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MEMORY AS A TOOL OF CHANGE:

FORGOTTEN PLACES IN SIBERIA



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I. Introduction

*“Forgetting [...] is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations”.*¹

In July 2017, a group of 18 German and Russian students and young experts embarked on an excursion to Western Siberia. The aim was to find out more about how locals commemorate the various aspects of Stalinist terror, ranging from deportations and executions to forced labor by meeting with local experts, activists and contemporary witnesses and their relatives.

This report serves to present our project “Memory as a Tool for Change: Forgotten Places in Siberia” and gives an overview on its background, purpose and the guiding questions we have been focusing on. The sections II and III outline our journey, including brief information on all destinations we visited, based on a travel blog the group wrote during the project. Section IV of this report contains four essays in which the participants reflect on lessons learned and their take on commemoration in Western Siberia and contemporary Russia.

Germany has often addressed its own history and managed to step by step transform its historical guilt into a sense of responsibility – the responsibility to “never again” tolerate wars of aggression or mass atrocities of any kind. Despite today’s Germany’s critical reflection of its recent past, there are key questions that persist until now: Why was it so difficult for post-war Germany to face the National Socialist era? Why did it take almost forty years for the “Historikerstreit” to occur and dismantle, among others, the myth that the Holocaust had been the idea of a small elite around Hitler? How is it possible that crucial documents about Hans Globke, one of the administrators of the Holocaust and former Head of the Chancellery (1953-63), are still not accessible to historians?

To answer some of these questions, we initiated the project Memory as a Tool of Change. In 2016, as a first part of the project, we gathered 30 students from Germany and Russia in Berlin, hoping to shed light on Germany’s and Russia’s ‘history of violence’. We visited memorials like the Topography of Terror, made an academic excursion to Frankfurt/Oder, and held workshops and discussion events. Having focused on Germany, we were curious to learn more about Russia. The questions we raised were similar: Why is there a revival of Stalin, one of the most gruesome dictators in history? Why does the state try to reframe the story of repressive GULag labor camps? And more generally, what are the mechanisms by which certain events get engrained into collective memory, or are neglected by it? From the first part of our project, we learned that the process of remembering and forgetting the past is the outcome of a continuous discourse over how we should evaluate it. The result of these larger societal debate is, to a large part, a function of the strength of different sectors of society who are involved in the discourse. This insight seems important for the analysis of the Russian culture of remembrance as well.

Determined to learn more about commemorative culture in Russia, we gathered 18 young experts from Germany and Russia for an excursion to Western Siberia. Between 2 and 14 July 2017, we travelled more than 3,800km by bus, train and boat to 13 different locations in Western Siberia, exploring different memorial sites, speaking to experts, survivors and their relatives, and visiting different communities to learn more about their practices of commemoration.

¹ Ernest, Renan, “What is a Nation?”, in *Becoming National: A Reader*, ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45.

To prepare for our journey, we first held a preparatory workshop in Berlin. The goal was to acquire more knowledge and expertise about the Soviet Union under Stalin, and to develop the key questions that would guide us along our trip to Siberia. We had inputs from three experts about 1) the commemorative project of the Russian Orthodox Church (Dr Tatiana Voronina, University of Basel), 2) the politics of forced collectivization (Dr Robert Kindler, Humboldt University Berlin) and 3) the role of civil society in commemorative practices (Anke Giesen, Memorial Germany).

After almost two weeks of intensive and insightful discussions with former victims of Stalinist repressions, their relatives, local authorities, experts and NGO representatives, we have identified the following main take-aways:

- First, on a local level, people do commemorate the victims of Stalin's atrocities. The remembrance we observed is, however, focused mostly on individual fates, de-politicizing the martyrism of GULag, forced labor and resettlement. It fails to connect the victims' suffering with the system of the Soviet Union, let alone its leadership.
- Second, contentious issues such as the GULag-system are addressed but partly reinterpreted. Citizens, local projects and NGOs would not call imprisonment cruel and forced labor a crime, but concentrate on 'sense giving' aspects such as contributing to winning WWII and rebuilding the Soviet Union after the war. Starting an in-depth process of looking for answers in the victim-perpetrator relationship and acknowledging the hardship endured by the victims seems likely to shake the foundations of how Russian society functions today.
- Third, there is potential for new forms of commemoration: activists and victims share their experience and impressions on social networks, which become a place for commemoration away from any memorial or physical manifestation. Here, social media can live up to its positive transformative character.
- Fourth, local authorities in Western Siberia allow and in some cases even encourage local commemoration. However, political reflection and questioning the systematic violence of the former USSR seems to be unwelcomed. Since neither local authorities nor the government have distanced themselves from the Soviet Union and Stalin's reign in particular, critical assessment of historic facts and commemorative culture itself does not seem to be encouraged.
- Lastly, memory can be considered rather a tool for preservation than for change in contemporary Russia. The current Russian leadership does not neglect the individual suffering of victims but rather instrumentalizes it, interpreting history in a way that feeds into the overall narrative of Russia as a strong state, mainstreaming the public discourse and opinion and disregarding opinions that diverge from official points of view. Moreover, it sees Stalin and its accomplices as a product of the time that cannot be condemned since they were functioning with the constraints of what was given and considered politically appropriate at that time (see rehabilitation of Molotov-Rippentrop pact²).

The essays of our participants in section IV of this report present their critical deliberations on four topics. Essay 1 introduces the reader to commemorative culture in Russia and establishes its broader context. Essay 2 deals with the commemoration of forced resettlement and asks how these experiences have shaped the victim groups. Essay 3 addresses the GULag system in the Soviet Union and examines how the various inhabitants of Western Siberia, some of which include victims and even

² Neil MacFarquhar, "Russia: Putin Defends Soviet-Nazi Pact", The New York Times, 06 November 2014, last accessed 29 November 2017, <http://nyti.ms/2neZsLF>.

perpetrators, evaluate Stalin's projects today. Finally, Essay 4 reflects on the commemoration of Stalinist repressions by the Wolga Germans, the NGOs we have encountered as well as the museums and archives we visited in the region. All essays reflect the group's personal experiences and encounters during the excursion but are underpinned by theoretical knowledge on the matter gained during our weekend in Berlin and in professional lives of our participants.

With our work, we would like to contribute to the international debate on the reality of commemorative practices in Russia as well as Germany. By bringing students and young experts in the field together and inspiring them to reflect on the experiences made, we intend to spark a demanding assessment process. We hope you find this report insightful and we would welcome your feedback and comments.

Over the last two years, we have come a long way. We traveled long distances in Western Siberia and explored Berlin, visited countless memorials and met with an endless number of experts and contemporary witnesses. With many questions and problems still to address, we are eager to continue our work. Our goal will remain to stimulate critical analysis and discussion between experts, NGOs and the public on the commemorative culture of totalitarian regimes in the 20th century both in Russia and in Germany. An effort we will pick up again in 2018. You are more than welcome to accompany us on this journey.

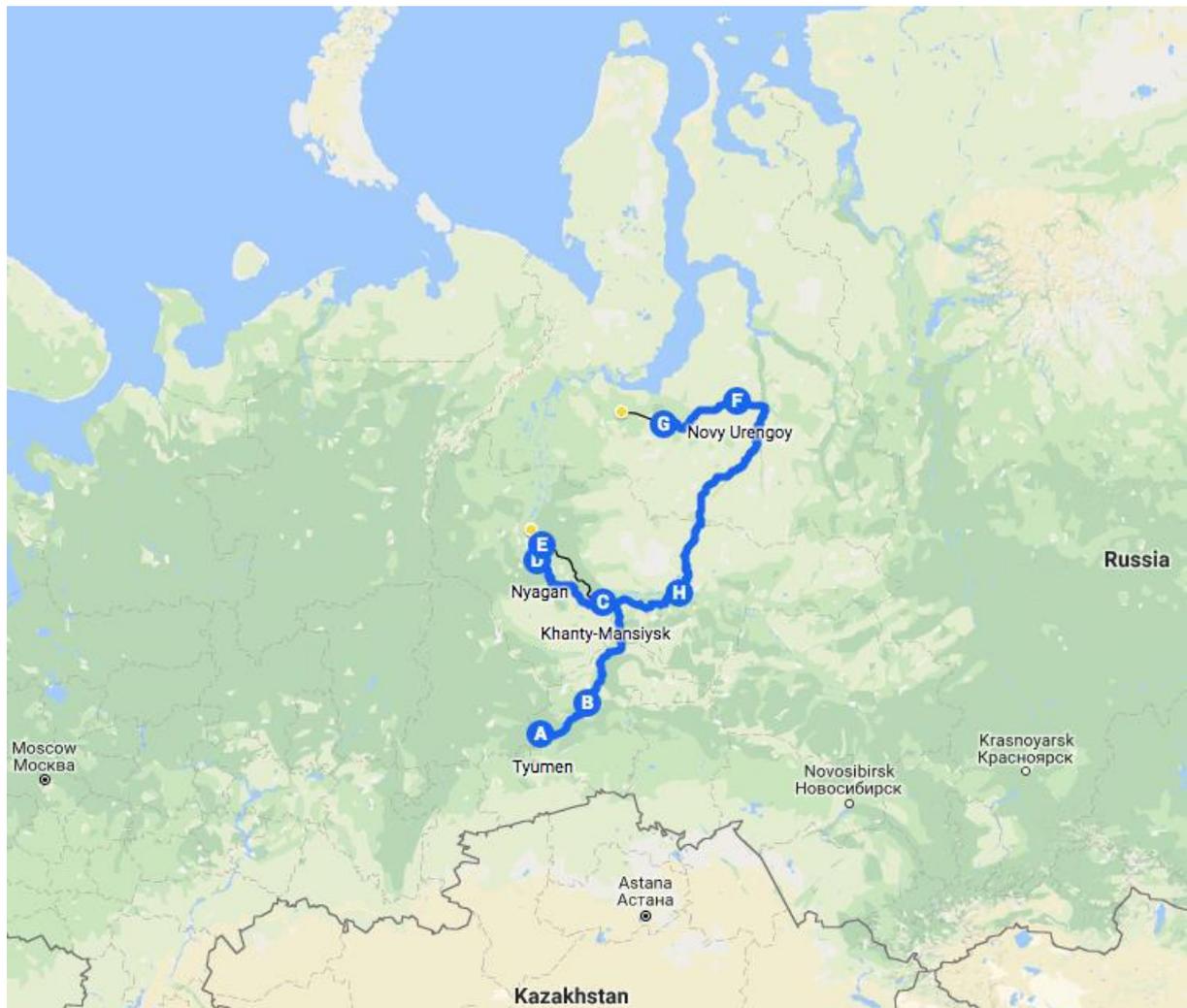
Yours sincerely,

Laura Scherer, Malvin Oppold, Mattia Nelles & Tom Reutemann



The group after an all-night trip to GULAGs along the Salekhard-Igarka Railway

II. The Journey in a Nutshell



Map made using Google Maps

Our journey began on 2 July 2017 in Tyumen (A). The first stop was Tobolsk (B), the former capital of Siberian Exile. We then moved on to Khanty-Mansiysk (C), from where we travelled to Nyagan (D) and Priobye (E) and then took the boat back to Khanty-Mansiysk. We continued to Novy Urengoy (F), using a night-train from Surgut (H). From Novy Urengoy, we took the bus to Nadym (G), where we embarked on our excursion to the Stalin Railway, using an off-road bus. After the field trip, we travelled back from Nadym to Surgut (H), where our journey ended on 14 July 2017.

III. The Travel Reports

Each station depicted here is a short version. Longer versions of the participant's travel blogs including pictures can be found on <http://ifair.eu/category/eastern-europe-eurasia-en/>.

STATION 1 | **TOBOLSK, TYUMEN OBLAST**

We began our stay in Tobolsk, the former capital of Czarist exile, with an extended historical tour informing us about about the city's eminent role in the Russian history of exile. On the second day, we visited the city's historic prison, which today houses a museum and a hostel, and met with representatives of the local Association of Deported Volga Germans to learn more about the history of deported Germans in the region.

Read more at: <http://ifair.eu/traces-exile-western-siberia-part-1-tobolsk/>

STATION 2 | **KHANTY-MANSIYSK, KHANTY-MANSI AUTONOMOUS OKRUG**

In Khanty-Mansiysk, we spent two full days rich of input organized by our local partner, the Yugra State University. Activities included a tour through the city's archive and small group meetings with deported Wolga Germans. To learn about the fate of the deported, we visited a large exhibition about the life and traditions of the Khanty population and met with two indigenous Khanty families.

Read more at: <http://ifair.eu/traces-khanty-people-reindeers-wolga-germans-soviet-champions-part-2-khanty-mansiysk/>

STATION 3 | **OKTYABRSKY DISTRICT, KHANTY-MANSI AUTONOMOUS OKRUG**

From Khanty-Mansiysk we departed to Lorba, a remotely located village which was built up exclusively by deportees of about 30 different nationalities. After visiting the abandoned cemetery and some abandoned houses we headed to Nyagan where we met with several repressed people of Ukrainian, German, Kalmyk or Bashkir descent, their relatives, local politicians, activists and a representative of the Orthodox Church. From Nyagan we headed to the Ob River to catch a speedboat to Oktyabrskoe where we were received in a local museum to talk about the repressions and meet with one historical witness. Next, we boarded a boat again that took us to Peregrebnoe, another village right by the Ob River, originally constructed by deported people. We were received by local dignitaries and descendants of those deported who told the story of their parents' plight. The next morning, we took to the water again, travelling for nine hours on a ferry down the Ob River.

Read more at: <http://ifair.eu/travelling-oktyabrsky-district-part-3/>

STATION 4 | **NADYM & SURROUNDINGS, YAMALO-NENETS AUTONOMOUS OKRUG**

Our journey to Nadym and its surroundings took two bus rides and one night of a train ride. But we soon realized that the trip further north was worth it. We were supposed to visit two labor camps along the 501 Railroad, more commonly (together with Railroad 503) known as the Stalin Railway. For many of the participants, the field trip to the abandoned GULags was the highlight of our trip. In preparation, we had meetings with scientists from the Arctic Research Centre in Nadym who gave us an overview on the history of one of the largest failed infrastructure projects of the USSR. In the city itself, we visited a local Museum which hosts a small permanent exhibition on the Stalin Railway. To

get to the GULag camps along the railway, we had to use an off-road bus. Due to construction sites along the former railway – authorities are building the first road from Nadym Westwards – our trip lasted from 6pm to 6am. Thanks to the Siberian “White Nights”, we could easily explore the two camps during the night. Both camps in the middle of the swampy Tundra proved to be remarkable. Through bogged terrain and defying the pestilence of mosquitoes and horseflies, we ventured on to see two camps along the remnants of the railway. In total, the GULag camps and the immense human suffering its construction caused left a lasting impression on all participants.

Read more at: <http://ifair.eu/white-night-tundra-snapshots-nadym-surroundings/>

STATION 5 | NOVY URENGOY & SURGUT, YAMALO-NENETS AUTONOMOUS OKRUG & KHANTY-MANSI AUTONOMOUS OKRUG

On our way back from Nadym to Surgut, we stopped at Pangody, a small sleepy village on our route to Novy Urengoy. To our great surprise, we found a memorial dedicated to the workers of the Stalin railway, the only one our guide knew of. In Novy Urengoy, Russia’s gas capital, we visited the local Gazprom museum and embarked on a city tour. After another night in the train, we finally arrived in Surgut where we held a fiery debate with a local activist representing an organization that aims to erect a Stalin statue in the city in order to “properly honor his outstanding contribution to Russian history”. Afterwards we had a final wrap-up session and a festive goodbye dinner before we departed.

Read more at: <http://ifair.eu/novy-urengoy-surgut-part-5-forgotten-places-siberia-excursion/>

IV. The Essays

4.1. COMMEMORATIVE CULTURE IN RUSSIA – A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Giulia Manca & Christoph Meißner

“Никто не забыт, ничто не забыто!” – “Nobody is forgotten, nothing is forgotten!” Once you have been in Russia, you will never forget this phrase. All the majestic monuments dedicated to the ‘Great Patriotic War’, as the Second World War was called in the Soviet Union and is still referred to in Russia today, but even graffiti in the streets and souvenirs carry this inscription. The term Great Patriotic War implies a specific Soviet perspective on the conflict. It emphasizes the defensive, national dimension of the war, and the enormous sacrifice made by the Soviet people. Today, this is the main focus of Russian commemorative culture.

Although the USSR attacked Poland on 19 September 1939 and consequently occupied half of the territory, the official narrative after the war states that it started on 22 June 1941 and ended with the surrender of Nazi-Germany on 9 May 1945.³ As the bloodiest and cruelest part of the conflict was fought on the territory of the former Soviet Union, especially Ukraine and Belarus, it is not surprising that the celebration of this victory was of great importance in the Soviet Union, and still is until today in most post-Soviet states.⁴ Still, despite the above quote, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation as its legal successor have, in fact, ‘forgotten’ some parts of their history. Many victims of the Soviet regime as well as rather inglorious segments of the past are forgotten and ignored by the common narratives about history.

How and why is that possible? The famous Russian writer Daniil Granin provides a path for some consideration. Criticizing the omnipresent narrative of the victorious Soviet Union, Granin believed that “The own victory [in the Great Patriotic War] had only disturbed the Russians to come to terms with the past.”⁵ After the victory, Joseph Stalin installed a personality cult centered on his person. In fact, he was regarded as the great leader of the nation and the one who led the Soviet Union to victory. Beside him, there was no place for others, especially not for the suffering of prisoners of war (POW), the enormous number of soldiers killed in the first months of the war, and the military mistakes which led to enormous conquest of land by the German Wehrmacht: only the victory counted, which was at the center of the official commemorative narrative. Private memories, however, told a rather different story, considering that nearly every family has suffered from losses of life.⁶ After the death of Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev – who later assumed power in the Soviet Union – held his famous secret speech “*On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences*” at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, on 25 February 1956. With this speech, Khrushchev essentially brought the personality cult to an end by criticizing Stalin’s responsibilities for part of the brutal repressions that occurred under his regime. Thus, this date also marked the first time when the victims of Stalin’s repressions came to the fore. Talking about Stalinist repressions, we refer to different groups of victims, among others the victims of the Dekulakization in the late 1920s and early

³ In the Pacific Region, the war only ended on 2 September 1945.

⁴ See further: Mischa Gabowitsch and Cordula Gdaniec, eds., *Kriegsgedenken als Event. Der 9. Mai 2015 im postsozialistischen Europa*. (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2017).

⁵ Christan Neef, “Der störende Sieg”, *Der Spiegel*, No. 63 (2000): 213.

⁶ Denis A. Malchev, Larisa S. Usova et al. “Otstaivaya status pobitelya”, in *Nasledniki pobedy i porazheniya*, ed. Rossiyskiy institut strategicheskikh issledovaniy (Moscow: 2015), 41.

1930s, the great purge in the years 1937/38, the deportation of entire ethnical groups (e.g. Kalmyk's, Germans, Ingush's) and the whole system of repression of the Gulag. The speech was declared secret, but still got published as early as June the same year in the New York Times. In consequence, numerous cities, streets and places named after Joseph Stalin were renamed, and memorials erected in his honor were reduced. Still, this first attempt of publicly coming to terms with the repressions of the past was not followed by consistent scientific research and public discussion, and when Leonid Brezhnev came to power in 1964, the efforts of de-Stalinization came to an end. While Khrushchev intended to move the country towards Communism, Brezhnev wanted to consolidate the economy and retain a Socialist system. Realizing that the population became more and more dissatisfied with the living conditions in the country, Brezhnev found the commemoration of the war to be a key issue that could unite the Soviet people and therefore sought a way to include the masses into the national narrative. In a short period of time, many memorials were built, e.g. the Statue at the Mamayev Kurgan in Volgograd. This was the foundation Russia's contemporary culture of remembrance.

In the era of perestroika and glasnost, the commemorative culture again underwent drastic changes, particularly after Mikhail Gorbachev addressed the "white spots" in the history of the country in his speech on the 70th anniversary of the October revolution in 1987, and insisted they had to be investigated. A result of this new openness was the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *"The Gulag Archipelago"* in 1989, which speaks openly about the repressions and the Gulag system. The book had previously been blacklisted, and its secret *samizdat* publication was strictly prohibited. During these relatively open times, the NGO *Memorial* was founded. Until today, *Memorial* and its various regional chapters remain one of the biggest critics of the culture of remembrance in Russia. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought a time of extreme instability and uncertainty into the everyday life of most Russians. Nevertheless, Boris Yeltsin tried to revive the epos of the times of Brezhnev and the memory culture of the Great Victory. Today, the continuity of this phenomenon under President Vladimir Putin is evident.

To put this brief outline in perspective, we would like to recall what we observed during our trip to Western Siberia, and put it into the context of current Russian culture of remembrance. As we already pointed out, a lot of 'blind spots' in the history of Russia still need to be addressed and discussed in a wider public context. Historians and NGOs such as *Memorial* try to do research on these issues, but face numerous difficulties. Arseny Roginsky, a board member of *Memorial*, stated in 2013:

"In Russia we have a war on history [...]. President Putin has said for years, that we have a glorious and victorious past, of which we need to be proud. However, we say: In our history, there were also a lot of shameful aspects".⁷

Obviously, research on these shameful aspects potentially threatens the social contract, as Ernest Renan⁸ has put it. This is one of the reasons why archives in Russia are partly closed and relevant documents are still kept secret. The 'blind spots' mentioned above are not only connected to the repressions, but also to many more issues regarding the war and the postwar times. One aspect concerns the fate of the Soviet POWs in Germany and their life after they returned home. Many of them were accused of treason, got arrested and were sent to Gulags. As we learned during our visit of the Gulag camps around the Transpolar Railway, many former Soviet citizens but also a number of

⁷ Gesine Dornblüth, "Kampf um die Erinnerung", *Deutschlandfunk*, 14 July 2014, last accessed 23 November 2017, <http://bit.ly/2iNPQTB>.

⁸ Ernest, Renan, "What is a Nation?", in *Becoming National: A Reader*, ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45.

German POWs worked there under harsh conditions. Nevertheless, the people in this region do not have a critical attitude towards this issue. Members of the *Museum of Nature* in Nadym, which also depicts the history of the place, as well as members of the Polar Research Institute in Nadym underlined that, in comparison to other camps, the conditions of these GULag inmates were much better. We wondered, however, how working in extreme weather conditions with temperatures as low as 60 degrees Celsius below zero and mosquito plagues in summer, could possibly be seen as relatively good. Others with whom we spoke even noted that the work on the railway brought the discovery of gas and oil in this region, Russia's main generator of wealth today.

How it is possible that such an immense set of brutal repressions is justified, or sometimes even completely ignored? One major reason is the intense state control of the war narrative: The war and memories of the war are present everywhere; in movies, newspapers and on TV news. Therefore, the memory of the war is an absolute, comprehensive narrative: A whole, glorious nation fought united to achieve victory and liberation from an external aggressor trying to occupy the country. Our interview with Valentina Egorovna Kagorodova confirms this perspective. She was born one year before the beginning of the war in Leningrad. During the ruthless siege of the city in 1942, she and her parents, part of the German minority, were 'evacuated' to Khanty-Mansiysk, where her parents were forced to work in the local fishery. From today's point of view, it was a clear case of forced deportation and resettlement of a specific ethnical group. But due to the tragic conditions the people of Leningrad were facing, this was not perceived as such – often it is referred to as an 'evacuation'. During our conversation, she claims that Stalin saved her life because he 'evacuated' her family, and that her parents bravely worked for the victory. There was no reflection about the fact that what her family, as many other minority groups, experienced, was deportation and forced labor. Her conclusion was that Stalin was not a criminal and that he simply did not know about the repressions. Lavrentiy Beria who headed the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), in contrast, is perceived as the real perpetrator who organized everything from behind the scenes.

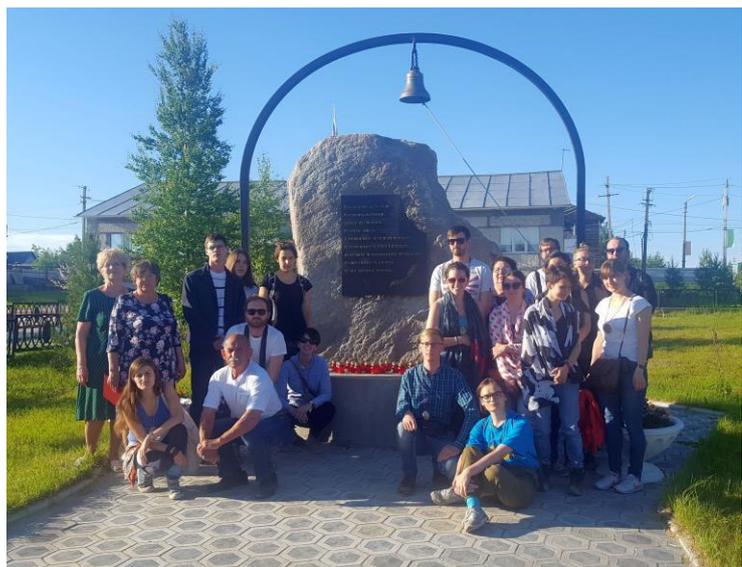


Participants of 'Memory as a Tool for Change' discuss with a local contemporary witness in Khanty-Mansiysk

With her perception of Stalin, Valentina Egorovna is not alone. The theory that he was not aware of the cruelties committed under his regime seems to be widespread indeed. The repressions are understood as part of the tragic destiny of the country, if not as a necessary sacrifice for a greater good. Considering what Stalin had achieved for the country, they somehow seem to be a kind of acceptable deal. Nowadays, Stalin even gains more and more popularity in Russia. In Surgut, we met a young man who even collected enough donations via crowdfunding (!) to build a monument for him. With president Putin calling the “excessive demonization of Stalin”⁹ an attack on the Russian nation, it is hard to imagine a way to come to terms with their own history by choosing a critical approach.

The narrative of the GULag and the repressions are largely disconnected from the narrative of the Great Patriotic War. The former represents a highly controversial chapter of Russian history, which nowadays is treated with caution. In contrast to the Great Patriotic War, however, the victims and perpetrators of the Stalinist repressions are both rooted inside the USSR. It is thus not possible to define an external enemy to blame; as a society, it means that the perpetrators are among themselves. If a serious discussion about this issue came up, it would bear the potential to question the foundation that Russian society rests upon, putting the precarious bit of balance and stability achieved after the collapse of the Soviet Union at risk. In this respect, the example of the Khanty people is a curious case. During Soviet times, their way of life was considered a threat to Soviet identity. Their culture was systematically suppressed, their shamans were deported to GULags, their language forbidden and in 1937, a Khanty revolt was violently crushed. Still, these wrongdoings were barely mentioned at any of the places we visited. On the contrary, the Khantys today appear to be very respected and admired, if not idealized for their culture and their connection to nature. A remarkable example is that of the *Stellar* of Khanty-Mansiysk, an impressive monument built at the highest spot of the city. A relief on its surface portrays the Khantys from their origins as fishers and hunters to their conflict with the Cossacks resulting in the annexation of the region by Czarist Russia, and finally the new beginning with the discovery of oil in the 1960s. The repressions, however, remain an untold story.

In Peregrebnoye, a small village on the river Ob we visited during our trip, we had the chance to see a memorial dedicated to the victims of the repressions, and even a small ceremony performed in their honor by local citizens. At first glance, the topic did not seem to be a taboo: Remembering the victims and mourning their suffering is possible, not just in a private form but also in public. If we take a closer look, however, it is evident that it is not desired to put the interpretation of the past as a catastrophe into question, or to demand accountability.



Memorial in Peregrebnoye

9 Gessen, Masha. “How Putin Seduced Oliver Stone – and Trump”. The New York Times, 25 June 2017, last accessed 14 November 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/25/opinion/oliver-stone-putin-trump.html?mcubz=0>.

Considering the conversations with the people we met and what we could observe during our trip, the Soviet mindset seems to be forming the mentality of the people much deeper than we would have expected before. Highlighting the war narrative on the one hand provides a collective identity; on the other hand, it puts the victims within a broader picture of a common destiny and justifies their suffering as part of a greater good. Their fate as individuals is blocked out, and their suffering as individual human beings who deserve an honest investigation, does not seem to be considered as relevant even by those remembering them today. There is no authentic memory without an open public discourse about what has actually happened, and what happened can neither be understood nor accepted without facing it. Lacking these prerequisites, as it seems to be the case in contemporary Russia, memory fail its potential as a tool of change.

4.2. MEMORY AS A TOOL OF CHANGE – OR OF PRESERVATION?

Veronika Loiko, Maren Tatzel & Henri Weindel

While our trip to Siberia has left us with an abundance of beautiful photos, uncountable memorable impressions, and lots of enriching encounters, many members of our group have felt uneasy about what we heard and saw, regarding the central aspect of our travel: Russian commemorative culture. We observed that the way the past is remembered might contribute to many of the challenges Russian society faces today. Our main points of interest lay in the question of how forced resettlement has affected the peoples and ethnicities in question and what kind of memorial practices these peoples have developed.

Especially regarding the first question, our visit to Tobolsk was very insightful. We met with a group of women of Volga German descent, forming a cultural club aimed at keeping up Volga German cultural heritage. The women were dressed in traditional costumes, resembling dirndl dresses with small roses attached at the hems, and straw hats. None of us had ever seen such costumes that we thought to be traditional Volga German costumes. But when we asked, we were told that the costumes were not traditionally Volga German. Instead the members of the club had created them on their own after having compared German traditional costumes and having adopted the parts they liked most and that seemed most German to them. It became clear that their remembrance and perception of German culture in Russia was highly fragmented and romanticized. In a way, the cultural club of the Volga Germans in Tobolsk presented a modified version of what they thought Volga German culture must have been like.

The heartfelt presentation of pieces of cultural identity left an impression of deep nostalgia. Still, when asked what they perceive as homeland, most of the members of the group named the places where they were raised, mainly the region of Tobolsk. All the German songs, the clothing, the preserved handcraft and the cuisine somehow pointed to a far-away destination, but it did not seem to diminish the Volga Germans' sense of belonging to their current place of living.

Our hosts were extremely kind and the food we were offered was delicious, but we couldn't help thinking that not much of the Volga German culture had remained. This was not the only time on our trip that we had this impression. In Khanty-Mansiysk, for example, Frieda Jakovlevna, a 77-year-old eye witness of the deportations, told us that she was truly German because she was "clean, punctual and very orderly". A 97-year-old eye witness we met in a small village located at the banks of the River Ob told us that she spoke



Participants discussing with a contemporary witness

German, but it turned out she only remembered how to say "I come from Gnadendorf. I am going to school." Out of fear the children would use their language in front of the wrong people, many Volga German parents did not teach their offspring the language, as was the case in Frieda Jakovlevna's

family. However, she still prays in German and also claimed to dream in the language sometimes. She does not mind that her children and grandchildren do not speak the language though, as long as they adhere to the 'German values' of punctuality, accuracy and orderliness.

It comes as no surprise that Volga German cultural life has barely recovered from decades of repression. This is especially so as the victims and their descendants do not wish to remember the repressions in detail. Many claimed that they did not face any discrimination by the locals upon arrival in Siberia, while reportedly, this has been quite frequently the case. The 97-year-old eye witness from Gnadendorf said she did not remember the circumstances of her deportation and that she had been too busy with field work to think about the reasons. This is especially remarkable as she was in her early twenties during her displacement. Refusing or not being able to remember such a traumatic experience might suggest that she adopted the official narrative rather than trusting her own experience.



One of the working groups meeting with a contemporary witness

While all of this might well be correct on an individual level, it appears that the contemporary witnesses in total have to a certain extent excluded the atrocities and the suffering their stories (or their memory). Partly, this might have been caused by a lack of possibilities to get information on the background and reasons for the resettlement. Faced with such silence on the parts where we had

sought most for a personal perspective, it was, as appalling as it sounds, almost liberating for us when in one meeting, an eye witness, also pressured by the insensitive way of questioning by her hometown's present officials, burst into tears and fled the room. While this was shocking and we all felt very sorry for the old woman, we were relieved to see someone who did not claim not to remember anything but clearly was still greatly troubled by her experiences. The exclusion of this painful past from the memory and a concentration on positive aspects, however, is quite understandable, as being confronted with it every day would make it hard to cope with the present challenges. Especially so as then it would become clear that there are culprits who committed the atrocities and have never been held accountable for what they did. On the contrary, the system that oppressed them is in some ways essentially the same, with the FSB succeeding the KGB, which again had succeeded the NKVD, responsible for the resettlements and with the Soviet-era prison camp system still partially in place.

The fact that the culprits have never been clearly named also characterizes society's dealing with the victims of the repressions and their descendants. The 97-year-old woman from Gnadendorf appeared to our meeting with a dozen medals pinned to her vest. She could not remember what she had all received them for, but one of them was the 'Hero of Socialist Labor' award, which she received for the forced labor she had to do after being deported. Also, victims of Stalinist repression can be found marching in the Victory Parade in Moscow on the 9th of May as part of the 'immortal regiment' of veterans of the 'Great Patriotic War', which is a great honor for them but at the same time labels them

as survivors of Nazi-Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union rather than of Stalinist terror. A possible explanation for the positive perception of these tributes could be the fact that they reintegrated Volga Germans into the national narrative and thus removed the stigma of alleged collaboration. Also on a political level, the Stalinist terror is not seen as the result of manmade decisions of specific people who could be held accountable, but rather in context of WWII and the necessary defense against the German invasion. Our local guide Natalya, who accompanied us for three days on our tour, bade all the eye witnesses farewell with the same sentence: "Thank you for helping to rebuild the country after the war." The victory over Germany seems to have eradicated most of the injustice done by retrospectively giving it a purpose. Stalinist terror, perceived to have come over the country like a natural catastrophe such as an earthquake rather than as a result of manmade decisions, contributed to winning the war. It was a terrible, but necessary and worthwhile collective effort, the narrative apparently goes. Unofficial apologies by public figures have hence been scarce and official ones are lacking completely. While some of the victims have been rehabilitated, there has never been appropriate compensation. Some of the victims have told us they would receive 92 roubles a month from the local government, which is around 1,50 €. The NGO *Our Memory* in Surgut told us that there is only one case in the region of Khanty-Mansiysk when the local commission for compensation could assert a displaced person's claim for compensation of 10,000 roubles. The lack of other, similar cases was explained by the difficulties of providing evidence of one's previous property, as most archives were destroyed.

Especially Stalin, who is increasingly seen in positive light in Russian society, as a recent survey¹⁰ shows, is rarely associated with millions of casualties caused during his reign. When we visited the remnants of a Gulag erected for workers on the construction sites of the Transpolar Mainline, a railway of 1,459 kilometers that was never operated and built on Stalin's orders from 1947 to 1953 in North-Western Siberia, we were shocked to find a portrait of Stalin on an improvised altar, neatly wrapped in cellophane to protect it against humidity, next to cigarettes, coins and two icons. While we first thought that it had been placed there for the same reasons that a swastika is sprayed on the wall of a concentration camp barrack, ridiculing the victims, our guide from the Nadym Polar Research Centre explained that Stalin had been placed there by descendants of the inmates to watch over them like a benignant father.

On the other side, civil society organizations raising awareness for Stalinist repressions often fail to uncover and question this narrative. When meeting with a local NGO in Surgut's historical museum, we had the feeling that it is crucial for them to remember the repressions but no clear answer as to why that would be important. In contrast to Germany, where commemoration of Nazi atrocities is inextricably linked to the outcry 'Never again!', Russian NGOs do not have such a clear aim of what they want to achieve with their work; memory does not appear to be 'a tool', and definitely not one of change. The balancing act of pursuing their activities and keeping the government's watchdogs at bay seems to 'drive strategy' and blur the vision of possible goals. Particularly the question whether there is a need to develop a 'counter-narrative' against the official commemorative culture has remained open. Making memory 'a tool of change' would bear the danger of politicizing history even more than is the case today, but it might also bear the chance of steering commemoration more towards showing a violent, and less towards a heroic image of a past that should by no means be repeated.

¹⁰ "Lyubov' Rossyan k Stalinu dostigla maksimuma", Levada Center, 15 February 2017, last accessed 20 November 2017, <http://www.levada.ru/2017/02/15/lyubov-rossiyan-k-stalinu-dostigla-maksimuma/>.

Russian society in general seems to be very focused on the past. Not only the huge parade on the 9th of May, also 'Victory Parks' remind the public of the victory over Germany in WWII, in villages and cities small and large, and no matter whether they have been built decades after the end of the war or not. They often feature an eternal flame and one or several tanks or armed vehicles, and rarely remember the war as what it was – brutal, painful and devastating – but rather as an exercise of soviet superiority overcoming Nazi-Germany and national pride.

In this context, it seems understandable that still today, Russian society and politics prefer to say "thank you" to the victims of Stalinist repression rather than "we apologize". For, if one does the latter, it means acknowledging that there is guilt, and conclusively culprits, whose prosecution is currently no priority in Russia. On the contrary, at the current moment, Russian political elites seem to rely on memory as a tool of preservation, using and manipulating the contemporary historic narrative to maintain power. After all, making memory a tool of change and questioning the continuities of the Stalinist repressive system might shake Russian society and politics at large.

4.3. MEMORY AS A TOOL – BUT NOT FOR CHANGE

Dora Komnenovic, Anastasia Lazareva, Florian Schöler & Elena Stamenkovic

Introduction

The focus of our particular working group was the GULag system in the Soviet Union. The aim of our journey was to come together with survivors and explore the ways in which their descendants' society both remembers and views the GULag system in Western Siberia.

During our preparation, we asked ourselves how the inhabitants of Western Siberia would evaluate Stalin's projects today, taking into account various actors such as the survivors and their families, the State and non-governmental organizations. How is the memory of the GULAG preserved and transmitted to future generations? More specifically, and pertaining to every-day life in the camp, what relations were possible to be built among inmates and between the prisoners and the outside world? How did the reintegration of former inmates into society work out, provided that it did happen? Moreover, we wanted to understand the reasons as to why Stalin's image has been invigorated in today's Russian society.

This essay will examine our impressions and findings in relation to commemorative culture in Western Siberia in four parts. Firstly, it will lay out certain background information about the sites we visited and their historical significance. Secondly, it will present our personal impressions of both the sites and the people we have talked to. Thirdly, we will take a look at the different types of memorials, part of which we saw during our trip. This will be followed by an examination of the perception of the GULag system in contemporary Russia.

Historical and factual background

Our journey took us to North-Western Siberia. As the GULags situated there were primarily in connection with the Trans-Polar-Railway, we will examine them in detail. Towards the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union was weakened and had suffered heavy losses, but Stalin celebrated the triumph over Nazi Germany. In commemoration of this victory, he decided to launch several building projects, including the construction of a vast railway line crossing the Arctic Polar Circle – the Salekhard-Igarka Railway, also known as the Transpolar Mainline, Dead Road or Stalinbahn. It required a tremendous amount of material, equipment – and human life. Hundreds of thousands of forced workers slaved to build the Transpolar Railway.



Remnants of the Stalin Railway

The project was also important due to the strategic necessity to protect the northern Russian border. In addition, the Great Stalin Railway aimed at developing the GULag system after the end of the war, as it would connect most of the northern GULags and would simplify the transport of resources the GULags provided. However, after Stalin's death in 1953 and Khrushchev's ascension to First Secretary, the policy of the Soviet Union changed. Khrushchev tried to push reforms and shut down most of the GULag system. Through this change, many GULags were dismantled, and their inmates released. As one of the main reasons for its construction ceased to exist, namely the connection of the northern GULags, the Transpolar Railway's importance was diminished and deemed excessive by the Supreme Soviet and was consequently scrapped.

Today, that remains of one of the Soviet Union's most gigantic infrastructural projects are more than 2,000 miles of rusty rails and rotten ties from Moscow to North-Eastern Siberia. Our journey in Western Siberia took us to the remains of the GULAG project *Construction 501*, set up to build parts of the Great Stalin Railway.¹¹ We were accompanied by a geologist from the Arctic Research Centre of Nadym. He highlighted the immense struggle of building a railway in the climatic conditions of northern Siberia. For example, all the materials used were transported on ships to the north, when the rivers were free of ice. Furthermore, it was particularly interesting to see how the GULag system grew parallel to the railway track.

The Railway Line currently lives on only in the memory of the people who succeeded in surviving. In a found diary an unknown author describes the conditions in the labor camps as the following:

"All human emotions - love, friendship, mercy, compassion, and honour - were taken from us. We felt neither pride nor dignity. The only feeling we were left with was hunger without any emotions."

Personal Impressions

Visiting two labor camps of the GULag project *Construction 501* was for many in the group the highlight of our trip to Siberia. It was even more so for the members of the working group "Structure and Inner Workings of the GULag System", who were hoping to find answers there to the questions we raised at the preparatory workshop. How is the GULag remembered today by various actors, including the survivors and their families, the State and non-governmental organizations? How is the memory of the GULag preserved and transmitted to future generations? More specifically, and pertaining to every-day life in the camp, what kind of relations were possible to be built among inmates and between the prisoners and the outside world? How did the reintegration of former inmates into society work out, provided that it did happen?

As a first step to approach these questions, we derived some insights on the topic by reading A. Solzhenitsyn's *The GULag Archipelago* throughout the whole duration of the trip.

"Just as always in our well-thought-out social system, two different plans collided head on here too: the production plan, whose objective was to have the lowest possible expenditure for wages, and the MVD plan, whose objective was to extract the largest possible earnings from camp production. To an observer on the sidelines it seems strange: why set one's own plans in conflict with one another? Oh, but there is a profound meaning in it! Conflicting plans flatten the

¹¹ The Transpolar Mainline was supposed to connect Salekhard and Igarka. The construction of this railway across Northern Siberia was coordinated by two GULag projects, construction 501 and 503. We visited two camps on the 501, Schuchiy and Glukharinyy.

human being. This is a principle which far transcends the barbed wire of the Archipelago".¹² "Hunger, which compels the most unselfish person to look with envy into someone else's bowl, and to try painfully to estimate what weight of ration his neighbour is receiving".¹³ "Yes, the camps were calculated and intended to corrupt. But this didn't mean that they succeeded in crushing everyone".¹⁴ "In the ten or fifteen years lived apart from us, how could our sons grow in harmony with us: sometimes they are simply strangers, sometimes they are enemies. Nor are women who wait faithfully for their husbands often rewarded: they have lived so long apart, long enough for a person to change completely, so that only his name is the same. His experience and hers are too different-and it is no longer possible for them to come together again"¹⁵ (p. 448).

On the other hand, the state of affairs on the site of the two camps made us think about the dynamics of top-down and bottom-up memory, as well as the plurality of memory narratives. The first camp we visited at the crossing loop Schuchiy is closer to the main road and thus more accessible for visits, which is why it displayed larger evidence of previous visitors' presence. In the absence of a more 'institutionalized' way of remembering the inmates, coins, cigarettes, an icon, but also a portrait of Stalin (!) were left by visitors.



A picture of Stalin inside the Gulag

On both sites, a cross has been placed on the camp grounds. In the second camp we visited, the camp at the crossing loop Glukharinyy, it was complemented by a plaque.

¹² Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918.1956*, (London: the Harvill Press, 2003), 218.

¹³ *Ibid*, 226.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 319.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 448.



Cross and candle in Schuchiy



Cross in Glukharinyy

The latter camp is slightly more preserved, but considering the first camp's better accessibility, *Memory of the North* foundation has plans to build a larger memorial there. *Memory of the North* aims to raise awareness of the regional GULags and preserve them. In the Russian Federation, there is currently only one GULag museum located on the site of a former camp, which is Perm 36.



Entrance to Glukharinyy

Memorials devoted to the Labor Camp 501

Nowadays, several sections of the 501 Railroad from Salekhard to Nadym as well as a huge area that was used for labor camps have the status of a monument of regional significance. Due to the lack of protection and preservation systems, places where prisoners were used to build Stalin's ambitious project are gradually disappearing.

Warning sign: Do not allow destruction. The camp at the crossing loop Schuchiy is being designed



The only memorial dedicated to *Construction 501* is located between the city Salekhard and its airport. The monument, established in 2003, represents a steam locomotive installed next to a commemorative stone.



Memorial in Salekhard, devoted to the victims of labour camp 501. Taken from <https://www.rutraveller.ru/place/5275>

In comparison to monuments dedicated to the victory in the Great Patriotic War, which usually dominate the cultural and memorial landscape of most Russian cities, memorials dedicated to the dark side of Soviet history are rarely represented in public space. Such an approach to Stalinist heritage undermines the understanding of the social value of historical monuments and erases the traumatic experiences of the USSR period. In post-Soviet Russia, public authorities maintain an image of the sacred role of the Great Patriotic War while developing the commemoration of victims of the Stalin era remains in the hands of a fistful of civil society organizations as well as local activists.

After our group returned from the trip to Siberia, the Youth Resource Center in Novy Urengoy received a grant for the project “Guides of the gas capital”. Local travel companies are now expected to develop tourist routes as well as excursions for pupils to the GULag camps. People who visited the camp remains now share their experience and impressions on social networks, which become a place for commemoration. The process of creating a commemoration infrastructure is an outcome of reflecting of the past. In relation to the vast territory of wooden barracks and other camp buildings the only memorial to *Construction 501* and touristic trips are the first step. Describing the camp ruins by using digital technologies is a goal for researchers as well as for local people to preserve the GULag complex at least in a virtual space.

The view of the GULag system in today’s Russia

One of the core questions that we sought to investigate during the preparation of the excursion was how the GULag system is commemorated in the Russian society today. From an abstract viewpoint, a more favorable interpretation of Stalin’s policies has taken hold in Russia over the last two decades. This is made evident both in national polls and by the efforts of dozens of cities to erect new monuments dedicated to Stalin. In order to assess this in a more practical matter with testimonies of first hand witnesses, we met people from organizations with starkly different perspectives on the matter.

In the museum of local history in Surgut, we had a discussion with people from the organization Our Memory, cooperating with Memorial, the biggest civil society organization for culture of remembrance in Russia. In what turned out to be one of the most emotional exchanges of the excursion, members of Our Memory, who were in fact descendants of victims of Stalinist repression themselves, recounted their efforts to build a memorial plaque in Surgut commemorating the victims of repression under Stalin’s rule. While they did succeed in installing said plaque after years of bureaucratic resistance, this victory was curtailed by the fact that a bust of Stalin was erected in the direct vicinity of it. The bust was funded and installed by the organization *Russian Spirit*. Members of Our Memory expressed their sense of degradation upon what they felt to be an insensitive slight. This would, however, not be the last time we would witness this kind of conflict emanating from opposing interpretations and evaluations of history.

After arriving at the most northern stop of our trip, Nadym, near Novy Urengoy, we set out to explore the remnants of two GULag camps which were used to house the captives working on Stalin’s Railway. Two guides from an organization dedicated to the commemoration of the local GULags led us to the camps and showed us around the sites with interesting anecdotes and a visible sensitivity of the historical significance of these places. Both of them devote significant parts of their spare time to maintaining the sites, e.g. by cutting down trees to keep the campsites accessible and similar to their appearance when still used to house inmates. Inside one of the still accessible barracks of the first camp we found a framed picture of Stalin, decorated and placed in a way to resemble a shrine. The guides too discussed their frustration about the insensitivity of people using the GULag camp to commemorate Stalin when it is, in their opinion, a place to remember the victims of his policies. In order to get a better understanding of the people behind such acts, we met with one of the organizers of the initiative *Russian Spirit* in Surgut. He explained in a rhetorically poised manner the rationale behind assessing Stalin’s policies in a more nuanced way. He knew of our project and thus correctly anticipated a more critical audience in terms of questions. It was, however, clear fairly quickly that he had little in terms of factual evidence to back up any of his assertions. In a manner reminiscent of

alternative facts, he brushed off critical questions and historical inconsistencies with nonsensical, albeit colorful claims and interpretations of history incompatible with the evidence in existence.

While this person was certainly the most extreme voice we heard in terms of revisionist historical interpretation, he was by far not the only one. Almost everyone we talked to during our time in Siberia presented the Gulag system in a more positive way than the evidence may permit. This was especially visible during our visit to the Gulag camps near Nadym: While we had just listened to a presentation in the Natural History Museum of Nadym about the alleged living conditions in the camps containing saunas and leisure facilities for the inmates, we could see the harsh truth of the matter for ourselves only hours later.

Conclusion

While we did meet people and organizations actively supporting the commemoration of the crimes of the Stalinist regime, the vast majority of people rather emphasized the positive outcome of Stalin's policies. Against the backdrop of the resurgence of Stalin memorabilia across Russia, it was somewhat sobering to see certain expectations confirmed during our excursion in Western Siberia. Memory is, in fact, used as a tool – yet not for change.

4.4. WAYS OF COMMEMORATING STALINIST REPRESSIONS IN TODAY'S RUSSIA

Nina Janz, Anna Korneeva, Katharina Kugler & Julika Trümper

Introduction

The term “Stalinist Repressions” refers to one of the most violent periods in Soviet but also Russian history, causing the deaths of millions of political opponents and civilians. Stalin gained power in the mid-1920s and held power until his death in 1953. Following the orders of Stalin and his administration, state organs such as the NKVD¹⁶ did not only imprison and execute hundreds of thousands of assumed enemies of the people but organized the deportation of entire ethnical groups, e.g. the Volga Germans, Kalmyks or Crimean Tatars to Siberia or Central Asia. Regardless of the exact number of repressed, which is difficult to establish and therefore subject of scientific disputes, the horrifying extent of atrocities caused by the Soviet leadership is widely recognized among historians. Nevertheless, today, Joseph Stalin is seen as a hero by a vast majority of Russian citizens. Just about every year, newspapers report on the growing percentage of Stalin’s popularity, based on the surveys carried out by the renowned Levada Institute. In its latest report, published in February 2017, it states that the level of approval for Stalin among the Russian population reached 46%, accumulating the percentage of participants referring to Stalin with “admiration”, “respect” or “affection”.¹⁷

Being aware of these rather disturbing figures, we set off to Siberia to learn how different groups of people affected by Stalinist repressions as well as NGOs and historical museums remember this cruel period of Russian history. The first part of this essay engages with individual stories and commemoration efforts of the Volga Germans as they can be found all over Western Siberia. The second part takes a closer look on how Stalinist Repressions are represented in the museums and archives of the region we visited. The final part examines the activities of local NGOs and their very different approaches when it comes to the evaluation of Stalinist times. All three parts are dealing with the question of what types of commemoration culture can be found in an area with a recent history that is so tightly interconnected with Stalinist crimes.

When approaching the various institutions and group representatives, we were especially interested in finding out whether our counterparts are questioning the causes of oppressions and deportations. Would they show any criticism of the political decisions made during the Soviet times, or would they rather refer to them as an inevitable course of history? Officially, the Stalinist repressions are neither denied nor excused. Commemorating them has been largely left to small initiatives with different interests and backgrounds. The following paragraphs will reflect on our findings concerning the commemoration practices of local groups and museums in Western Siberia today.

¹⁶ The People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs

¹⁷ “Lyubov’ Rossiyan k Stalinu dostigla aksimuma”, Levada Center, 15 February 2017, last accessed 16 November 2017, <http://www.levada.ru/2017/02/15/lyubov-rossiyan-k-stalinu-dostigla-maksimuma/>.

Individual stories and commemoration efforts of the Volga Germans

Stalinist repressions affected and radically changed many lives. Through the forced resettlements of entire ethnic groups, ordinary people were uprooted and forced to build a new life under harsh conditions in foreign places. The reasons for resettlements of the Volga Germans specifically can be boiled down to two main motivations: Firstly, Stalin collectively labelled them as collaborators, fearing they would support Hitler's army from the inside. Secondly, he needed work forces for grueling labor, mainly in fisheries and the timber industry, in Siberia and Central Asia – in places like Khanty-Mansiysk and other towns or villages in Western Siberia, places where we spoke to resettled people or their descendants.

With so many people affected, there cannot be consensus on how those forced resettlements are remembered. Based on the case of the Volga Germans we met, it is interesting to look at some examples of remembrance. There is, for instance, an active group of descendants of Volga Germans in Tobolsk. During our meeting, they stated that they wanted to remember their history and therefore try to keep cultural elements alive through songs and German lessons, and to pass on personal family histories through conferences with published conference volumes, so that those stories can reach a wider audience. However, the resettlement process itself and the reasons behind it were barely reflected upon – none of the Tobolsk Volga Germans expressed anger towards Stalin because of those resettlements. A 97-year-old resettled Volga German in Oktyabrskoye gave a possible explanation for this lack of anger, stating that she wasn't offended that it happened because she thinks that the authorities did what needed to be done and that she therefore trusted them since she herself was not the expert – the authorities were.



Singing Ensemble „Gute Laune“ in Tobolsk

We encountered a different attitude with the town representative who claimed that “the repressed still cannot talk about it without crying, because it was a genocide of our people”¹⁸. However, this was not visible with the 97-year-old lady he introduced – she told her story without any tears. In general, it did not seem like the resettlements and the suffering they caused for so many were much of an issue in most places, not even among the victims themselves. This can be explained by the fact that perpetrators and victims still had to live together in often very small communities – not a good situation to dig up a complicated past.

Something that was saddening to us was that we got the impression that the authorities ‘used’ the repressed living in their communities to ‘show off’ to us. An example of this was a case of an old lady who was obviously very uncomfortable and unhappy being at the center of attention of so many people, but the town representative waved off our concerns. This lady was perhaps the only one of the repressed who didn't seem indifferent to the resettlements, but it was hard to tell whether this was caused by her memories or by the surrounding situation.

¹⁸ Translation from statement in Russian. On enquiry, he explained that by “our” people, he meant the multinational Russian people.

Overall, the often indifferent approach to the forced resettlements was surprising – one would think that a process in which so many lost their homes and often also their friends and relatives would lead to anger against the perpetrators, but this was rarely the case with the people we met. Instead, we encountered the described attitude of acceptance – an attitude perhaps further explained by this quote of another Volga German from Nyagan: “Maybe there is something in the Russian character where *rodina* is more important than what I myself suffered”.¹⁹

The History of Stalinist Repression as part of Museums and Archives in Western Siberia

During our journey through the history of Stalinist repressions, we visited museums as well as archives and discovered various interpretations, projects, exhibitions and different approaches towards the victims of the Stalin era. The first stop on our trip was the old Siberian capital Tobolsk, where we visited a former prison. The old prison complex consists of renovated prison cells that are now being



Victims of the Great Terror, Prison Chapel Tobolsk.
Credit Nina Janz

used as a hostel, courtyards, a memory plaque and a memorial for the people executed at the former mass graves. Inside the prison chapel, the names of the local victims of the Great Terror of 1936-38 are listed on the walls. The prison museum displays Stalinist Repressions as a part of the Russian and Soviet history, and records in exemplary manner the names of the victims. It does, however, not challenge the why and the how of those historical events.

The next museum we visited, the *Human and Nature Museum of the Yugra region* in Khanty-Mansiysk, introduced an aspiring project to document the memories of exiled and deported people. Besides dedicating a part of the permanent exhibition to the contemporary Stalin cult and objects of the exiled, the museum developed a virtual exhibition of expulsion and deportation to the Yugra region. This virtual exhibition introduces biographies, memories, photographs, documents and objects of exiled, banned and politically repressed people who had to work and live in today’s Khanty-Mansiysk region.²⁰ The exhibition was transferred to a virtual level because a separate museum dedicated to expulsion could not be realized due to financial problems.



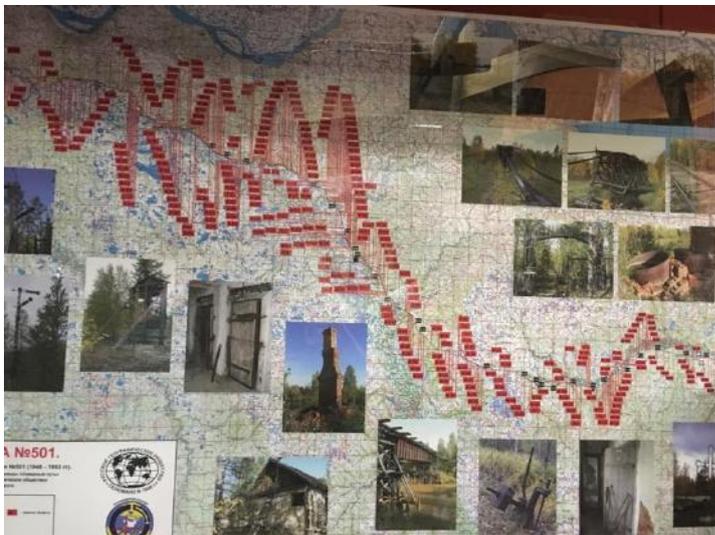
Virtual Museum Natural History Museum Khanty-Mansiysk, Introduction of the political repressed people in the region. Credit Nina Janz

¹⁹ Approximate translation from a statement in Russian, *rodina* meaning “home (country)”.

²⁰ “Virtual Museum, History of the exile and resettlements in the Khanty-Mansi autonomous district of Yugra. 1920 – 1950), last accessed 18 August 2017, <http://hesr.ugramuseum.ru>.

In its overall presentation, the museum summarizes the banishment, resettlement and deportation to Siberia from 1920 until the 1950s as a tragedy of the repressed people in the Soviet Union, but cedes the interpretation of these events as well as any condemnation or consent to the visitor. The museum staff chose a neutral way and focus exclusively on collecting and recording the past.

Our journey further led us to the *Historical Museum of West Siberia*, to Surgut.²¹ The museum does not dedicate a lot of space to the period of deportations but mentions it as part of the history of the town and the region, and cooperates e.g. with the NGO *Our Memory* during events and temporary exhibitions. The *Natural History Museum Dom Prirody* in the city of Nadym, almost 1,000 km far north from Surgut, takes a similar approach.²² Apart from a zoo of live animals, glass cabinets with plants and other animals of the region as well as folkloristic clothes and handcrafts of indigenous people, the small museum hosts a room dedicated to the GULag 501, as part of the GULag System and forced labor camps at the famous Stalin Railroad in the North Siberian Tundra.²³ Objects like clothes, tools, cell doors, and other artefacts of this enormous, unfinished construction project, are shown next to



Map of Stalin Railroad and its labor camps, Natural History Museum Nadym, Dom Prirody. Credit Nina Janz

rooms with cages of rabbits and parrots. Even though photographs of the still existing ruins and a map of the different construction sections are being displayed, the museum does not represent a critical confrontation with the labor and punishment system during the Stalin era. The museum guide mentioned the hard conditions of the workers of GULag 501, but emphasized also the benefits for the region, like employment for locals and the development of the North.

The struggle with this chapter of Soviet history and the treatment in public exhibitions are about as varied as the circumstances and the biographies of the deported and resettled people: they range from only mentioning the existence of a Stalin Railroad Project in Nadym, to recording and collecting documents, memories and names of the victims, like the Natural History Museum in Khanty-Mansiysk and Tobolsk. In many places, the museums are mirroring the public debates on the Stalin era, since they are state financed institutions. Not every public institution is able to or willing to deal with this dark chapter of history. The State Archive Khanty-Mansiysk, for example, holds just a small file concerning the deported and labor settlements.²⁴ Other archives, such as the Oblast Archive in Tyumen with its NKVD records, which contain details of the Stalinist repressions, are still closed to

²¹ "The Museum Center of Surgut", accessed 18 August 2017, <http://skmuseum.ru/museum-center/>.

²² "Dom prirody in Nadym", accessed on 20 August 2017, <https://www.culture.ru/institutes/11542/muzey-istorii-i-arheologii-g-nadima-dom-priodi>.

²³ For more information about the "Dead Road", see http://sever-press.ru/501/index_e.htm.

²⁴ "State Archive of the Yugra Region in Khanty-Mansiysk", accessed 19 August 2017, <http://www.gahmao.ru>.

the public.²⁵ Our journey showed us the various and often contradicting ways of commemorating the repressed people in Siberia. Projects like the virtual museum in Khanty-Mansiysk will hopefully be adopted and supported, in order to give the victims a voice and a place within the country's history.

Commemoration of Stalinist Repression in the activity of NGOs in West Siberia

Mass violence orchestrated by Stalin and his accomplices in the 1930s-1950s left its traces both in collective and personal memory and thus is reflected in the activities of different NGOs in Western Siberia. The first societies on our way through one of the darkest chapters of Russian history, like the *Association of Deported Volga Germans* in Tobolsk and the 'Russian Germans' Association of Khanty-Mansiysk, perform a variety of actions. Trying to maintain their own culture and transmit it to posterity, they organized a folk ensemble; they also participate in song-contests and uphold German holidays. An important part of the activities of these societies is collecting documents, oral narratives and personal stories of the witnesses themselves or their descendants. They are dealing with the past, but on a personal and family level only, without putting it into the historical and political context, without even reflecting on the reasons that caused those events.

We were fortunate to meet another NGO, the local public organization of the victims of political repressions *Our Memory* (Surgut) and the group *Our Origins* (Nizhnevartovsk) towards the end of our trip. The members of both NGOs made every effort to enlighten the audience by publishing books



The design for the Monument to the Victims of Political Repressions, Surgut.
Taken from: <http://in-news.ru/news/obshchestvo/v-surgute-poyavitsya-pamyatnik-zhertvam-politicheskikh-repressiy.html>

about special resettlements and executions in the region, protection of repressed peoples' rights and memorialization of the victims of political repressions. As in the case of above-mentioned associations, the majority of NGO members themselves or their families suffered from repressions - these activities are thus only conducted by dedicated citizens with a personal interest, not specialists or professionals.

One of the main goals of the NGO *Our Memory* is the creation of a memorial dedicated to the victims of mass political purges. The future monument will be raised in the form of a split rock and a group of people. "One man managed to go through the rock and split in half. The rest of the people left to stand beside – the ones who didn't pass, didn't survive"²⁶, said Pavel Akimov, the chairman of *Our Memory*, in an interview. With a grant from the government of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug,

²⁵ The access to NKVD records is not regulated in a uniform manner. During our trip and discussions with experts and representatives of NGOs, the lack of access and research on the records during the Stalinist repression have been frequently criticized.

²⁶ "V gorodakh Yugry prihodiat pamyatnye meropriyatiya ko Dnyu pamyati zhertv politicheskikh repressiy", Ugra-TV, 27 October 2015, last accessed 25 November 2017, http://ugra-tv.ru/news/society/v_gorodakh_yugry_prokhodyat_pamyatnye_meropriyatiya_ko_dnyu_pamyati_zhertv_politicheskikh_repressiy/

it was possible to erect the two stone slabs on the bank of the river Ob. However, due to the lack of further financial support, the construction of the monument is temporarily halted. Most of the NGOs' actions are supported by the *Transfiguration Brotherhood*, one of the largest informal communities of believers in the Russian Orthodox Church, which advocates for an "Act of National Repentance"²⁷. The NGOs share this religious view of the problem of overcoming the violent past; the installing of the Monument to the Victims of Political Repressions in Nizhnevartovsk two years ago was accompanied by the ceremony at the initiative of 'Our origins' society.

Widespread pro-Stalin views and half-official approval of Stalinist time provoked a large number of local initiatives like the NGO 'Russian Spirit', one of whose members we spoke to in Surgut. He represented a patriotic youth group that stands for keeping the tradition, leading a healthy lifestyle and restoring historical justice as its activists understand it. In 2016, the group applied to erect a bust to Stalin, whom they treat as a symbol of the golden age in which the USSR was transformed from a backward peasant nation into an industrial dynamo, defeated Nazi Germany and became a global superpower. A bronze bust was supposed to be a gift to war veterans, who regard Stalin as a hero and express nostalgia for Soviet times. The statue was installed roughly 25 meters away from the site of a future memorial to victims of political repressions. Two contradictory monuments on the same riverbank, Stalin and his victims within a few meters away from each other - a symbolic embodiment of the deep rift in Russian society over Stalin's legacy. After much protest, the Stalin bust was removed by local authorities a few weeks later, due to the lack of a required permit. However, the activists of *Russian Spirit* have already started a fundraising campaign for a new memorial.



Memorial to the victims of political (not Stalinist) repressions in Khanty-Mansiysk. Credit K.Kugler

²⁷ "The Transfiguration Brotherhood", last accessed 23 August 2017, <https://psmb.ru/en>.

Conclusion

As the examples described in this essay have shown, the ways of commemorating the Stalinist era are just as different as the opinions and interests of the various groups that are dealing with the topic. What they have in common, though, is that they rarely openly criticize Stalinist policies. The Volga Germans we met prefer to talk about their history as a harsh fate but do not link it to political decisions that should be criticized. This could, perhaps, also be the result of a psychological coping strategy, which states that human beings tend to seek some sense in whatever tragedy they might have faced, calling it their fate and even showing some pride in it.

The exhibitions we visited display the forced resettlements during the 1930s and 40s as historical facts, which does not necessarily lead to criticism of the people in power at that time. Correspondingly, the Stalinist repressions are often simply labelled as “political repressions” when being exhibited at museums or memorial sites. Questioning this phenomenon, the representative of the *Human and Nature Museum of the Yugra region* in Khanty-Mansiysk told us that the term “victims of political repressions” is the one considered to be ‘politically correct’. It is obvious that the name of Stalin is not to be connected to the horrible events of the repressions. Instead, it should be linked to the great victory of the Soviet power in World War II, which is nowadays actively being used as the core element for a new Russian national identity.

The most critical opinion on Stalin was expressed by the initiative seeking to establish a monument to the victims of repressions in Surgut. Erecting a Stalin bust right beside the spot for this memorial is symptomatic for the clash of different points of views when it comes to the evaluation of the Stalinist period today.

V. About the Organizers

IFAIR, Berlin, Germany

The Young Initiative on Foreign Affairs and International Relations (IFAIR) e.V. is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to civil society dialogue, intercultural exchange and the involvement of young, creative actors in foreign policy processes. In our Think Tank, young authors leave their footprints in current political debates. IFAIR's Impact Groups give our generation a platform to bring tangible projects to reality. IFAIR's motto is "Think. Learn. Act.": We learn from theory and transform these learnings into practical results – and vice versa.

Yugra State University, Khanty-Mansiysk, Russia

The Yugra State University focuses on developing the human capital resources necessary for Western Siberia to address the challenges of the 21st century. Founded in 2001, Yugra State University is one of the youngest state universities in Russia. One of their important missions is training high-skilled specialists for industrial purposes of the region. It is the university's aim to demonstrate that the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug is a place of creativity, living, education and long-term perspective.