulag not only permeate the contemporary quotidian experiences and infrastructures of correctional institutions, but are to a great extent a powerful residue sedimented in the social codes, networks, hierarchies, and cosmologies of the communities spread throughout contemporary Russian society. The Gulag as a social fact remains a living repository of victimization, victimhood, and trauma that is likely to last longer than the political and ideological machine that produced it.

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