

When Memorials Cease to Commemorate: The Museum of the History of Political Repression in Tomsk as a Place of non-Patriotic Remembering

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Abstract

This article examines tourists' experiences of visiting the Tomsk Memorial Museum of Political Repression. Through a semiological reading of the exhibitions and textual analysis of visitor books, I show how despite the museum's proclaimed purpose as a place of remembrance, tourists frame their visits in terms of education and entertainment. Referring to memory as a discursive practice, I demonstrate how the exhibition does not fit the dominant patriotic discourse, wherein actors are remembered for their contributions to the Motherland. Because those killed in Gulags are represented as victims rather than heroes, their story remains insignificant and immemorable to many Russians.

Key words: memory, dark tourism, patriotism, discourse, gulag

Introduction: The Meanings of Wood

One of Russia's oldest cities east of the Urals, Tomsk is commonly known as the Siberian Athens. And quite rightly so. Although in size and economic power, Tomsk, with a population of slightly more than 500,000, lags far behind its nearby neighbor Novosibirsk, a huge industrial, scientific, and financial hub with more than 1.5 million inhabitants, neither Novosibirsk nor any other city in Western Siberia can match Tomsk's architectural beauty. Designed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the streets of Tomsk are graceful and always filled with young voices: every fifth citizen is a college or university student. Welcoming and cozy during the short summer, somewhat gloomy in autumn and spring, Tomsk takes on a fairytale look in winter, when the city is covered with snow, shiny and fragile, and electric lights radiate expectations of New Year and Christmas. The city's century-old wooden buildings are the jewel in its architectural crown. The largest collection of wooden architecture in Russia, these two- and three-story houses constitute the most 'soulful' (*dushevnaia*) and thus nostalgic (*Pesmen* 2000) part of Tomsk. Surrounded by beautifully carved wooden frames, their windows have seen things long gone—gone long enough, indeed, to evoke in the melancholic passerby an array of sentimental, kitschy fantasies: a bluish spark composed of sleigh troikas, Cossacks, ballrooms, pancakes, furs, Orthodox churches, and samovars. Dressed in wood, this old Siberian city is beautiful.

Unfortunately, Tomsk's association with timber has another, darker dimension. Over roughly 25 years, from the late 1920s to early 1950s, Tomsk was associated with notorious *lesopoval* (lumber felling)—a term referring to forced labor in prison in general and to forced labor in Gulag camps in particular. Indeed, the Tomsk region played a significant part in the history of the Soviet penitentiary system. During Stalin's reign, the forests and rivers north of Tomsk became a place of death and suffering for tens of thousands of 'special settlers,' convicted as *kulaks*, 'wreckers' and counter-revolutionaries (Papkov 2012). Today, both sides of Tomsk's association with wood draw the institutionalized attention of two thematic museums. Opened in 1982, the Museum of Wooden Architecture offers its visitors 'an exposition in the form of consequential narrative about the history of the wooden architecture and development of [wooden] architectural décor.'¹ Similarly, the Memorial Museum of Political Repression OGPU-NKVD Prison, established in 1989, has the mission of 'eternalizing (*uvekovechvanie*) the memory of victims of political repressions.'²

This article too focuses on the memory of the victims of Stalin's political terror. Utilizing semiotic reading of the exhibits and textual analysis of visitor books I examine how the museum staff perform the work of commemoration and how tourists and visitors respond with recalling and remembering. To a considerable extent, though, this is also a study on absence: despite the museum's explicit efforts to remind visitors of the death and suffering of their fellow countrymen, many tourists frame their visits strictly in terms of education and entertainment. Rather than a place of remembering, the Museum of Political Repression functions as a source of interesting, sometimes even amusing information.

Such ostensible immemorability of Stalin's crimes in post-communist Russia is well known within the academic community (Etkind 2004, 2009a, Khapaeva 2009). While this lack of memory is usually explained by pointing to the manipulative politics of the ruling elite; to trauma; or to moral corruption of Russian society, I propose a different interpretive strategy. My argument begins with the assumption that since collective memory is generated and maintained through communication, it may be understood as a discursive practice (Bietti 2014, Wertsch 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). What is remembered, what is forgotten, and what is altogether immemorable arises from the organization and functioning of a given discursive order. Utilizing the Lacanian notion of the master signifier—an empty sign that constitutes the ultimate reference point for an ideological discourse and thus ensures its stability (Glynos 2001)—I show that in public commemoration in post-communist Russia, this role is primarily fulfilled by the notions of the Motherland and the People. More often than not, actors and events in modern Russia are remembered according to their place in the Motherland-centric discourse, as long it may be explicitly established.

The place of the commemorated Gulag prisoners, though, remains all but unrecognized, as the museum represents them as innocent sufferers rather than heroes who lived and died for the sake of the Motherland. Accordingly, for many visiting tourists, the story of the Gulag is primarily a story of dying for nothing. Having cause but lacking meaning, life and death in Stalinist camp appear to be natural and mundane, perhaps interesting but ultimately insignificant and thus immemorable information. Visitors thus refer to the museum as a place of education and entertainment rather than *lieu de mémoire*. Their unwillingness to remember the victims of Stalinist repression should be seen as a normal consequence of the overwhelming power of the patriotic discourse rather than the result of trauma, political manipulation, or moral corruption.

Memory of Stalinism in Post-Soviet Russia

In former Soviet Bloc countries, the memory of the communist past is never uncomplicated. From East Germany (Velikonja 2009) to Hungary and the former Yugoslavia (Velikonja 2009, Volčič 2007) to Poland (Pasięka 2012) and Romania (Tulbure 2006), sharp repudiation of the Soviet authoritarian legacy co-exists with nostalgia for 'the ethos of reciprocity characteristic of the socialist past' (Tulbure 2006: 86) and longing for 'past dreams, past visions, past expectations' (Velikonja 2009: 12). To this trend, Russia is no exception. Not only do today's Russians hold nostalgic feelings toward the 'mature socialism' of Brezhnev's era (Oushakine 2009, Yurchak 2006), but in fact, they retain ambiguous attitudes even to the Stalinist period of Soviet history (Tumarkin 2011). Thus, while in Germany, the need to commemorate the victims of Nazi crimes has gained broad consensus (Forest et al. 2004, Young 1992), in Russia, where the numbers of the murdered are of comparative vastness, one finds a striking 'absence of widespread public monuments' (Etkind 2004: 43).

This state of affairs is often interpreted in terms akin to mental illness. Dina Khapaeva, for example, observes that 'post-Soviet society is seriously ill with a partial amnesia that makes its historical memory strangely selective' (Khapaeva 2009: 359). She explains this ostensible malady by suggesting that in recent decades, Russian society has taken the path of consciously repudiating the norms of human morality—indeed, 'a gradual loss of interest in the human condition' (Khapaeva 2009: 373). Differently than Khapaeva, Alexander Etkind maintains that 'Russians remember the Soviet terror fairly well, though they vastly differ in their interpretations of this terror' (Etkind 2009: 182). Stalin's political repression of millions of Soviet citizens was accompanied by the psychological repression of their memory in the minds of their loved ones. These repressed memories, though, did not disappear but took on

'new and strange forms' (Etkind 2009: 186). Etkind thus suggests that despite the relatively low intensity of institutionalized commemoration of the Gulag victims, traumatic mnemonic specters of the Stalinist past quite literally haunt Russian society.

Others assert that Russians' problematic indifference to Stalin's victims may result from the political zigzagging of the current regime. Although the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) ceased to exist, its demise was not accompanied by a major replacement of the political elite (White 2010). No substantial lustrations occurred, and, in fact, the majority of the former Soviet nomenklatura joined the ranks of the new Russian post-Soviet elite. Moreover, Russia was represented as the true successor to the USSR's achievements, and victory in the Great Patriotic War became a sacred event of monumental scale, endowing Putin's elite and Putin himself with glory and legitimacy (Wood 2011).

As the successor to Soviet glory, the Russian political establishment occupies a delicate position in relation to Soviet crimes. The current regime must denounce Stalin's repression but cannot push the repudiation too far. Thus, ambiguity and oscillation characterize the official position toward Stalinism. From the wave of destalinization in the early 1990s (Smith 1996) to Putin's suggestion that 'the excessive demonization of Stalin is... one of the ways to attack... Russia' (Stone 2017, ep. 4) to the restoration of the ode to Stalin in the Moscow Metropolitan station (Adler 2012), to inaugurating a monument to the victims of Stalinist purge (Osborn 2017)³ the attitude of the contemporary Russian authorities toward Stalin's dictatorship remains vague and completely overshadowed by what Khapaeva calls 'an obstructing myth' of the Second World War (Khapaeva 2009).

As this literature review shows, the medicalization explanations of the non-institutionalized status of the memory of Stalin's victims in Russia can be revelatory and allow authors to arrive at important insights. However, this viewpoint risks creating a political hierarchy between lay actors and scholars, who as experts occupying a dominant position based on their preferential access to reality and truth (Foucault 2006). Moreover, I suspect that the medicalization of collective memory overemphasizes the role of actors' agency, as if what and how one remembers and forgets were solely a function of the condition of one's psyche and moral preferences. Although it is individuals who remember, regret, glorify, and commemorate, 'culture provides them with the instruments for these purposes' (Etkind 2009: 188), so the inability to remember certain past event(s) may have cultural rather than psychological or moral causes. This critique applies to studies that attribute the 'problematic' condition of memory of the Gulag to manipulation by political elites. 'There can scarcely be an identity outside language' (Halfin 2007: 30), so one can doubt the extent of the political elites' autonomy from the very ideological discourse they (re)produce. Although the elites' ability to manipulate and 'brainwash' the public should not be ignored, I propose that the Kremlin's public-relations strategies are not the first factor to consider when trying to explain how and why the memory of the Gulag works.

Following James Wertsch, I suggest that given the narrative form of memory, the act of remembering is akin to an utterance and thus follows the rules of the related discursive order (Wertsch 2008a,b,c Wertsch, J. V 2008, Wertsch, James V. 2008b, Bietti 2014, Casey 2000, Zerubavel 1995). In Russia, this order becomes increasingly Motherland-centric. According to Serguei Oushakine's observation, during the early post-Soviet period, the 'transitional people' of Russia sought to make sense of the social and cultural 'limitlessness' (*bespredel*) around them. Amid the rapid decomposition of the familiar (Soviet) socio-cultural fabric, 'stories about the nation and the country were used as a major organizing plot for individual accounts: these personal feelings acquired a socially recognizable narrative structure' (Oushakine 2009: 6). Consequently, 'patriotism ... emerged as an emotionally charged set of symbolic practices called upon ... to provide communities of loss with socially meaningful subject positions' (Oushakine 2009: 5).

While not the only possible framework for mapping the past, the Motherland-centric patriotic discourse in Russia has received strong support 'from above' in recent years. Through parliamentary initiatives, television programs, school textbooks (Tsyrlina-Spady and Lovorn 2015), and musical performances (Wickström and Steinholt 2009), state patriotism has increasingly saturated both the media and politics. Indeed, according to the Russian president, 'we have no other, and there can be no other unifying idea but patriotism.' (Putin

2016)⁴ Centering the public discourse on the Motherland and the People positions them as master signifiers—tautological concepts that function as the ultimate reference points for all the utterances produced within a particular discourse frame, fixing their meanings and stabilizing the whole discourse (Bracher 1988, Lacan 2006). Just as the sun's gravity determines the trajectories and mutual order of the bodies in the solar system, so utterances in Russian public discourse are interpreted and related to each other by their semantic anchoring in the notion of the Motherland.

In public commemoration, stories of people and events become good, bad, painful, cursed', or blessed memories according to their relation to Motherland and as long as this relation is explicitly pronounced. The more patriotic a narrative of the past is, the more unforgettable it becomes. If, however, the relation of a given story to the Motherland is not articulated, then it fails to acquire meaning and becomes immemorable. I, therefore, conclude that it is possible that Stalinist victims' death and suffering remain insignificant to contemporary Russians because this narrative does not explicitly refer to the Motherland's fate. To what extent sites such as the Tomsk Memorial Museum of Political Repression become places of memory is not primarily a result of the state of psyche or moral condition of its visitors.. Rather, it is a question of how, if at all, the story of the Gulag prisoners told through the museum exhibitions complies with the discursive rules of Motherland-centric patriotic remembering.

Reading the Museum: Patriotism vs. Christianization and Compassion



Figure 1: The privatization of memory. Stripped of any Motherland-centric symbolic framing, the Stone of Grief is more akin to private gravestones in ordinary cemeteries. (Author's photo)

Museums and their exhibitions are not simply collections of artifacts but also fields of implementation of and competition between rhetorical practices offering different ways of coming to terms with the past. The content and design of exhibitions, explanations from tour guides, as well as the conversations, thoughts, and behavior of visitors—all may be interpreted as statements pertaining to ongoing communication with and about the past (Andermann and Arnold-de Simine 2012, Blair et al. 2010, Noy 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, Ravelli 2007). In this light, the Tomsk Museum of Political Repression appears as a fascinating field of study, which permits both poring over the content of the story of Stalinist terror and examining how and to what extent this story may become recollection.

Fields like this are rare. This is the only museum east of the Urals dedicated to the commemoration of Stalin's victims. It is one of the oldest of its kind in Russia, too, founded as early as 1989 thanks to an initiative by the local branch of the Memorial Society for Historical Research and Civil Rights. Like many other dark heritage sites, the museum is located in situ (Kang et al. 2012, Kidron 2013, Stone 2006), in the basement of a red-brick house that from 1920 to 1946 functioned as a headquarters of the Soviet political police—the notorious GPU-NKVD. A visit to the museum, though, begins even

before one enters the building in the adjacent Public Garden of Memory—a small square with birch and pine trees. In the center of the park is a low pedestal, with a granite stone mounted on it (see Figure 1). An inscription on an arch raised above the stone reads: ‘In memory of those killed on the land of Tomsk during the years of political terror, this Stone of Grief is installed’ (ustanovlen).

In a way typical of sites commemorating the Gulag victims, the memorial is uninformative and symbolically opaque (Etkind 2004). Neither the stone nor the inscription provides visitors with any clue as to who the victims and the executioners were or when the atrocities took place and for what reason. In fact, the memorial even does not mention Stalin’s name. The semiotic significance of the monument is also laconic. Free of the flags, ensigns, five-pointed stars, statues, and bas-reliefs typical of Russian commemoration sites, the monument in Tomsk does not refer to the stories of the lives and deaths of Gulag prisoners or to the Motherland and the People. Like ordinary gravestones, the Stone of Grief points at nothing but the dead, representing their sheer occurrence as significant enough to establish the whole memorial. As in cemeteries, where personal acquaintance prompts visiting the departed, the victims of Stalinism are presented to be remembered for their own sake, as if they were friends, relatives, or members of visitors’ religions.

This tendency to detach remembering from the figures of the People and the Motherland becomes further amplified as one enters the museum. After descending the stairs to the basement, one comes into the ‘investigator’s office’ (kabinet sledovatelja)—a relatively small compartment furnished with an old, green-cloth-covered table, with two chairs on opposite sides: one for a prisoner, one for the investigating officer. The latter is represented by a mannequin dressed in a NKVD uniform, with a blue peaked cap and a big leather pistol holster on its right hip. There is no mannequin for the prisoner, yet his presence is registered by a file of cheap yellowish pasteboard lying on the table. The file contains a few dozen thin pages—a copy of the investigation protocol of the renowned poet Nikolay Alexandrovich Kliuev, who was arrested in Tomsk and executed in October 1937 on charges of belonging to the non-existent monarchical Union for Salvation of Russia. In front of the table, facing the NKVD mannequin and a larger portrait of the NKVD’s founder Felix Edmundovitsch Dzerzhinsky, is a wall with three show windows. One contains a picture of Kliuev and a piece of paper proclaiming the poet’s posthumous rehabilitation in 1957. The two remaining vitrines are also dedicated to prominent figures: art theoretician Gustav Shpet (shot in 1937, rehabilitated in 1956) and Michail Shatilov, the first manager of the Tomsk Ethnographic Museum (shot in 1937, rehabilitated in 1959).

While these three men made distinguished achievements, there was nothing exceptional in their arrests and subsequent executions. Indeed, as emphasized by the museum curator, once arrested, Shatilov, Shpet, and Kliuev shared the fate of ‘thousands of innocent victims’ (tysiachi nevinno ubiennykh) of Stalinist terror. The investigator’s office, with its official certificates of conviction, execution, and rehabilitation, presents, therefore, a story of hideous misrecognition: during the years of the Stalinist purges, in cabinets just like this one, millions of Soviet citizens were identified as ‘wreckers’ and ‘enemies of the people,’ although they had done nothing wrong and caused to the People no harm. While neutralizing the negative connection of the prisoners’ lives and deaths to the People and the Motherland, the exhibition does not offer a positive one instead. Emphasizing that those who perished in Gulag were no enemies, the museum invests no effort in showing that they were heroes. The exhibition thus continues the process of detaching memory from the figures of the People and the Motherland. Consequently, to visitors who habitually apply their patriotic interpretive toolkit, death in the Stalinist camps appears to be death for nothing: it has circumstances and causes but lacks context and meaning. Whether done by a bullet in the execution corridor, starvation, tuberculosis, or diarrhea, death in the Gulag remains a mere causality, an episode as mundane and insignificant as cessation of life by a traffic accident or old age.

Visitors, however, are not left alone to make sense of the story of the repressed Soviet citizens. The three remaining museum halls provide tourists with many tools for non-patriotic memory construction. The largest hall was formed by merging two original prison cells by removing the wall separating them. Today, it is a wide room, with a low ceiling and walls of rough brick. One wall, the closest to the doorway, is decorated with old Soviet posters which proclaim increased industrial production and promise a radiant future but also call for vigilance against

ever-present spies, wreckers, and enemies who always ready to sting. Like the convictions and death sentences presented in the interrogator's office, the Stalinist interpretation of reality is opposed by that provided by the museum.

This is not done, however, by presenting counter-statistics showing the real state of the Stalinist economy. Instead, in the center of the room, in front of the wall with propaganda posters, stands a large glass showcase containing goods that served the exiled in their new lives in Siberian settlements: a small gramophone, a dress, a sewing machine, shoes, a teddy bear, and even a small bust of Stalin. These everyday objects are surrounded by family photos of their executed owners. Pictures of victims can also be found on the far wall of the room. Not contextualized by everyday objects, these photographs are charged instead with symbolic meaning, as they are arranged in the form of the Christian cross. The two other walls feature more everyday items, letters to and from victims' family members and copies of the official documents (some personally signed by Stalin) that regulated the NKVD's repressive campaigns.

The third room in the museum is a reconstruction of a small, brick prison cell, with only three bunks, a dim lightbulb, and a wooden slop-pail. Finally, the fourth hall houses temporary exhibitions, usually dedicated to the history of the suffering of particular social groups: Jews, Catholics, priests, etc. Such exhibitions offer some historical information about the number of the repressed, the circumstances of their deaths, and the years when the repressions took place. The most commonly exhibited items are, as in the first room, objects that served convicts in everyday life: letters, Bibles, crosses, and clothing.

As semiotic reading of the collections suggests, the museum prompts visitors to remember the victims of Stalinist terror by their Christianization and by establishing with them quasi-personal relations. Bibles, beads, fragments of the repressed priests' religious clothing, and, most importantly, a large Christian cross made of photos of Stalin's victims evidence an effort to Christianize the memory of the repressed. Although historically inaccurate and somewhat violent toward the victims, their posthumous conversion nevertheless provides visitors with tools of non-patriotic remembering.⁵ By making God the ultimate reference point in the interpretation of the Great Terror, the museum locates the repressed under the auspices of a religious discourse, which, in turn, offers visitors a set of well-established practices of commemoration, mourning, and grief (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. The Christianization of memory. Note how the letters and photographs depicting the prisoners' lives are organized around the Christian Orthodox icon. (Author's photo)

Unlike crosses and Bibles, the exhibited teddy bears, dresses, sewing machines, and letters do not possess extraordinary symbolic significance. Instead, because they authentically belonged to the victims, they can function as transitional objects, bridging the existential gap between visitors and the (gone) life-world of their original owners (Froggett and Trustram 2014, Kidron.

2012). This is especially true of prisoners' letters, presented throughout all of the museum's halls. Letters allow their writers to speak in their own voices, testify to their agency, and present the writers as individuals who existentially fit into intersubjective relationships and may deserve personal compassion, empathy, and remembering. Addressed to the writers' relatives and describing their immediate concerns (e.g., children's health, warm clothing, food, cold weather, and harsh labor), the letters are capable of bringing visitors into the very heart of their authors' life-world, taking on the status of close acquaintance. Finally, because even skimming the letter takes time, and since while skimming tourists cannot but follow the prisoners' feelings and thoughts, reading effectively allows visitors to 'grow older together' with the victims, and thus locates them in the shared realm of intersubjective experience.⁶

Overall, this examination of the Tomsk memorial complex suggests that its exposition follows the strategy of gradual abandoning the patriotic frame of remembering and providing visitors with alternative instruments of memory and grief. First, the absence of the stars, banners, hammers, sickles, and huge, concrete statues typical of state-sponsored commemorative sites questions the necessity of remembering by emphasizing the heroes' contributions to the People and the Motherland. Second, in the investigator's room, this ostensible necessity is explicitly rejected. Finally, the three remaining halls provide tourists with alternative ways of remembering the Gulag victims: their posthumous Christianization and empathic sharing of their life experiences.

These efforts, however, do not ensure that the Memorial Museum of Tomsk functions as a place of non-patriotic memory. As a collective performance, museums result from the interplay among a broad range of interpretive patterns, some proposed by museum staff, others brought by visiting tourists (Bagnall 2003, Garoian 2001, Macdonald 2005, Ravelli 2007). Thus, the question of how and to what extent the Tomsk Memorial Museum functions as a mnemonic site cannot be answered only by a semiotic analysis of its exhibitions. It also demands exploration of their interpretation by visitors.

Reading Visitor Books: 'We Really Liked It Here'

For this task, studying visitor books offers several advantages. Unlike conducting interviews or focus groups, studying books prevents researchers from influencing the participants' responses. More to that, because notes left by visitors comprise explicit expressions of their feelings and thoughts, reading them may have advantages over such 'naturalistic' methods of enquiry participant observation, which 'tell us rather little about visitors' views of their experience or the exhibition' (Macdonald 2005: 120). This is not to say that entries in visitor books may be taken for granted as unbiased reflections of tourists' feelings and thoughts. Comments in visitor books are never produced in a vacuum. Their authors write in reaction to previous notes, take into account their potential readers, and are influenced by their assessments of the social and political situations in their respective countries (Reid 2005). Also, as Chaim Noy aptly reminds us, the books' very appearance and physical position in the museum may well be 'manipulated so as to serve and promote the mission of the site' (2008a: 512).

Noy's warning also highlights visitor books' unique transitional features. Provided and manipulated by museums, the books constitute an integral part of exhibitions. However, from time to time books are taken by commenting visitors and their pages are filled with notes over which museums have no immediate control. Afterwards the books are returned to their place and once again become part of exhibitions. This ongoing circulation ensures that the books function as powerful communicative devices, linking the perspectives of the exhibition and the visitors and breaking down the dichotomy between the two. Studying visitor books, therefore, allows grasping the museum in its holistic complexity, as a collective accomplishment in which museum staff and tourists have significant, if not equal, share and responsibility.

During my research in 2014, I had access to the visitor book for that year. A museum employee also kindly provided me with scanned copies of the books for the years 2006–2008 from the museum archive. Together, the volumes have a considerable total of approximately 1500 entries. How many of these may count as a manifestation of memory work, and what are the basic patterns of this work? The answers vary depending on the particular reading of collective memory one chooses to embrace. For example, following scholars such as

Schudson (Schudson 1993) and Zerubavel (Zerubavel 1995), one may apply the notion of memory to any socially established practice of referring the past. In this case, all the entries in the visitor books and, in fact, the very convention of writing in visitor books in museums may be referred to as memory work. I, however, suggest that such broad a definition of memory runs the danger of stretching this concept to the point where it is no longer discernible from the notion of culture (Berliner 2005).

I, therefore, accept a more conservative reading of memory as a phenomenon rooted in subjective experience (Halbwachs 1992, Nora 1989, Yerushalmi 1989). While society and culture certainly play significant roles in defining of what, how, and when we remember. Remembering as a process seems to be a private faculty, indeed, 'a model of mineness, of private possession, for all the experiences of the subject' (Ricoeur 2004: 96). Communicating one's inner temporality, memory is a form of reflexivity: in reminiscing, it is not the object but our experience of the object that comes to the fore. In this context, Augustine's metaphorical association of memory and digestion is especially suggestive.⁷ Since phenomenologically speaking, aggravated, structured, and anticipated experiences sum up to what we actually are, remembering manifests the absorption of the memory's respective theme into one's very self.

Despite this conceptual complexity, memory remains a basic and easily discernable phenomenon. Most often, we are aware of our remembering and capable of reporting it in discourse. Therefore, for the purposes of this work, I view a simple count of the occurrences of memory-related words, such as 'memory,' 'forgetting,' 'recalling,' and 'remembering,' in the visitor books as a reasonably good indicator of memory work by visiting tourists. Such indicators are few. Of the approximately 250 entries from October 2013 to May 2014, only 42 mention the word 'memory' or 'forgetting' in any context or form. In fact, when referring to Stalinist atrocities and victims, visitors prefer to use the term 'history' (57 entries for the same period). For example, a group of six tourists from the city of Novosibirsk stresses the didactical importance of the history of the Gulag:

Thank you very much to the museum staff members. The facts [presented in the museum] and the exhibits are amazing even for us, in our 40s and 50s. A wonderful history lesson for our teenage children. (2014)

Anton, from the city of Krasnoyarsk, comments:

People have the right to know their history. Thank you that there is in existence such a museum (spasibo za takoi muzei). (2014)

Seven years earlier, an anonymous visitor writes:

Thank you for keeping our history and for giving us a chance to get acquainted with its most hidden pages. (2007)

This preference for history over memory may be quite instructive as the terms represent two rather different ways of referring to the past. Whereas remembering entails intimacy with the past, history establishes the past as an object of inquiry separated from the enquiring subject. Indeed, historical research begins at the point where the past becomes increasingly alienated from living actors (Nora 1989, Yerushalmi 1989). The heavy presence of the term 'history' in visitor books, therefore, may indicate that many visitors have a somewhat distanced, (and therefore untypical of memory) attitude toward the Gulag victims.

No less telling are the entries that define the museum in general terms as a 'place of interest.' Consider, for instance, the following note by an anonymous visitor:

Enjoyed being in your museum. I came to know a lot of new, insightful and interesting [information]. (2014)

A group of students elaborates on the same point:

We learned a lot of new and interesting [information]. Thank you for widening our horizons with such interesting facts and details. (2014)

One of the most common locutions in the visitors' entries, the 'interesting information' compliment suggests that they regard Stalinist repression as a notable phenomenon potentially worthy of further investigation. One, though, should note that for attraction, there must be separation. To make further steps the object of interest possible, there has to be a gap between that object and the interested subject. Thus, whereas remembering folds its object into the reminiscing self, the notion of furtherness, constitutive of the interested attitude, presumes distance.

This is not to say that all the tourists remain personally untouched by the story of the Gulag. Many visitors readily confirm that they are impressed and sometimes even horrified by the encountered display of death and suffering. Here, for example, is a report on a broad range of morbid emotions:

Pain! Fear! Hatred! This whole feeling of endless oppression of souls locked down here projects an indelible impression. (2007)

And:

Experiencing the piercing dread of those years is achieved not only by means of the museum's collection but also because the museum is located in the very place where convicts were actually kept. (2014)

The museum's ability to horrify its visitors, however, does not necessarily establish it as a mnemonic site. Because existential dread constitutes a universal component of our being, tourists' consumption of morbid sites might serve several purposes. For example, it may help shore up 'the fragility of the self's survival strategy' (Stone and Sharpley 2008), enhance family cohesion (Kidron 2013), or even give psychological relief and existential catharsis (Kang et al. 2012). It, therefore, is difficult to determine whether the emotional outpouring caused by the encounter with death and suffering in the Tomsk Museum of Political Repression is converted into narratives of remembering.

Often, visitors describe their emotional experience in terms of entertainment. For example, a visitor named Lenochka (little lovely Lena) confesses:

In the beginning, it was very frightful and creepy ... BUT INTERESTING!!! A breath-taking sight, indeed. (2007)⁸

Consider an entry by a group of high school students:

We really liked it here in the museum. ... Very interesting. We are leaving this museum rather impressed. Old stuff in great quantities. And the doors [of the wards] are just awesome. Thanks a lot. (2007)

Defining the museum as a site with plenty of 'old stuff' to gaze at, these entries hark back to the dawn of the museum era, when nascent museums were used as collections of curiosities (Ravelli 2007: 2). Curious gazing, in turn, is a practice of which distanced attitude is constitutive part. Curiosity, Heidegger tells us, pushes its object away from the gazing actor, as he or she hurries 'to leap from it [the object] anew to another novelty' (Heidegger 1962: 216). Curiosity, in this respect, directly opposed to re-calling, an effort to re-establish the attachment of what is re-called to one's uttermost self. The visitors' reported excitement over the museum does not provide unequivocal evidence of memory work. On the contrary, as I have shown, it may indicate the overall incommensurability of the visitors' experience with the practice of remembering.

Writing in a polite and somewhat formal manner, most commenting visitors mention that they find their visits rewarding and thank the local staff for the 'uneasy labor of keeping the museum.' According to their notes, the museum proves to be a valuable site for historical education, entertainment, and emotional release. They, however, only rarely mention its function as a place of remembering. One might be tempted, therefore, to accept Khapaeva's bitter assertion, that 'repentance and remorse do not pertain to typical qualities of 'the 'Russian national character'' (Khapaeva 2008: 99). I suggest, however, that it is not ostensible moral obduracy but the absence of references to the figures of the Motherland and the People throughout the exhibition that prevents tourists from reading their visits as mnemonic activity.

For those visitors, whose patterns of remembering are constituted in the frame of patriotic discourse, the 'non-patriotic' story of suffering in the Gulag appears to be immemorable and qualifies only as information.

In line with this suggestion, many entries that do mention remembering or forgetting also explicitly refer to the People or the Motherland. To make the Gulag victims eligible for remembering, their stories have to be proactively 'patriotized.' Thus, in March 2014, one visitor notes that:

It is a rather needed effort [*ochen' nuzhnoe delo*] to prevent us from forgetting the history of our people.

Six years earlier, a student from the Tomsk University of Architecture comments:

I am greatly thankful to members of the museum staff for [preserving] the memory of woeful fate of our long-suffering Motherland. These walls have seen so many of her smart, beautiful, and honest sons. In loving memory.

Two visitors from neighboring Novosibirsk write:

Thank you for the memory of the fate of the Russian people. Your work is rather important. (2008)

The patriotic discourse of remembering, for all its dominance, proves to be not immune to challenge or change. Consider this entry by two teachers from a local school:

Our hearts are bleeding for the innocently ruined souls. So much injustice, so many dark stains in the history of our long-suffering Russia. We need this museum! We need a memory of our grandfathers, executed in the town of Kolpashevo, let the word about the murdered ones remain a requiem. (2007)

While using 'long-suffering Russia' as a familiar semantic anchor of the narrative of remembrance, these visitors remain focused on their murdered ancestors. Instead of gravitating from the latter toward the mythological figure of the Motherland, their memory flows in the opposite direction, so ultimately, it is the grandparents who become the subject of the teachers' requiem.

Indeed, among the tourists who left notes in the book, some even go a step further, completely detaching their memory of the repressed from the celestial sufferings of 'our country.' Thus, for students at Tomsk Pedagogical University, the Gulag victims stand at the very center of memory.

Thank you for the museum! Thanks to you, there is a living memory in us of deportations, of camps and wrongfully executed people. We are in great pain for people who were killed only because they happened to live in those parlous times. We are seized by feelings of dread and anxiety, pain, fear. (2007)

An anonymous visitor writes:

One's hair stands on end when one looks at all this horror! So many people were

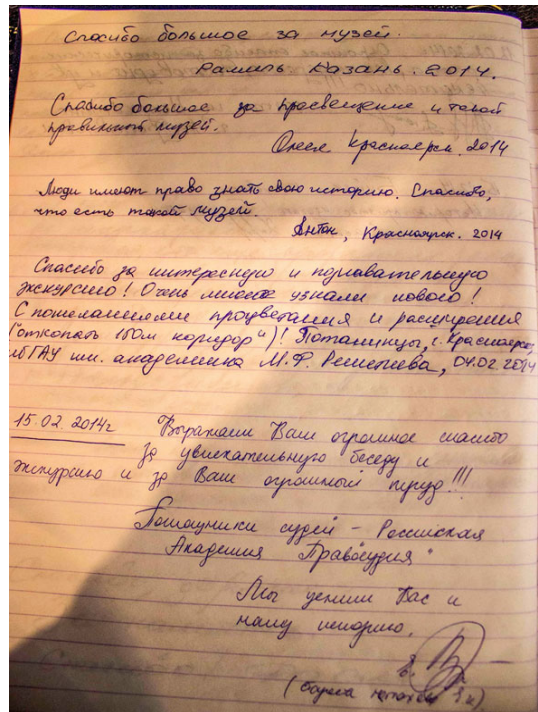


Figure 3. 'Thank you for an interesting and informative excursion!' For many visitors, the Stalinist atrocities are interesting rather than unforgettable. (Author's photo)

repressed just for nothing, without any substantial reason! The convicts' diaries are especially impressive. Thanks to these documents, the feelings and thoughts of those unfortunate people can reach us. ... No doubt, we have to keep the memory of terrible events of the past. [...] By reading the documents, studying the buildings' maquettes, and looking at the photographs, you understand better than simply by staring at history textbooks. (2007)

From the museum's perspective, this entry might represent a goal accomplished: using the museum exhibits as transitional objects, its author manages to establish a personal bond with the victims of Stalinist oppression and thus can remember them for what they were, without anchoring their memory in the concept of the Motherland. However, as noted, such entries are rare. For many, the authoritative figures of the People and the Motherland remain the ultimate anchors for remembering, and the Gulag prisoners are hardly memorable at all. The visitors grasp the traces of their lives, torment, and deaths as pieces of 'interesting information,' sometimes even as instruments of entertainment. Although the very name of the Tomsk Memorial Museum of Political Repression manifests its purpose as a place of remembering, whether it will actually become such remains in doubt.

To be sure, cultures provide their members with more than one discursive frame of remembering (Assmann 2015). In this paper, I illustrated how visitors are encouraged to remember Stalin's victims not through establishing their contributions to the Motherland but through empathic compassion or the frame of religious tradition. However, these alternative ways of remembering mostly remain paths not taken as visitors show little interest in remembering their Stalinist past without referencing the Motherland or the People. Considering the sharp rise of patriotic rhetoric in recent years, this attitude likely will not change soon. The chances, therefore, are great that in the coming years, the prisoners of the Gulag will remain absent from the remembering of their modern descendants.

Conclusion

Examining the discursive contexts of remembering is crucial for understanding museums as social institutions, especially in relation to their function as places of memory. In this article consideration of this context helps explain how the disconnection of the story of the Gulag from the trope of leaving and dying for the Motherland's sake prevents the Tomsk Memorial Museum from becoming a mnemonic site. Because linguistic practices produce subjectivities and frames of interpreting, thinking, and recalling even events of horrific scale and brutality may go unnoticed if they do not fit the dominant order of discourse.

On a more general level, considering the discursive dimensions of the museum allows one to avoid constructing problematic conceptual hierarchies between museum staff and the tourist public (Garoián 2001). Both the representations and guidance from the former and the interpretation made by the latter constitute discursive enactments. Rather than the source of a single-directional flow of knowledge about the past, the museum may be grasped as a site where different practices of negotiating the past are applied, compete, and are synthesized. Moreover, regarding the museum as a discursive phenomenon avoids building hierarchical relations between lay actors and scholars. When explaining the immemorability of the Gulag for modern Russians, I were in a position to resist the temptation to issue moral verdicts and 'medical' diagnoses to Russian society. By emphasizing the dominant role of the notion of the Motherland in forming social memory in Russia, I show how passive attitudes toward Stalinist crimes might result from the lack of fit of their representation to the frame of a patriotic discursive order.

In exploring heritage sites, the power of actors' agency should not be overestimated. True, to a great extent, museums are constituted by actors' performance. However, actors themselves are the products of linguistic practices, so they exercise only limited authorship in what and how they perform. How and to what extent museums function as mnemonic sites is largely a matter of rather holistic processes of the reproduction of discourse, of which exhibitions, tourists' reflections, and academic papers are both a mirror and a constitutive part.

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Notes

- 1 Muzej Derevjannogo Zochestva. <http://artmuseumtomsk.ru/page/137>, accessed 11 January, 2018.
- 2 O Muzei', Memorial'nyj muzei 'Sledstvennaya tiur'ma NKVD'. <http://nkvd.tomsk.ru/about/>, accessed 11 January, 2018.
- 3 Andrew Osborn, 'Putin Opens Monument to Stalin's Victims, Dissidents Cry Foul,' Reuters, October 30, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-monument/putin-opens-monument-to-stalins-victims-dissidents-cry-foul-idUSKBN1CZ256>, accessed 11 December, 2017.
- 4 Putin, V.V. 'Vstrecha s aktivom Kluba liderov' [Meeting with the core group of the Leaders Club]. Prezident Rossi'i, February 3, 2016, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51263>, accessed 11 December 2017.
- 5 According to Alexander Etkind, grasping Stalinist terror in religious terms may be a quite problematic, indeed, 'highly questionable' (2004: 52) effort. First, because Stalinist policy of terror was a strictly secular project. Secondly (and most importantly, perhaps), since many of Stalin's victims were non-Christians or even outright atheists.
- 6 According to Alfred Schutz growing older together as a process of sharing time and attuning individual streams of consciousness is a fundamental element of sociality and, indeed, contemporality (Bregman 1973, Schutz 1967).
- 7 According to Augustine's reflection, 'the memory ... is as it were, the belly of the mind, and joy and sadness, like sweet and bitter food; which, when committed to the memory, are as it were passed into the belly, where they may be stowed, but cannot taste. Ridiculous it is to imagine these to be alike; and yet are they not utterly unlike' (Augustine of Hippo 2008: 273).
- 8 Author's emphasis.

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