

ZUZANNA BOGUMIŁ
The Maria Grzegorzewska Academy of Special Education

Stone, Cross and Mask: Searching for Language of Commemoration of the Gulag in the Russian Federation¹

Abstract: This article examines the commemoration practices of the Gulag in the Russian Federation. On the basis of qualitative data collected during a field research carried out in a few former lager districts (the Solovetsky Islands, Komi Republic, Perm region and Kolyma), I reconstruct a way the history of Soviet repressions was uncovered from oblivion and the process of Gulag commemoration began. Starting from the assumption that the Gulag memory was not started to working through in Russia till the end of 1980s, and that the last stage of Perestroika had a crucial influence on a way the repression past is nowadays commemorated in the country, I examine several memory projects erected in that time and show how the process of reworking the Gulag experience and presenting it in a narrative form occurred. On a base of the first exhibition dedicated to the Gulag past, *SLON—Solovetsky Lager Osobogo Naznachenya*, (the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp) I reconstruct a process of rewriting history and describe how the repressive past was perceived at the end of the 1980s. In turn, analyses of meaning and social function of the monuments commemorating Gulag show that at the beginning there was a diversity of the past interpretations and that the processes of the transformation of the soft into the hard memory proceed quite quickly. However, since the mid-1990 a comeback to the traditional, well recognizable model of culture is visible. Thus, the memory of Gulag supported by the Russian Orthodox Church slowly dominates the social perception of the repressive past.

Keywords: memory, Gulag, monument, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Solovetsky Islands, spontaneous shrine, Memorial Society.

In the age of memory (Nora 2007) the simplicity and minimalism of the remembrance practices of Soviet repressions as well as practically lack of secular and coherent commemoration language of the Gulag past seems significant (Etkind 2009a: 182). Therefore, memory researchers develop such concepts as cultural amnesia, collective nostalgia or melancholy (Mendelson, Berber 2005; Etkind 2009b; Boym 1995; Oushakine 2007) to explain the unhealthy mourning and obscurity of the process of working through the Soviet terror past in Russia. However, as one of the memory researchers, Aleksander Etkind, points out diagnoses on cold character of Russian memory are exaggerated (Etkind 2009a). Sociological polls show that Russians remember the Soviet terror fairly well and are able to say what happened to their society and own family even fifty or seventy years ago. As Etkind stresses these “sur-

¹ This article bases on the field research that I carried out in 2006, 2007 and 2008 in the Russian Federation. It was a part of a wider research project: Remembering Gulag—analysis of sites of memory in the former Soviet camps. Project was sponsored by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education, no N11601231/1159.

veys reveal the complex attitudes of people who retain a vivid memory of the Soviet terror but are divided in their interpretation of this memory” (Etkind 2009a: 193). Unfortunately, he does not explain how people are divided and what the key points of their disagreements are but in his researches he focuses on analyze of memoirs, novels, films or fictions trying to develop a complex theory of cultural memory in Russia (Etkind 2009a).

In this article I analyze what Etkind is calling a hardware aspect of Gulag memory, which means: monuments, museum exhibitions and other material signs of memory in order to show that their shape is only seemingly simple and mute. As Jan Assmann claims monuments represent some significances important for identity of people who erected them (Assmann 2008: 37). They are *signum temporis*, bear social, political, national or universal values of the time when they were erected (Grzesiuk-Olszewska 1995: 11–12). Thus, I treat monuments as a kind of narrative matrix, which on the one hand expresses collective memory through its form and co-develops it on the other (Young 1993: 1–15). Signs and monuments form a kind of unconventional stories (Domańska 2006), they are interpretations of the past which use non-verbal description languages. They draw on the language of art or nature and search for the right image which would present the inexpressible. Even if they are a bare stone they are a testimony of some social act and thus they signify. As James Young claims while analysing the monuments it is important to discover different layers of significances hidden in them, to “allow every site to suggest its own definition and to establish how and why public memory of this era is being shaped by the memorials” (Young 1993: VIII). Thus, inspired by Young work on the Holocaust memorials, I look on the Gulag monuments, their form, meaning and a social function through the discourse on the Soviet repressions past of the time when they were erected. I refer them also to the Russian culture, in which they are embedded, because as I am showing in this article, only this dual approach permits the complex interpretation of Gulag monuments.

The article bases on the field research that I carried out in Russia between 2006 and 2008,² literature review I made during my fellowship in the Aleksanteri Institute in Helsinki in 2011, and material collected in frames of my on-going research on the phenomenon of a new martyrdom in Russia.³ The main data was collected between 2006 and 2008 during a few months ethnographic field research that I made on the territory of a few former lager districts (the Solovetsky Islands, Komi Republic, Perm region and Kolyma). During that time I collected over 40 in-depth interviews, some visual material (photographes of monuments and exhibitions) and archival data (mostly copies of some documents from the museum archives, articles in local newspapers).

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Discovering the Gulag past

To understand significances of the Gulag monuments it is important to pay a special attention to the social and cultural changes of the end of the eighties. It was this last stage of the Perestroika, which left the greatest mark on the way in which Gulag memory manifests itself in the Russian Federation. Nevertheless some significant expressions, to use Michel Foucault language, can be seen earlier on, during Khrushchev's Thaw, when the process of prisoner rehabilitation started (Sherbakova, 1998; Adler 2004; Smith 1996; Adler 1993), and the stage of denial, which was an official policy to the Gulag memory for former decades, ended; 1956 year also marked a beginning of a dark period of memory, a time of "repression of repressions" (Etkind 2009b: 635). Thus, it is only the end of the eighties that a thoroughly new multi-level discourse started to be created. It was a time when "nation's lens" on its past changed quite radically and a public history of the Soviet repressions in a very short moment got a new form (Hochschild, 2010: 87). Russian philosopher Grigory Pomerants describes that events in such a way: "imagine being an adult and nearly all the truth you know about the world around you... has to be absorbed in a matter of a year of two or three" (quotation after Adler 2001:276). That was a time when Russians started intensively looking for a new post-Soviet identity and were interested in rewriting the past (Forest, Johnson 2002: 528).

There are at least two important dimensions of the impact of that time on the Gulag memory in Russia. First of all, reconstruction of the past, which was done in that period, provided the shape of this memory. For a long time it existed outside the scope of public discussion, and the late eighties paved the way for conventions that were to help in understanding the memories. Also today the Gulag memory framework developed in those years has an impact on the way this event is perceived. Secondly, facts, places and figures that were back then subject of discussions and press articles, co-created what is currently understood as the Gulag history. Each of those gestures, actions and discovering was significant and helped to raise Gulag memory from social oblivion. It was very important because the anniversary of the Great October was still hugely celebrated in 1987, and exhibitions presenting the achievements of the communist system were developed in Solovki, Inta or Magadan museums. The existing world order cracked a year later. Gulag history was uncovered from oblivion and spilled on the surface with its full obscurity. As one of my interviewers, a historian from Syktyvkar, pointed out: "In 1989 each day looked like a Gulag memory day".⁴ It was therefore necessary to embrace this huge social experience which had been left socially unprocessed and untransformed for sixty years.

A perfect example of the attempts at reworking this experience and presenting it in a narrative form, which means to give it a new significance which suits to a new social situation is the exhibition of SLON—Solovetsky Lager Osobogo Naznacheniya, (the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp), which was opened in 1989 on the Solovetsky

⁴ Interview made in Syktyvkar in September 2007.

Islands⁵ (Photo 1). It was the first exhibition in the USSR that talked about the Gulag history. When museum employees started preparing it in 1988, as I was ensured during my field research in 2006 by one of the exhibition's curators, they entered an unknown ground and were discovering the "white spots of history." However, if one takes a closer look at this exhibition, he will see that it failed to offer a thoroughly new approach to history, but built its message on the information already known before. It only tried to look at them from a new perspective.



Photo 1. The exhibition of Solovetsky Lager Osobogo Naznachenia (the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp) on Solovky Islands, 2007, photo by author

A vast majority of this exhibition was devoted to the first period of SLON's functioning, when some prisoners could continue their scientific work. The exhibition presented newspapers and magazines issued on the Island in that period, the activities of the Solovetsky Society for Local Lore, which carried out research of the local fauna and flora, pictures and theatre posters documenting prisoners' cultural life. On the other hand, only a small fragment of the exposition (two panels) was devoted to prisoners' physical work. This arrangement and way of presenting the topics seems

⁵ This exhibition was displayed in the lieutenant corps till 2007 when it was closed because the indoor had to be returned to the monastery and because museum workers wanted to change the exhibition claiming that it was already old fashion. In 2011 a new display was opened in one of the former lager barracks on a main road (former lager road) of the village. About this exhibition and some other Gulag exhibitions in Russia: Zuzanna Bogumił 2009: 298–310.

puzzling, particularly if we consider that the exhibition was supposed to talk about people and its aim was to “bring back the historical truth about mass repressions of the 1920’s and 1930’s”.⁶ In reality, apart from information located next to the names of former soldiers, which says that a given person died on Solovetsky Islands or was executed by firing squad in 1937, other black cards of SLON’s history actually remained uncovered. The described history of the cultural life made it even more difficult to understand why SLON’s history deserves to be condemned and what was so tragic in the mass repressions of the twenties and thirties.

To understand the provenance of this choice of topics it is useful to dig in the museum’s archives. According to them from 1967 onwards, when the museum was established, some topics related to SLON’s history were worked out. Even before the Perestroika, guides could talk about the dates of SLON’s existence, about newspapers and magazines, Solovetsky Society for Local Lore, theatres, museum and Gorky’s visit in 1929.⁷ What’s more, in 1987 Antonina Mielnik drew up a document which compiled and systematized information found in earlier materials worked out by museum staff. At the same time she added a spacious new part about SLON’s economic achievements.⁸ Two years later, the same person was the chief author of the exhibition devoted to the lagier-related history of the Isles.

Comparison of information included in the paper from 1987 and the 1989 exhibition allows to understand what the exhibition authors had in mind when saying that they started discovering camp history in 1988. It did not mean that the full history was then unknown. However, there was a substantial change in the perception of the whole history, which involved recognizing a “human being” in prisoner, noticing his innocence and understanding a power of official propaganda and oppressive activities of the state. Thus, the exposition focused on presenting people who were forgotten in the years of “cult of personality” by stressing the uniqueness of the camp collective they formed. In spite of the change in the history perception the cultural and scientific activities could still be presented as a positive achievement, not of the system this time, but of exceptional people. However, it was not possible to present such topics as economy or physical work in a simplified or schematic way, as their problematic character came to light. That is why the exposition presented these topics in a very brief way.

The way the exhibition the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp displayed the Gulag history (presentation of unprecedented Gulag community and omission of problematic subjects) resembles the way the Gulag history was perceived in whole Soviet society at the late eighties. The SLON exhibition after its inauguration at the Solovetsky Island, during the next two years was displayed in other cities of the USSR (Minsk, Kijev, Donsk) and everywhere enjoyed the same huge social interest. There was also

⁶ On a base of the information included in the exhibition project designed in April 1989; Archive of the Solovki State Historical, Architectural and Natural Museum, no. 2_1_34, Soshyna A., Mielnik A., Brodsky A., Bazhenov J., Tematichno-ekspozicyonny plan vystavki „Solovecky lager osobovo naznachena 1923–1939 gadov.”

⁷ Archive of the Solovki State Historical, Architectural and Natural Museum, no. 2_1_480_5 „Istoriya soloveckovo monastyra,” obzornaya istoriko-architekturnya ekskursya po Soloveckomy Kremlu; 1969 god.

⁸ Archive of the Solovki State Historical, Architectural and Natural Museum, no. 2_1_501_1, „Solovecki lagier osobovo zaznachenya (spravka dla ekskursavodov), elaborated by Mielnik in 1987.

a great interest in the historical article and testimonies of survivors. Suddenly, many Soviet people started to feel an urgent need to create sites of memory, which will protect the memory, as well as the signs of memory that will express it. Different memory actors wanted to establish “purification trails” which would be used by visitors travelling between former forced labour camps, just as pilgrims frequent holy places. At this first stage Gulag memory did not have national features but looked like an unifying everybody phenomenon.

Time of Spontaneous Shrines

The first acts of the commemoration of the Gulag had a performative nature and should be perceived as what Jack Santino calls “spontaneous shrines.” Such commemoration is unofficial, characterized by a duality, which means that “it commemorate deceased individuals and simultaneously suggest an attitude toward a related public issue (Santino 2004: 365), which in the situation of the crumbling Soviet Union, was a fight for democratization of the country and recalling the memory of forgot victims. As Santino points out the spontaneous shrines insist on the personal involvement in the issue and do not permit a visitor to look on victims as mere regrettable statistics. They require participation and which seems even more important, interpretation. That is why the first Gulag monuments got a neutral form mostly of a stone. Their role was not to impose a meaning on participants but invite them to reflection and discussion. Their simple form was also a result of the fact that they were thought as a temporary signs of memory, which with time should have been replaced by the gigantic memorial complexes.

Monument in Vorkuta (Photo 2)—one of the first monuments of the Soviet repressions victims erected during the memory wave of the late eighties serves as a great example of such spontaneous shrine. It was erected on a river bank of Vorkuta, on the opposite site to the first coal mine and camp in Rudnik. A monument of the Victims of Stalin’s Terror was unveiled 25 of December 1988 as a central moment of the first Memory Days in Vorkuta.⁹ In that time the Memory Days were the events of important cultural, social and political significance. They lasted not a day but a week. It was a time of meetings with the former prisoners of VorkutLag, of exhibitions and such cultural events as a bus visit to the historical places of the VorkutLag, concerts, movie shows and even possibility to get a baptize in different confessions.¹⁰ The celebrations next to the monument of Victims of the Soviet repressions with candles, posters and speeches of former prisoners, Memorial Society activists were always a central moment of these Days. Thus the monument in Vorkuta as many other monuments erected in that times even if had very simple form was not neutral. It was

⁹ Vorkutinsky “Memorial,” chronika dat i sabytyi, *Zapolarie*, 23.03.1991; Istoya vorkutinskovo “Memoriala,” *Zapolarie*, 15.09.1995; Vitali Troshyn, K Vam, Nashi sootchestvenniki, k vam, zhiteli zemli!, *Zapolarie* 25.11.1989.

¹⁰ V. Pietrov, S 23 noyabrya po 2 dekabrya Dni Pamyati Zhertv Politicheskikh Represyj, *Zapolarie*, 23.11.1990.



Photo 2. **The monument of Stalinist Victims in Vorkuta erected in 1988, 2007, photo by author**

a political statement, because it personalized public and political issues to which it was dedicated.

It is important to stress that for many founders of the first monuments to the victims of political repressions the political dimension of their monuments was very important. The best examples of such a clear political message are the monuments erected by the Memorial Society members. This unofficial, social community was established as a spontaneous social movement to help people express and release their memories (Adler 1993). Memorial wanted to create a new language that would describe the essence of the Gulag experience and transform it into a tool of fight with the Soviet power. That's why from the very beginning Memorial paid so much attention to dates and symbols used. They were supposed to constitute a secular collection of holidays and symbols of the new civic society build on the worked through Gulag history.

Memorial activists wanted to erect gigantic monuments, which would be a signs of committed crimes and symbolic markers for a future. One of them should have been located in Moscow, an interesting project “the Russia's Thorn Crown” was also discussed in Vorkuta. Representatives of the nations whose ancestors died in the Vorkuta mines were supposed to create and erect monuments on Vorkuta ring (Smyrski 1998: 34–38). Some of them as Polish cross in Rudnik or monument Vladasa Vildžiunasa on Yur-Shor cemetery were even constructed. The most spectacular memorial complex was the Triangle of Suffering and Redemption designed by Ernst Neizvestny. This memorial comprised monuments—masks, which were located in

Yekaterynburg, Vorkuta and Magdana (Leoig 1998: 67–71). They were supposed to be made of concrete not a stone to highline that the presence of people in such places as Vorkuta or Magadan is artificial. All three monuments were supposed to become a sort of *axis mundi*¹¹ of a new democratic society, the axis which would become a symbolic centre creating a system of values and affecting the understanding of a postsocialist world.

As a process of collecting money and planning monument competition requires a lot of time, the first monument erected by Memorial activists was also a spontaneous shrine, a Solovetsky stone placed in front of Moscow's Lubyanka in 1989.¹² With time, similar stones cropped up on the squares of other cities, in Archangielsk, on the Solovetsky Islands and finally on the Troitsky Square in St. Petersburg. One more sign was established in Moscow in front of Memorial's seat, the so called "small Solovetsky Stone." These two last stones were erected when Memorial activists understood that erection of gigantic artistic monuments is not possible in the Russian political and social situation of 21-centaury. However, they have not chosen any artistic form for these new monuments, but consequently used a traditional, "Memorial's sign of memory," which is a Solovetsky stone. Such behaviour was not accidental, but had a deeper meaning.

Time of Stone Monuments

"The Solovetsky Stone" in St. Petersburg best reflects the most important characteristics of Gulag's memory supported by Memorial, namely the opposition to the system (Photo 3). It was transported from Savvatievo at the Solovetsky Island, a place of riot in 1923 which resulted in deaths of several political prisoners.¹³ Members of the Memorial Society consider it to be a very significant event which marks in a way a symbolic beginning of the history of political repressions in the USSR. Special status enjoyed by political prisoners under tsarism was lifted and a new stage of repressions started where political prisoners were shifted the lowest level in the hierarchy of prisoners. Moreover, it is an important event, because as one Memorial members explained to me: "victims were everywhere and so far opposition was located exclusively here".¹⁴ This idea was also reflected in one of four inscriptions engraved on the stone: "Borcam za svobodu" (Fighters for freedom).

However, not everyone interprets the history of Savvatievo in the same way. Most of all the history of the place of isolation for political prisoners was only a small element of SLON's whole history, not mentioning Gulag's history. Political prisoners detained in Savvatievo mainly included representatives of other political parties—Esers,

¹¹ As Mircea Eliade writes in the traditional community axis mundi marks a center of the world, around this axis the word extends. Therefore, its appointment is so important, it gives the world a comprehensive and structured shape. Mircea Eliade, 1999, *Sacrum i profanum*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KR, 29–35. Therefore, it was so important to appoint an *axis mundi* of a new democratic Russia.

¹² Michail Butorin, Solovecki kamen na Lubianke, *Prawda Sieviera*, 31.08.2000.

¹³ About the history of a political prisoners' lager in Savvatievo: Anna Applebaum, 2005.

¹⁴ Interview made on the Solovetsky Island in August 2006.

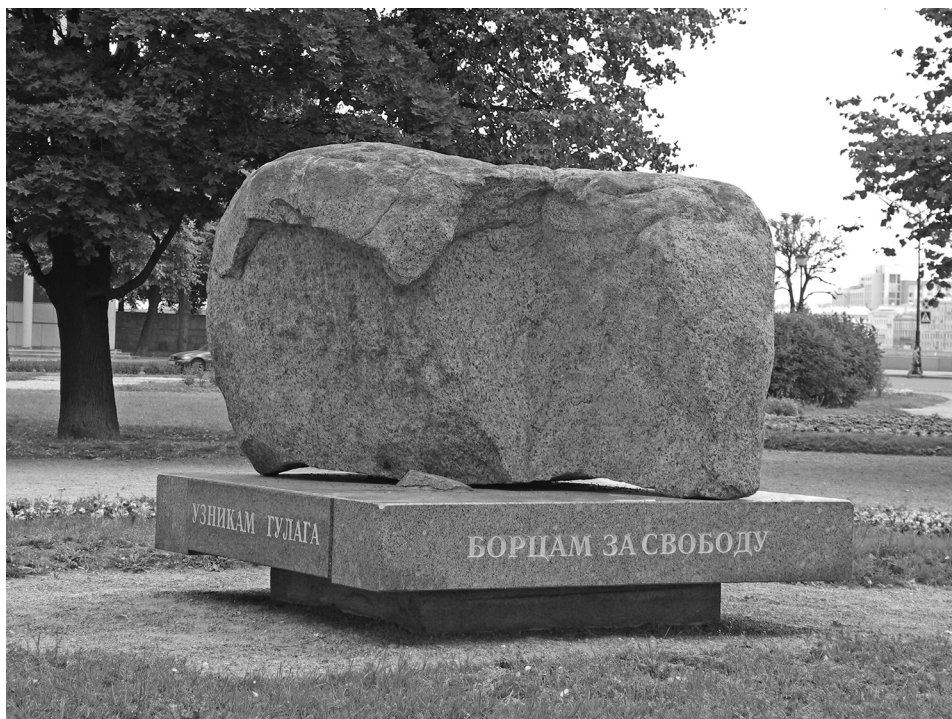


Photo 3. The Memorial of the Victims of Political Repressions on Troitskaya Square in St. Petersburg, 2006, photo by author

Mensheviks—who participated in the revolution of 1917. They were detained according to tsarist principles, which mean that they were treated in a privileged way. They could protest, organize hunger strikes or receive aid from the Red Cross (Tołczyk 2009: 84–85). They were fighting to upkeep this privileged status for themselves, and not for the rights of everyone. This shows the controversiality of the Savvatievo “heroes.”

However, Memorial activists seem not to notice this ambivalence and refer to another meaning of this place. Savvatievo is a symbol of war between the state and the people. It is a history that shows the continuation of autocracy, which involved power in the hands of one person, the authorities destroying own citizens for their disloyalty (Iofe 2002: 106–107). The location of the monument at the Troitsky Square carries a message that the problem does not only apply to the Bolshevik authorities, but concerns the whole history. Troitsky Square is the oldest square in the city and its first administrative centre. It is also a place whose establishment contributed to the development of a legend about Peter I as a hero who brought a new city to life with only one gesture. A legend which glorifies the “authority,” regardless of the price that citizens had to pay for the authority to be formed.

Nowadays, the monument in St Petersburg and the Solovetsky stones in other parts of the European part of the Russian Federation constitute together a kind of network, signs of memory related with each other by meaning, connected not only by their provenience, but also message and meaning imparted by the Memorial Society.

They are very particular because as Forest and Johnson points out, these stones belong to the small group of the monuments erected in the post-Soviet time, which refer to the past and do not have “monumental scale and messages of the Tsarist and Soviet traditions” (Forest and Johnson 2002: 541). Thus, they have enough power to build a viable civic tradition (*ibid.*).

Very similar monuments to victims of political repressions were erected by the Memorial members in others cities of the Russian Federation. If we look at these of them, which are located in the Komi Republic we will see that they all have a very simple, neutral and non-confessional visual form. Quite often it is a stone which was transported from a place significant for Gulag history (in Ukhta for instance it was transported from Vetlasan Mountain where was a camp hospital, where *dokhodiagas* were dying). Also inscriptions on these monuments are very simple and usually related to the word “victim,” which in combination with the location or provenance of the monuments (territory of the former lagier cemeteries), and the shape of some of them (tombstones in Piechora and Inta) clearly indicates that the main aim of the first commemoration practices was to commemorate people who died. It seems important to stress that this quest for mass burial places and their political use was very popular not only in Russia but in all Eastern European countries during the demise of the socialist regimes. It is because as Katharine Verdery stresses the “symbolic capital” of sites of memory of dead ancestors are particularly important during the political transformations (Verdery 1999).

In the years 1988—1991 many other monuments, plaques and crosses were set up in the cities and towns of the USSR. Also some Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Latvians or Poles and the official delegations from these countries peregrinated to these places in order to erect nationally-religious symbols on graves of their ancestors.¹⁵ This nationally-religious character of some memorials had a great influence on perception of meaning of some places. Sometimes it provoked a process of division on “our” and “yours” sites of memory, “our” and “yours” monuments. However, it is not a rule that the national memorial became the cause of the conflict between groups. Very often, even if the memorial possesses very national features, it is treated as common one. It is a case when there is no other memorial in surroundings or a given monument has some artistic values (i.e. the Latvian memorial “Dzimtenei” in Inta, monument in Ezhva both in Komi Republic).

The amount of erected monuments was still insufficient. Thus, the process of imparting a new meaning to the old monuments in order to make of them significant Gulag sites of memory was also quite popular. One of the great examples of this process are the monuments to the first discoverers of the North in the Komi Republic. One may find them in each city of this region. At first glance they haven’t got much to do with Gulag. The obelisk in Ukhta (photo 4), for instance, was unveiled in 1974 on the anniversary of the establishment of the city of Ukhta in order to commemorate the landing of the expedition from Solovetsky Island which came here in 1929 in search

¹⁵ About Gulag monuments erected by representatives of different nations on the territory of the former lager cemeteries: Zuzanna Bogumił, 2010, pp. 41–56.

of useful mineral ores. However, at the beginning of the nineties this monument got a different meaning. It started to be considered as the monument of the victims of political repressions, because most of the discoverers of the North were prisoners. As most of the useful mineral ores was discovered or at the beginning extracted by *zekhs*, the monuments to the first discoverers of the North in the Komi Republic are nowadays perceived as important Gulag monuments and therefore, each year on October 30th during the Memory Day of Victims of Political Repressions,¹⁶ participants of the celebrations arrive to these places to honour the memory of former prisoners.



Photo 4. The monument to the First Discoverers of the North in Ukhta, 2007, photo by author

Time of Obeisance Crosses

Another, important group of the Soviet repressions signs of memory form obeisance crosses, the orthodox chapels and icons of the new martyrs and confessors. The Orthodox church similarly as the Memorial Society started to interpret the Gulag history

¹⁶ In October 1974 Andrei Sakharov proclaimed on the conference in Moscow that the day 30th of October will be a Day of Political Prisoners, Day of Fight and Freedom. During the following years the political prisoners organized hunger-strike and published special newspapers on that day. The choice of 30th of October was not accidental. This date was not linked with any other political event, thus it did not provoke any controversy. 18 of October 1991, 30th of October was proclaimed an official national holiday, however, the name of it was changed into The Memory Day of the Victims of Political Repressions (Grabnova 2007).

at the end of the eighties, but proposes different reading of the Soviet repressions (Bogumil 2010: 1–19, Bogumil 2010a: 23–40). It perceives them as a period of persecutions for religion and a moment of trial. Those who managed to persevere in their religion and died a martyred death became a foundation for the rebirth of the contemporary Orthodox Church (Bogumil 2011: 307–318). Since the Millennium of Baptism of Russia (1988) up to 2009, the Russian Orthodox Church has canonised 1770 new martyrs, confessors and other sainted persons and this process is still in progress (Kahla 2010: 196).

By looking on the orthodox crosses one has to bear in mind that through the symbols and inscriptions on them they should be understood as an icon and prayer (Gnutova 2006). It is also important to consider them jointly, outside the framework of their geographical location and inside the world of the orthodox mysticism. Their location, just as in the case of Solovetsky stones, is not accidental and is always associated with a tragic event that occurred in a given location, or constitutes a symbolic opening or closing of a certain space of memory.

Important signs of the Orthodox commemoration language are the obeisance crosses made on the Solovetsky Islands. They are made in the tradition of the Russian North (Before the Revolution Solovky were famous of their Monastery's crosses manufacture), but have a new meaning, engraved on them symbols and sings refer to the history of the Soviet repressions. The symbolic power of these signs of memory provokes that they are willingly used also in other parts of the Russian Federation to commemorate new martyrs (Shancev 2007). For instance, the largest and the most significant Solovetsky cross was located in Butovo near Moscow (Photo 5), where mass executions were performed from mid-1930's until the beginning of 1950's. It was put just next to the Temple devoted to Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia.¹⁷

Crosses or memory chapels are not only erected by representatives of the Orthodox church, but also more and more often by Memorial members, who state that these are universal symbols, which unambiguously express their meaning. As one of my interviewers in Perm region claimed:

I do not really like this confessional character of signs. In the 30's and 40's many people in the Soviet Union were just atheists, and to commemorate them I erect the cross (...). But the cross, as it is shown in our European tradition, not only Russian, indicates that the place is a memorial (...) it catches the attention and indicates that the place honors the memory of a man. Thus, I usually erect the crosses. The catholic one as well.¹⁸

Members of the Moscow and St. Petersburg Memorials do not do it, as they perceive the confessional signs as a threat to the secular memory of the Gulag. However, representatives of other Memorial branches get involved in such activities. Thus, consciously or not they support the Orthodox interpretation of the Gulag history. This turn towards Orthodox signs of memory is a slow, but evident process, which has a huge impact on the shape of the Gulag memory in Russia. The central

¹⁷ More about Butovo (Bogumil 2011).

¹⁸ Interview made in Perm, July 2008.



Photo 5. The Solovetsky cross next to the Temple devoted to Holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia in Butovo near Moscow, 2008, photo by author

monument dedicated to the Gulag past in the Komi Republic is a perfect example of this complex process.

In 1998 Members of the Syktyvkar Memorial managed to establish the Pokayanie Foundation, sponsored from the republic's budget¹⁹ and in 2001 they erected the central monument devoted to the victims of the Gulag of the Komi Republic on one of the squares of Syktyvkar (Photo 6). The monument has a shape of the Orthodox chapel, which is a typical Russian sign of commemoration. The metal relief located on the central back wall, which represents "the night arrest" perfectly shows a strong embedment of this monument in the Christian iconography. The relief presents a man who was a dedicated communist. This is signified by the sickle and hammer badge held by a child in its outstretched hand. The man was awarded by the authorities who also contributed to his death. The whole scene resembles Christ's Crucifixion with women standing next to the cross, Mary—the mother and Magdalena—here the wife. The man himself seems to accept his faith humbly and his gaze directed at the sickle and hammer badge reflects contrition and remorse for his sins.

The artistic form of this monument shows that from the beginning of the 21-century the turn to the well recognisable signs of memory and to the Orthodox

¹⁹ It is the only organization of this type in Russia, which is funded from the state budget. Its aim is to carry out historical studies and commemorate the victims of Soviet repressions in the region. For more information see their website: <http://www.pokayanie-komi.ru>



Photo 6. **The Memorial-Chapel to the Victims of Political Repressions in Syktyvkar, erected in 2001, photo by author**

interpretation as a more comprehensive is an evident process. Despite the attempts to create a coherent secular language to commemorate Soviet repressions and successful erection of many monuments in the nineties, the Gulag history, indeed, as Aleksander Etkind claims, has not been fully worked through in Russia. At the end of the nineties there was still a chance to create such a secular commemorative language. In 1996, after a few years of disputes, *The Mask of Sorrow* (Photo 7), one of three monuments planned by Ernst Neizvestny as indicators of the democratic society, was successfully erected in Magadan. This monument was very long discussed mostly because of a cross with a figure of a man on it located on the back of the mask. This profaned use of Christian symbolism caused a storm around this monument. It was claimed that whole composition on a back of the monument forms sort of an allegory of rebellion.²⁰ The

²⁰ Krest bez Christa *Vecherny Magadan*, 12.01.1996, reprint from *Pravoslavnyaya Moskva* no 29, 1995.

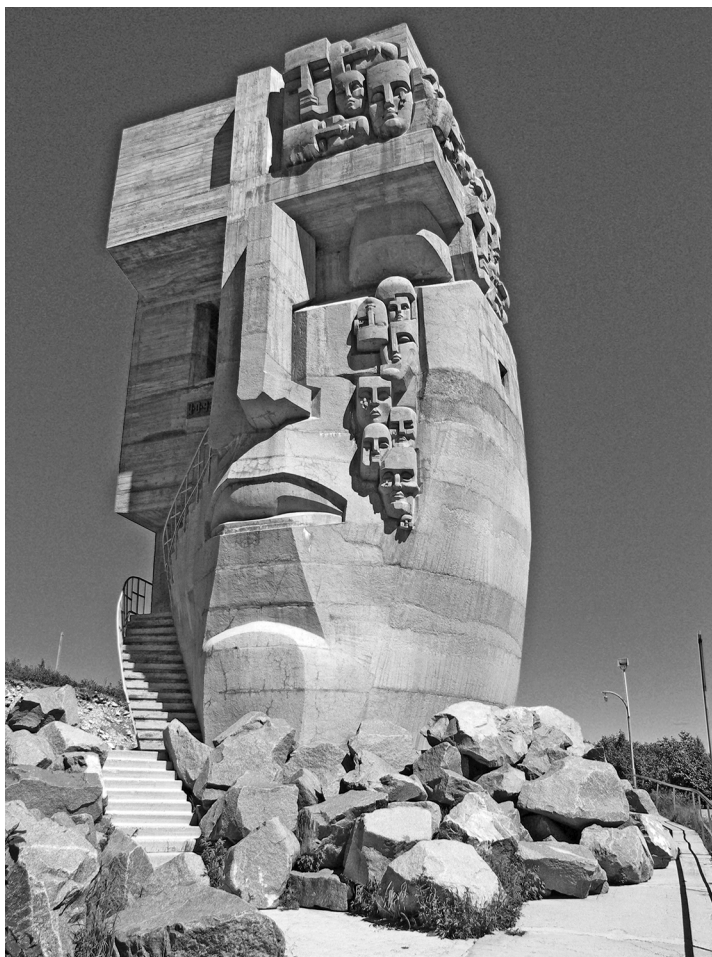


Photo 7. The Mask of Sorrows designed by Ernst Neizvestny in Magadan, erected in 1996, photo by author

crucified man does not accept the cross, but brakes away, therefore this representation is not a symbol of victim or reconciliation, but rather a symbol of anger and refusal to resign oneself to one's fate.²¹ It is this profaned use of Christian symbolism that caused a storm around Ernst Neizvestny's monument and stimulated protests of the Magadan's orthodox community against its erection.²²

However, in 1996 when the Mask was unveiled, a strong objection of the Orthodox Church did not threaten significance of the monument. Long before its erection, the Mask got a meaning of the marker of the Kolyma citizens' identity. It is because inciting memory about Gulag resulted in the change of perspective in which the

²¹ Nerastorzhimaya chast narodnovo ducha..., *Vecherny Magadan*, 30.04.1993.

²² There was a huge social debate in local newspapers about the significances of this monument. The orthodox argumentation was the best expressed in the article *Krest bez Christa Vechernyj Magadan*, 12 January 1996, reprint from *Pravoslavnaya Moskva*, no 29, 1995.

existing history of the region was captured. In consequence discussions about the shape of the Mask of Sorrow provoked a huge debate on the Kolyma identity and brought to the reflection that the terror past is an important part of the region's history. As mayor of Magadan Nikolai Karpienko stressed during the unveil of the monument, 12 of June 1996, the Mask commemorates people who lived during one of the most tragic periods in Russian history. Therefore, the choice of Russia's Independence Day (June 12) as the date of unveil of the Mask of Sorrows was not accidental. The inauguration of the monument in the anniversary of the most important civic holiday in country was a clear message—warning for the future generations that the time of lawlessness has never repeated in Russia.²³

However, in Kolyma as in the whole Russia the status of memory changed at the beginning of 21st century. A huge Orthodox Church was raised in the centre of Magadan, and the Orthodox representatives, who are against the monument, enjoy more and more influence in the city. Moreover, Mask is also criticized by the memory researchers who interpret it as a kind of monster and not meaningful sign of memory (Etkind 2009b: 638). Thus, the only gigantic, artistic monument erected in Russia loses its symbolic impact and becomes more of a pure attraction of Magadan and not a meaningful sign of memory, and important feature of Kolyma citizens identity.

Post Scriptum about Gulag Memory

As I tried to showed in the late eighties when, using Juri Lotman's language, there was an explosion and the old Soviet world fell apart (Lotman 2009), there came a period of lively social dialogue and search for a new commemoration language. Then the Gulag memory could became an important feature of a new democratic society. It is because the approach to the surrounding reality changed and slowly people started to change their world by establishing monuments, which were supposed to be a message for the future generations.

If one looks nowadays on the monuments and signs of Gulag memory, which are located on the territory of the Russian Federation he will notice that they have a simple, neutral form, and their basic function is to recall the dead and pay them respect. As Alexander Etkind points out these monuments

do not give a presentation about the struggle of prisoners, the uprisings in the camps, about hearings and tortures, about the violence and opposition, about the hardships, ideology and other matters specific for this situation. Crosses and tombstones recall any death, but not necessarily this particular one that has become the result of a criminal regime. "Therefore, "monuments [in Russia-ZB] do not blame, do not protest and do not explain the past (Etkind 2004: 68, 70).

However, when these monuments were erected in the late eighties, beginning of nineties their meaning was evident. Their function was to give honour to dead people and help society to come to terms with their Soviet repressions past.²⁴ The example

²³ Zabveniuyu ne podlezhit, plakalo dazhe nebo, *Magadanskaya pravda*, 19 June 1996.

²⁴ See what Irina Paperno writes about politics of the dead bodies in Irina Paperno, 2001, "Exhuming the Bodies of Soviet Terror," *Representations*, vol. 75, no 1, 89–118.

of desecrated spontaneous shrines shows that in that time, these monuments were clear markers of the past. Firstly, because they commemorated clear-cut category of dead people (victims) and by referring to tremendous places of Gulag history (cemeteries, places of shooting, former death hospitals) tried to turn past terror into an instrument of group identity (Paperno 2001: 109). Secondly, because they were not perceived as a final monuments but as cornerstones of the future gigantic memorials. They were treated and perceived as temporary signs of memory. A problem is that the process of transformation of the soft into the hard memory was interrupted.

The economic crisis and political changes in mid-1990 stopped the process of cultural changes. However, it doesn't seem to be the main reason behind the failure to create a secular language that transmits Gulag's experience. In spite of its attempts, the Memorial Society, one of the biggest memory actors, was not able to establish a system filled with meanings, which would set the framework for a new civic community (both in terms of time—holidays, as well as in terms of space—sites of memory). As Alexander Etkind noted:

there was no serious philosophical debate in Russia, neither secular, nor religious, which would tough upon the problem of guilt, memory and identity of a society that had gone through mass terror (Etkind 2004: 51–52).

Although, as Etkind explains, at the beginning of nineties Dimitrij Lichaczew tried to initiate such discussions, nevertheless as he writes:

Russian intelligentsia did not issue any work similar to the outstanding book by Karl Jasper *The problem of guilt*, which triggered unending debates in the German society (Etkind 2004: 51–52).

In consequence, the Gulag memory has different shape and function in Russia than the Holocaust memory in the West (Bogumil 2010: 35–36; Johnson and Forest 2002: 539–543).

In fact only on the literary ground, especially in the area of recollection literature, some concepts were coined, which help consider the Gulag experience: *The Gulag Archipelago, A World Apart* or *Inhuman Earth*. Also comparisons are used, such as for example Magadan as the Russian Auschwitz or Workuta as Buchenwald. Although these rhetorical figures allow to capture and express certain fragments of the Gulag experience, nevertheless they do not offer any coherent language, which would allow understanding its full complexity. In the case of Holocaust such language was developed for several decades, and its current shape is a result of deliberations and dialogue of many philosophers, artists, writers and witnesses of events. The existing Gulag memory projects are not the key to finding an answer to essential questions: How was it possible? How are we supposed to keep living?

As the process of cultural and political changes was stopped, and one may observe a kind of agreement between old and new elites in Russia (Troebst 2005),²⁵ a comeback to the traditional, well recognizable model of culture is visible. Therefore, the orthodox interpretation has an ever stronger impact on the understanding of the Gulag past. The Orthodox concept does not stigmatize anyone, nor does it renounce the

²⁵ Compare Stefan Troebst, 2005.

whole fame of the past, proving rather that victims were important for contemporary revival of the church (Bogumił 2010a, Bogumił 2011). The history of Gulag was a time of the test of faith. This reflection perfectly expressed the archbishop of Lvov and Galicya Augustyn:

In my opinion each orthodox man should arrive on Solovky (...). It is because the Solovetsky new martyrs and confessors were similar to the first Christians, those who in Rome and other parts of the Roma Empire dead from persecutions. During the persecutions Rome was for Christians as the second Golgotha, and the Solovetsky Golgotha might be treated as the third one in the history of the Christianity. It is obvious that for the orthodox Russian nation Solovky are the national Golgotha (Osipenko 2007).

Thus, in the Orthodox discourse the Solovetsky Concentration camp, and what follows the whole history of Soviet repressions becomes a part of the myth of “Moscow as the third Rome,” which is well rooted in the Russian culture (Duncan 2000). This reference to the recognisable cultural pattern provokes that the Orthodox Church interpretation is better understandable than any other one. Moreover, as Aleksy II claimed:

during the one thousand years of history the Russian Orthodox Church has always stayed with its people and actively participated both in the spiritual care for them and in the building up of the state (quotation after John Garrard, Carol Garrard 2008: 243).

Thus, the Orthodox perception of the past guarantees a sense of continuation with the past. It does not stigmatize anybody, neither provokes a feeling of meaninglessness but by referring to the Orthodox Church authority it supports a feeling of stability of the identity. Such “solid” reference seems so important for Russians especially nowadays, when their social life is threatened by the liquid modernity.

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Biographical Note: Zuzanna Bogumił is a sociologist and cultural anthropologist at the Academy of Special Education in Warsaw. Her research to date has dealt with religious conflicts in Ukraine, memory problems (mostly in Russia), as well as with the significance of historical exhibitions in Central Europe. She was a coordinator of projects: Remembering Gulag—analysis of sites of memory located in the former soviet camps in the Russian Federation (2006–2008), The image of the Second World War in St Petersburg, Warsaw and Dresden (2007–2008). From 2011 Bogumił carries out a new project in Russia entitled Novomuchenichestvo—the orthodox interpretation of the Soviet repressions. She has published in *Neprikosnovennyj Zapas* and *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*. Her book *Pamięć Gulagu* [Gulag Memory] will be published in 2012 by the Universitas Publishing House.

Address: The Maria Grzegorzewska Academy of Special Education, ul. Szczęśliwicka 40, 02-353 Warszawa, Poland. E-mail: mitregaz@wp.pl