

Soviet Political Repression in Moscow Museums from the 1980s to 2020: Transformation of
Museum Practices and the Public Narrative

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Abstract

The research contributes to studies in Russian historical politics related to reconsideration of Soviet political repression by introducing to the field the museum studies perspective. Focusing on the collective memory of the late 1980s – 2020 and conducting the case study on four Moscow museums, the thesis traces the transformation of public discourses on the history of repression, major projects in late-Soviet – early-21st century Russian historical politics, introduction and silencing of the memory agents, and changes brought by these shifts to the constructed historical narrative. Dividing the research into two parts: the late-1980s-2000 and 2000-2020, it argues that transformations connected to monopolization of history writing process in Putin’s Russia changed the presentation of history of repression, subscribing it to the frames of Russian protective sovereignty. Cases of the Memorial Society Museum and Sakharov’s Center Museum illustrate the characteristic memory field of the 1990s, with the narrative about Soviet repression constructed from the perspective of the human rights violations and the democratization discourse. For the 2000s, the cases of Gulag History Museum and “Russia – My History” historical park show how the government-controlled agents’ overtake of collective memory creation process changed the narrative about the repression, denying repressive policies of the late Soviet Union, generalizing the victims to create the “national victimhood” and ascribing the responsibility for repression to “the other.”

*To my mother, who kept the copy of “The Gulag Archipelago”
she made with her friends in the attic of our country house*

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Introduction

Armenian radio is asked, 'Is it possible to foretell the future?'

Answer: 'Yes, that is no problem: we know exactly what the future will be like.

*Our problem is with the past: that keeps changing.'*¹

The public history of Soviet repression in Russia is still far from reaching the consistency of the narrative – not the least because of its embeddedness into other societal spheres, the agents of which use (and abuse) history for their own purposes. What was the timeframe of political repression in the Soviet Union? Who were the victims and the persecutors? Could any explanation of the reasons behind this full-fledged state terror be found? Finally, how should this meticulous centralized eradication of own citizens be written into the larger history of the country that has built its identity on the glories of the Soviet era (especially, the Great Victory)? These questions evoke multiple, often – contradictory answers in today's Russia, depending on who is providing them. One thing, however, remains clear: despite seemingly allowing for the discussions of the negative side of the Soviet regime, the present Russian government is reluctant to fill in all the “blank spots” left by the constraints put on historiography under state socialism and aspires to keep the narration of the history of repression under the close supervision. In the public sphere,² this struggle for the state monopoly over writing history of the Soviet past has been developing simultaneously with the marginalization of non-controlled, independent historical agents whose public influence, peaking during the late Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras, was in a continuous decline in Russia after 2000.

¹ Armenian anecdote cited in Hoskin G. “Memory in a Totalitarian Society: The Case of the Soviet Union,” in *Memory: History, Culture, and the Mind*, ed. T. Butler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 115

² In this research, I would follow the definition of public sphere suggested by Jürgen Habermas: “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens” (Habermas J. “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article,” in *Critical Theory and Society. A Reader*, ed. Bronner S.E., Kellner M.D. (New York, London: Routledge, 1990), 136)

This “moral-political relevance”³ of Soviet repression for the construction of the national identity in today’s Russia and its dependence on contemporaneous social and political agendas, created a situation when the public history transmitted through cultural, social, and educational projects became populated with multiple, if not self-contradictory presentations of common historical past. Moreover, with the history of the state terror being tied to the political and social agenda of not only governmental but also independent agents, assessment of repression and the Soviet period of Russian history in general largely became “a matter of values much more than of knowledge,”⁴ reflecting the clashes happening in the fields situated beyond the historical debates. Thus, while paving the first state-sponsored monument dedicated to victims of political repression in Moscow – the Wall of Sorrow – with stones from the Soviet places of detention in 2017, in 2021 the Moscow Duma seriously discusses the possibility of returning the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky⁵ to one of the city’s central squares.⁶ Or, endorsing the creation of the Association of the Museums of Memory “united to preserve the memory of victims of political repression”,⁷ the government declares two of the institutions included in the program – the Sakharov Center and the Memorial Society – “foreign agents”, subjecting them to fines and further constraining their research and public activities.⁸

My thesis will contribute to studies on the formation of this ambiguous nature of public historical narrative about Soviet repression in Russia from the late Socialist period to our time. The means through which the collective views on the past are created are broad, and in the

³ Langenohl A. “History between Politics and Public: Historiography, Collective Memory, and the “Archival Revolution” in Russia,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1:3 (Summer 2000), 561

⁴ Khazanov A. “Whom to Mourn and Whom to Forget? (Re)constructing Collective Memory in Contemporary Russia,” in *Perpetrators, Accomplices and Victims in Twentieth-Century Politics*, ed. Khazanov A., Payne S. (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 133

⁵ Felix Dzerzhinsky (1877-1926) was the head of the security police organs Cheka and OGPU and one of the main architects of the Red Terror.

⁶ “Golosovanie po ustanovke pamjatnika na Lubjanke zapustjat 25 fevralja. Na vybor dva varianta: Dzerzhinskij i Aleksandr Nevskij.” [The Public voting about installation of the Monument on the Lybyanka Square is to start on February, 25. Citizens can choose between Felix Dzerzhinsky and Alexander Nevsky], *Ria Novosti*, February 19, 2021, https://t.me/rian_ru/81545

⁷ Cited from the official webpage of the program <https://gmig.ru/projects/assotsiatsiya-rossiyskikh-muzeev-pamyati/>

⁸ “Leading Russian NGOs Muzzled By ‘Foreign Agents’ Label,” *Radio Liberty*, July 23, 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-muzzles-ngos-foreign-agent-law/25467789.html>

following research I would tackle only one axis of their realization by looking at the sphere of museum policies. Indeed, the mobilization of historical politics in the reassessment of the Soviet past in Russia has already attracted a significant number of scholars. Some situated the Russian case within the cases of other post-socialist countries (Lipman & Miller 2015) or the worldwide experiences (Gabowitsch 2005, Epplee 2020). Others focused on specific means of public history making – monumental politics (Forest & Johnson 2003, Etkind 2004, Smith 2019), official directives and laws (Koposov 2011, Sherlock 2011, Malinova 2015), television programs and cinema (Wijermars, 2018), or provided a general overview of the public history making processes in Russia (Merridale 2003, Epplee 2020, Weiss-Wendt 2020). Along with the earlier studies on the collective memory in the late Soviet – early post-Soviet Russia (Smith 1996, Hochschild 2003, Jones 2013, Bogumił 2018), this corpus of research provides some insights into the public history making process in Russia and the different agents involved in it. However, the way history of repression is narrated through museums remained largely unaddressed by the professional historical society, and has never been studied in its historical development, from the first exhibitions dedicated to the topic, to the present day.

At the same time, museums provide a fruitful field for discovering the strategies and intentions of the agents involved in the creation of collective memory, clashes between them and cleavages that it causes for the existent narratives of the common past. For the official discourse, museums become a useful platform of promulgating the sanctioned view on history, as their “alleged innate neutrality” allows them to be turned into the “instruments of power as well as instruments of education and experience.”⁹ At the same time, as open social spaces, museums provide beneficial grounds for the construction and dissemination of counter-histories, which aim to tackle the official, often – coercively politicized views on the past. My research would address both sides: the museums initiated by private independent initiatives and

⁹ Karp I. “Kulture and Representation,” in: *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Karp I., Lavine S. (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 14

those constructed as a part of a top-down state program. The first projects to be analyzed as being part of the early developments of collective memory of repression would be the museums of the Moscow Memorial Society and the Sakharov Center, both emerged in the early 1990s from the grassroots initiatives of the former dissident circles and functioning today as NGO institutions. The transformation of the narrative after 2000, under Putin's regime,¹⁰ would be considered through the Gulag History Museum – being opened in 2004, it is still the only state museum in Moscow that specifically deals with the repression-related topic, and on the 20th century exposition of the “Russia – My History” multimedia history park established in 2017 as a joined project of the Russian Patriarchate and the Russian government.

Museums to be addressed in the research are treated as both agents of public history making and products of the centralized historical politics of the state. Limiting the research to Moscow, at the same time, allows studying ways in which contradictory historical narratives coexist in the confined spatial environment of one city, and in no other Russian city the memory of Soviet political repression has gained as many tangible public manifestations as in the capital. Already from Perestroika, Moscow became the main venue for demonstrations of historical NGOs established there at that time – the already mentioned Memorial Society and the Sakharov Center. At the same time, as a capital, Moscow has been the launching pad for most of the top-down historical projects, including the Gulag History Museum and the first branch of the countrywide project of history parks “Russia – My History”. Finally, I wish to focus on Moscow history museums rather than on museums in places directly connected to sites of detention (such as Perm-36 Museum or Levashovskaya Heathland Museum) as they reveal how the historical narrative is created once freed from being attached to a certain “chapter” in history of Soviet repression. Unlike in museums established on the former shooting grounds or labor

¹⁰ In the thesis, I adapt the already developed chronological division of recent Russian history that defines the period after 2000 as “Putin's Russia,” arguing for the profound difference of it as compared to Gorbachev and Yeltsin periods. For more on the nature of Putinism, see sub-chapter “Russian Historical Politics from 2000 to 2020.”

camps, curators of Moscow museums are faced with the task of recreating the history of repression from scratch, having to choose which aspects of more than 70 years of state terror to show and how.

The thesis departs from the suggestion to treat historical memory “as a variable to explain the political action and social movements,”¹¹ by considering the development of museum narrative in realms of the larger shifts in public policies of the late Soviet – early 21st century Russia. While doing so, I aim to reveal what historical narratives about the repression are presented, how they relate to each other and other events in historical politics, and suggest possible reasons that stand behind choices made by the various agents involved in the creation of the museums under consideration. Thus, apart from bringing together the history of museumification of Soviet repression in Moscow from the late 1980s to the present time, as well as structuring other critical events in Russian historical politics, the following thesis contributes to studying the role that assessment of the Soviet past has been playing in the public life of the country.

Methodologically, the thesis brings together several fields of research related to public history studies: collective memory, historical politics, and museum studies. Wulf Kansteiner wrote that studying public history is “a rare combination of social relevance and intellectual challenge.”¹² Indeed, the above-mentioned engagement of public history with the agendas of spheres not directly linked to the academic, classical history, poses a particular challenge to providing the de-politicized and objective analysis of the museums in question. Primarily, it would be tackled by following Mary Douglas’ argument that “institutions cannot have minds of their own”,¹³ thus making the analysis consciously account for the multiplicity of voices that

¹¹ Wang Z. *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict. Historical Memory as a Variable* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 4

¹² Kansteiner W. “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies,” *History and Theory* 41 (2002): 180

¹³ Douglas M. *How Institutions Think*. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 9

stand behind the expositions – museum directors, curators, sponsors, affiliated civil organizations, etc. Unavoidably, deconstruction of the final product that the museum visitors see would be only able to go as far as the sources about its construction, largely restricted in case of the state institutions, are made public. This obstacle would be partly overcome by appealing to the information available in the press or from the published interviews with the employees, however, the intrinsic inability of a researcher located outside the inner structure of the respective museums to get a grip on all details of their organization should be admitted from the very beginning. Furthermore, the establishment and development of the museums would be situated within the broader social and political discourses unfolding in parallel (from the democratization processes of the Gorbachev's *Glasnost* to the entrenchment of the nation-building processes and anti-West sentiments under Putin), arguing for the intrinsic dependence of shifts in the public historical narrative about repression on changes in other public spheres.

The main argument of the thesis is that from the late 1980s to the present day, the history of Soviet repression presented through museums was transforming in accordance with the social discussions it was part of. At first, being elaborated by the human right activists of the Memorial Society and the Sakharov Center, the collective memory of repression was presented mainly through the lenses of violation of human rights and the struggle for democratic freedom in the late USSR, thus necessarily including the later years of Soviet political repression and resistance towards them into the narrative. From the 2000s, with the government agents taking over the control of public history writing from the grassroots initiatives, Soviet repression came to be included into the whole history of the Soviet period and the Russian identity building from it. As the central point to identity-definition was given to the victory in the Great Patriotic War, the history of repression became regarded as a potential threat not only to this main narrative but also to the overall stability of the country's sovereignty, in which the image of the past glories came to play a crucial role. For this reason, the existence of repression after 1945 or the formal disbandment of the GULAG system in 1960 has been deliberately pushed out from the

official historical discourse, including its presentation in the museums. At the same time, in the narrative about the repression of Lenin's and Stalin's eras, different means have been used to downplay the involvement of concrete officials into the establishment of the full-fledged state terror.

Theoretical Framework

1. Collective Memory Studies

Regarding the theoretical underpinning, my research falls into the widely developed field of collective memory studies. Much has been written on the topic since Halbwachs introduced the concept in the 1920s:¹⁴ just a glimpse on the volumes dedicated to the issue (Erl A. 2008, Olick J.K. 2011) shows that the field brought together scholars from various disciplines: history and anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, art history, psychology, etc. The main aspect that united them was a presumption that collective memory of one's history as it exists in the present has been "selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function is to do so."¹⁵ The available view that we have on the past, therefore, "has very little to do with the past and everything to do with the present."¹⁶ This intrinsically constructed nature of the research object also defined the variety of phenomena that collective memory historians study, which ranges from the private diaries to school curricula, legislative acts, memorial sites and traditional festivals.

Throughout nearly 40 years of studies of history in the public sphere, scholars have introduced different concepts for the subject: public or remembered history, collective or social memory, *lieux de mémoire*, proposing different conceptualizations and study patterns.

¹⁴ For a more detailed overview of the development of concepts, see: Olick J.K., Robbins J. "Social Memory Studies: From "Collective Memory" to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices." *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 105-140

¹⁵ Hobsbawm E. "Introduction: Inventing Tradition," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Hobsbawm E., Ranger T. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 13

¹⁶ Douglas M. *How Institutions Think*, 69

Admitting that other theoretical endeavors, especially, on public history, are also useful for the research, in my study I am operating with the concept of collective memory and depart from its definition proposed by Jan Assmann (1995). According to Assmann, the “collective memory [...] always works by reconstructing” the memories of the past in relation to the contemporary situation, and is always linked with the broader public sphere: “Which past becomes evident in the heritage and which values emerge in its identificatory appropriation tells us much about the constitution and tendencies of a society.”¹⁷ In the collective memory theory, the constructed nature of narration of the past is also highlighted, as “it is never the past itself that acts upon a present society, but representations of past events that are created, circulated and received within a specific cultural frame and political constellation.” The object of collective memory study, then, is not the past itself, but “mediated representations” of it, which involve “selecting, rearranging, re-describing and simplifying, as well as deliberate, but also perhaps unintentional, inclusion and exclusion of information.”¹⁸ For my research, these “mediated representations” are to be found not only in the expositions of the selected museums, but also in other manifestations of the collective memory of Soviet repression – be it the new history-related laws and regulations promulgated by the government, erection of the new monuments, publication of primary sources or commemorative demonstrations.

Since my research seeks to distinguish the agents standing behind the creation of the collective memory of Soviet repression, the question of agency also plays a central part. Many scholars have emphasized this aspect of working with the collective memory, aiming to define ways it can be employed for the whims of the present – for identity building processes, determining the society’s stance in world affairs, or establishing paths for future development. Particularly useful for my thesis would be practical questions posed by Natalie Zemon Davis

¹⁷ Assmann, J. “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65, Cultural History/Cultural Studies (Spring - Summer, 1995): 133

¹⁸ Assmann A. “Introduction to Memory and Social Change,” in *Memory and Political Change*, ed. Assmann A., Shortt L. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 3-4

and Randolph Starn in the introduction for the special issue of the *Representations* “Memory and Authenticity” (1989) that the researchers of the collective memory should be asking about the objects of their study: “by whom, where, in which context, against what [were these narratives created]?”¹⁹ Looking at the museums through the framework of collective memory studies would allow me to deconstruct the narrative they transmit to their visitors and to connect it to the wider field of Russian historical politics.

2. Historical Politics

Another concept crucial for my research is *Geschichtspolitik*, or historical politics, the study of instrumentalization of history usually determined by (but not limited to) the acts of government-supported agents. The instrumentalization of the historical past in recent history lived through several periods of intensification: the formation of nation-states, the aftermath of WWII, and the dissolution of the USSR. For the former socialist countries, the rise of the state’s attention towards history writing has generally started after the immediate crisis of 1991 has passed. In Russia, however, it intensified later, in the early 2000s, partly as the consequence of the “Color Revolutions” that shook the post-Soviet terrain,²⁰ and partly as the overall change of perception of history in the Putin’s political agenda that would be discussed in the second chapter.

Theoretical conceptualization of historical politics started in the 1980s and developed in parallel with the public history studies, with the German historian Edgar Wolfrum being the first to give it a name – *Geschichtspolitik*.²¹ Being part of public history studies, historical

¹⁹ Zemon D. N., Starn R. “Introduction,” *Representations: Special issue: Memory and Counter Memory* 26 (1989): 2

²⁰ Miller A. “The Turns of Russian Historical Politics, from Perestroika to 2011,” in *The Convolutions of Historical Politics*, ed. Miller A., Lipman M. (Budapest, NY: Central European University Press, 2012), 257; Sniegón, “Dying in the Soviet Gulag for the Future Glory of Mother Russia? Making “Patriotic” Sense of the Gulag in Present-day Russia” in *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin’s Russia*, ed. Bernsand N., Törnquist-Plewa B. (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 111

²¹ Wolfrum E., *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (1999), quoted in *Historical Politics: Eastern European Convolutions in the 21st Century*, ed. Miller A., Lipman M. (Budapest, NY: Central European University Press, 2012), 2

politics made “researchers pay more attention to the actors, institutions and methods of this policy, rather than diverse interpretation of the past it produces.”²² Aleida Assmann defined historical politics as a sphere where history is instrumentalized for the formation of national identity, and provided a crucial aspect that allows distinguishing it from other manifestations of public history: being dictated from above, it entrenches itself in the public sphere more firmly to define the past for the longer future than the “polychoral bottom-up memory.”²³

Regarding Russian historiography, the concept of historical politics was addressed by Alexei Miller, both in terms of theoretical conceptualization and particular cases of historical politics in Russia. In the introduction to the volume *The Convolutions of Historical Politics* (2012), Miller provided a somewhat broader definition for the phenomenon than Aleida Assmann. Thus, among the agents responsible for carrying out the historical politics, he listed not only directly state-related groups and individuals: political leaders, political parties, new specialized institutions, museums established under their patronage, but also groups that can work independently and potentially produce contradicting views on the past: traditional research organizations, NGOs and mass media associations.²⁴ For Miller, the *political nature* of the manifestations of the past is what defines them as historical politics. In regards to the objectives, historical politics usually aim to establish “assertion of healthy patriotism with the help of history,” the necessity of which is justified by the existence of a certain “external enemy that works tirelessly to promote the view on the past that is detrimental for our fatherland.”²⁵ This narrative, as would be seen further, was fully embraced by the authors of “Russia – My History” parks.

²² Ibid., 4

²³ Assmann A. “Dlinnaya ten’ proshlogo” [*The Shadow of the Past: Memorial Culture and Historical Politics*] (Moscow: NLO, 2006), 22

²⁴ Ibid., 7

²⁵ Miller A. “Rossija: Vlast’ i istoria” [Russia: Power and History], *Pro et Contra* 3-4 (May-August 2009): 11-13

3. Public History of Soviet Repression in Russian Historiography

The study of the politicized nature of the public history in Russia has been developing along with the intensification of it, from the early 2000s. However, relatively little research was done on the collective memory of Soviet repression per se, especially in terms of its development and evolution, leaving several lacunas that my thesis would touch upon. First, when discussing the collective memory of state terror in the Soviet Union, the researchers, already from the pioneers in the field – Adam Hochschild (1994) and Katheleen Smith (1996), tended to narrow down the definition of repression to the Stalinist period. Such a limitation left the repression campaigns happening before and after Stalin unconsidered, with Khrushchev's Secret Speech on the 20th Party Congress marking the end of the phenomenon and the beginning of its historicization. Being the first official condemnation of Stalinist crimes, Khrushchev's Speech, indeed, was crucial for the formation of the public historical discourse. However, this partial revelation of state crimes did not mean their termination – and numerous documents testify to the great numbers of political prisoners kept in the same inhumane conditions of labour camps under Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and even Gorbachev (Perm-35,36,37 camps, for example, functioned until the end of the 1980s),²⁶ not to mention other forms of repression exercised in Late Soviet Russia.²⁷ Such a way of constructing the narrative about the public history of repression has unwittingly pushed scholars to adapt the official view on this atrocious side of the Soviet regime, which was formed under Khrushchev. Of course, this state of affairs can be connected with the simple lack of public reflections on the ongoing injustices of the

²⁶ Bogumil Z. *Gulag Memories. The Rediscovery and Commemoration of Russia's Repressive Past* (NY, Oxford: Berghahn, 2018), 14

²⁷ In my thesis, when referencing to "Soviet political repression," I imply the definition provided by the Law on Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression N 1761-1 (18 October 1991):

Article 1. Political repression is defined as different means of persecution used by the state for political purposes, in form of deprivation of life or freedom, forced placement to psychiatric institutions, expulsion from the country and deprivation of citizenship, eviction of groups of people from their places of residence to exile and special settlements, the compulsion to labor in conditions of restricted liberty, as well as any other deprivation of rights and freedom of people perceived as socially dangerous for the government and political system for class, social, national, religious and other reasons, which were performed by court decisions, decisions of other organs with court functions, or administratively, by the executive authorities, officials and public organizations or their organs, which were given administrative rights." (Law on Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression N 1761-1, 1)

1970s-1980s. Still, already the fact that in the 1970s the growing number of persecutions targeted those who tried to publicize their history needs to be conceptualized and reflected upon.

Another limitation comes from the tendency to regard collective memory creation in Russia simply as the “struggle between the Kremlin’s Towers.”²⁸ Independent organizations, usually evoked in the discussions about the 1970s-1990s, virtually disappear when it comes to the Russian public field after 2000 and, when mentioned, are presented only as “victims” of aggressive state politics. Not aiming to deny the unprivileged position in which the NGOs openly contradicting the government are put in today’s Russia, I suggest that a more balanced comparison that would highlight the mutual influences of both sides should be presented. Some introduction to this perspective was offered by Nikolay Epplée, who dedicated the sub-chapter of his recent book *Inconvenient Past* (2020) to the bottom-up initiatives of coming to terms with the traumatic Soviet past in Russia. Nonetheless, his main focus fell onto the Memorial Society projects, while Sakharov Center, another key actor in the formation of the independent historical discussion about Soviet repression, was not mentioned even once, just as were not mentioned any museum initiatives of the institutions.²⁹

In general, studies of the collective memory of Soviet political repression, especially after 2000, considered them in isolation from the earlier developments of the collective memory field, and oftentimes took the form of critique of the present-day Russian politics rather than trying to conceptualize them in realms of chronological development. Thus, despite attracting more scholarly interest in the last few years, the present state of the research field still has significant gaps that my thesis would address. Apart from the comparative museum’s analysis, the thesis would fulfill the gap in research on the collective memory of post-Stalinist repression

²⁸ Miller A. “Introduction” in *The Convolutions of Historical Politics*, 7

²⁹ Epplée N. *Neudobnoe Proshloe: pamyat o gosudarstvennykh prestupleniyah v Rossii i drugih stranah* [The Inconvenient Past: Memory of the State Crimes in Russia and Other Countries] (Moscow: NLO, 2020), 95-110

and the bottom-up contributions to historical politics with their influences on the creation of the state-supported narrative.

4. New Museology: Museums as Collective Memory Agents

Conceptualization of museums as key collective memory agents has been developing from the introduction of the New Museology studies in 1970s France.³⁰ The New Museology emerged in response to dissatisfaction with traditional Old Museology studies, which were “too much about museum methods, and too little about the purposes of museums.”³¹ Following the new museologists, I would conceptualize the chosen Moscow museums as “significant sites of ideological controversy and political conflict.”³² In other words, would treat them as terranes where different views on the history of repression meet, interact and clash with each other.

Methodologically, New Museology shifted the analytical focus from the descriptive to the representational critique of museum’s content, introducing the new questions to be asked from the museum expositions: “How meanings come to be inscribed and by whom...and the strategies by which they were positioned as “objective” or “true” ...[while others being] marginalized and ignored?”³³ In terms of analytical tools, the shift offered considering museums as multimedia text presenting the historical narrative to be researched by the deconstruction of its creation. The benefit of looking at the museums content through textual analysis was the possibility to move “away from privileging or compartmentalizing a particular aspect of the museum; for example, its building, collections, individual staff, or organizational status,”³⁴ thus establishing a common ground for comparison across institutions otherwise different in their financial, organizational, and technological arrangements.

³⁰ Gray C. *The Politics of Museums* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 7

³¹ Vergo P. *The New Museology* (London: Reaction Books, (1989/2006), 3

³² Luke T.W. *Museum Politics. Power Plays at the Exhibition* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), x

³³ Macdonald S. *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 2-3

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 26

At the same time, museums working with traumatic pasts have received separate attention from researchers, being conceptualized as “memorial museums.” Generally, the memorial museum studies have concentrated on the Holocaust history museums, recently starting to include critical analysis of the museums of Communist atrocities opened in post-socialist European countries. Paul Williams provided a useful characteristic to this type of cultural institutions, listing some features that distinguish them from the conventional history museums. “Their site is usually integral to their institutional identity; they often maintain a clientele who have a special relationship to the museum; they regularly hold politically significant special events; they often function as research centers geared towards identifying victims and providing material to aid the prosecution of perpetrators; they are frequently aligned with truth and reconciliation commissions and human right organizations; they have an especially strong pedagogic mission that often includes a psychological component in their work with survivors; educational work is stimulated by moral considerations and draws ties to issues in contemporary society in a way that is uncommon in standard museum presentation of history.”³⁵ Nearly all these features correspond to the museums in the Memorial and Sakharov Center, which, nonetheless, were not mentioned by Williams (who, among the Russian museums related to Soviet repression only mentioned the Perm-36 Museum). Using Williams definition to approach the Memorial and the Sakharov Center museums as memorial museums, I would consider the “Russia – My History” park as a “conventional history museum,”³⁶ and the Gulag History Museum, despite its self-conceptualization as a “museum of conscience,”³⁷ as a somewhat intermediary form that provides a state-sponsored view on history, while adapting the forms developed by the earlier NGOs. Despite the typology of museums is not at

³⁵ Williams P. *Memorial Museums. A Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*. (Oxford and NY: Berg, 2007), 21

³⁶ “A conventional history museum... that assembles its exposition in a more neutral historical setting”, in Williams P. *Memorial Museums. A Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, 21

³⁷ Postnaya E. “Muzej Gulaga kak otrazhenye travmaticheskogo opyta” [The Gulag Museum as a reflection of traumatic experience] (MA research paper, Sociology Department, Higher School of Economics Moscow, 2017): 70

the center of my research, some considerations about the dependence of the historical narrative construction on the type of the institution would be mentioned.

As for the practical side of studying museum expositions from the perspective of the textual approach offered by the New Museum Studies, the set of universal “instructions” for the analysis does not exist. At the same time, a significant number of research done on the other memorial museums provides an extensive number of hands-on examples that would be used in this thesis. Especially prominent would be case studies provided in the volumes edited by Ivan Karp and Stephen Lavine (1991), Susan Pearce (1994), Patterson Lehrer (2011) and Arnold-de Simine (2013). All the volumes consist of contributions by scholars from various fields and largely concentrate on the European and North American museums. The articles would be used for the examples of how to go about the materials provided in the expositions, objects and their authenticity, the multiplicity of agents whose views they reflect, and the questions of power relations, authority and clashes between the different views transmitted through the museum space.

5. Studying Representation of Soviet Repression in Russian Museums

Despite not being as developed as studies of museum representations of other traumatic pasts, in the last years, some research on museums of Soviet repression in Russia has also been done. Daria Khlevnyuk is the contemporary Russian researcher who contributed the most to the topic. Among her works, especially relevant for my thesis is an article on the phenomenon of affect in the memory museums, published in the volume “Politics of Affect: Museums as a Space of Public History” (2019).³⁸ In the article, Khlevnyuk mostly dealt with the theoretical conceptualization of memory museums as applied to Russian case, generally reiterating the framework developed by Paul Williams (2007). Another direction of research done by

³⁸ Khlevnyuk D. “Pochustvovat’ prava cheloveka: affect v muzeyah pamyati” [To feel the human rights: affect in the memory museums], in *Politika affecta: Muzey kak prostranstvo publichnoy istorii* [Politics of affect: Museum as a space of public history] (Moscow: NLO, 2019), Kindle edition

Khlevnyuk, somewhat similar to my research, was her inquiries into the construction of the narrative about victims of Soviet repression in Russian museums (2021).³⁹ Basing her assumptions on case studies of several Russian museums dealing with the history of Soviet repression (not the ones this thesis considers), Khlevnyuk suggested that the victims are usually conceptualized as “victim-heroes,” which partly gives them agency in narrating their stories. Despite finding Khlevnyuk’s approach towards working with Russian memory museums helpful and exemplary, I do not fully agree with her conceptualization, and in my further analysis of Moscow museums would suggest a different, more varied conceptualization of victimhood presented through their displays.

Most of the previous research, however, consisted of separate case studies dedicated to single institutions, which I will mostly use when discussing the origins of some of the museums. The most well-researched in this regard is the Gulag History Museum, with the articles by Ekaterina Postnaya (2016), Vera Dubina (2019) and Jeffrey Hardy (2020) dealing with the old exposition the museum had before the relocation to the new building in 2012. “Russia – My History” historical parks have also attracted some scholarly attention, although mostly in form of critical notes on the historical inaccuracy of the narrative presented there, including the special section of *Istoricheskaya Expertiza* journal № 1(14)/2018 with contributions from Adrian Selin, Andrey Suslov and Alexey Mosin⁴⁰ and a joined critical publication in *Point & Counterpoint* by Ivan Kurilla, Sergey Ivanov and Adrian Selin.⁴¹ From the perspective of institutional affiliations, also important for my research, the parks were considered by Krasilnikova and Valdman (2019).⁴² At the same time, from the perspective of the constructed

³⁹ Khlevnyuk D. “Victim-heroes in collective memory: Surviving Soviet repressions heroically,” *Memory Studies* 1/14 (February 2021): 2-14

⁴⁰ “Razmnozhenie deleniem: istoricheskie parki Rossia – moya istoria” [Deublication by division: historical parks Russia – My History], *Istoricheskaya Expertiza* 1/14 (2018): 59-102

⁴¹ ““Russia, My History”: History as an Ideological Tool,” *Point and Counterpoint* (August 2018), <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/russia-my-history-history-as-an-ideological-tool/>

⁴² Krasilnikova E., Valdman I. “Praktiki politiki pamyati: park-muzei “Rossia-Moya Istoria” v sisteme institutsionalnykh protivorechij” [Practices of memory politics: park-museum “Russia-My History” in system of institutional contradictions], *Vestnik Tomskogo Universiteta* 444 (2019): 72-82

historical narrative, “Russia – My History” was only considered once, in a study by Ekaterina Klimenko (2021) that dealt with the presentation of the Russian 1917 Revolution.⁴³

The museums in the Moscow Memorial and Sakharov Center, in their turn, have received even less attention from the scholarly community. Usually mentioned as an important agent of the collective memory field in the 1980s-1990s, the Memorial Society has been never considered for its museum activity. Even less attention has been given to the Museum in the Sakharov center, not mentioned either for its activities in the 1990s, or for its present standing, even in the general collective memory studies of the recent years. By analyzing not only the contemporary expositions of the four Moscow museums, but also their origins and transformations, my thesis would, therefore, add the missing piece to historicization of the development of collective memory about Soviet repression in Russia.

Note on Sources

As my thesis is built on the hands-on analysis of the chosen museums, the core group of sources consists of materials provided in the expositions. Most of the materials were collected in the summer of 2020 and reflect the expositions that were on display at that time, which is important to note, especially since the Gulag History Museum and the “Russia – My History Museum” make amendments to their expositions relatively often.

Largely, the sources collected from the museums are the textual materials, including leaflets, supplementary information sheets (if included in the exposition), texts presented on the displays and interactive kiosks, as well as descriptions posted on the museums’ official websites. Another group of sources includes objects presented in the museums’ expositions, which were analyzed from the perspective of the context they are placed in, their authenticity, labels through which they are explained by the museum curators, their relation to certain aspects

⁴³ Klimenko E. “Building the Nation, Legitimizing the State: Russia—My History and Memory of the Russian Revolutions in Contemporary Russia,” *Nationalities Papers* 49:1 (2021): 72-88

of history, or symbolic connotations they bear. Exhibited audio-visual materials (documentary footage and digitalized photographs) were also included in this group and treated similarly. The final category is the overall layout and exhibition design of the expositions – keeping in mind the dependence of its complexity on different financial and spatial capacities of the museums, the analysis still allows seeing if museum designers aspired to include additional tools to create a “museum experience”, and to pin down the viewers’ reactions they presupposed.

Another part of the research consists of the analysis of Russian historical politics. Since the definition of the term is broad and can include numerous cases, the list of historical politics to be mentioned in the research is in no way exhaustive. However, I would cover the most noticed (by other researchers or in the media) and influential for the museum sphere events related to (re)assessment of Soviet repression. For the period of the 1970s-1990s, the sources were mostly retrieved from the secondary literature or published decrees, laws and statements of the politicians, as well as from the records kept in the Memorial Center archive in Moscow (including programs of public events, documentary footage of the demonstrations, leaflets and posters). For the more recent years, the testimonies to the changing attitude towards memory of repression were considered through sources retrieved from the official news channels (Radio Liberty, Izvestija, TASS, etc.), published interviews with the officials and the official directives, laws and cultural projects.

Structure of the Thesis

My research is built on the comparison between the two periods of the collective memory of Soviet repression in Russia: the 1980s-1990s and 2000-2020. This division is based on the suggestion already developed in Russian historiography to consider Putin’s regime in separation from the late Gorbachev’s and Yeltsin eras, and to regard the time of Medvedev’s

presidency (2008-2012) as a continuation of Putin's politics that did not bring any significant changes in public politics.⁴⁴

The first chapter of the thesis, therefore, is dedicated to the public discussion about repression in late Soviet – early post-Soviet Russia and the prominent role played in its development by the Memorial Society and the Sakharov Center. Building on the grassroots nature of this early stage of discussion, and giving an outline of the indecisive steps taken by Gorbachev and Yeltsin's governments in terms of establishing control over public history writing, the chapter moves on to discuss the creation and content of the two museums – in the Memorial Society and the Sakharov Center. As the Memorial Museum does not have a permanent exposition, it is mostly considered for its contribution to the formation of the collective memory of Soviet repression in the 1990s and the variety of interventions into the public field this museum, despite being constrained by the financial and physical circumstances, provides today. Sakharov Center, in its turn, having a permanent exposition dedicated to the history of repression, is analyzed from the perspective of historical narrative about the repression, victims and persecutors it represents. Highlighting the importance of the institutions in the 1990s, I argue that, looking at their standing in the 21st century, the certain decline of influence caused by the pressures from above, can be noted.

The second chapter is dedicated to the historical politics and museumification of repression in Putin's Russia. Pointing out some crucial events which led to monopolization and centralization of public history writing imposed by the government, the chapter moves to the analysis of the two state-supported museums with expositions dedicated to the history of Soviet repression. The Gulag History Museum is analyzed from the perspective of it being “a museum of conscience,” thus adopting some of the approaches developed by the independent historical organizations, while simultaneously promoting the officially-sanctioned view on history, being

⁴⁴ For more on the approach, see Chapter 2. Russian Historical Politics from 2000 to 2020

a public museum dependent on the governmental support and funding. The exposition of the history park “Russia – My History”, on the other hand, presents the purified top-down view on the allowed frames of public discussion of Soviet repression and its relation to the overall Russian history.

In conclusion, I bring together the analysis from the two chapters, showing how the contexts of the public discussions of Soviet repression changed and influenced its representation in Moscow museums. Tracing the transfer of the formation of the collective memory of repression from the hands of the grassroots initiatives to state-controlled actors, I argue that the historical narrative of repression became highly politicized, which consistently pushed some parts of the history of repression into oblivion. As in contemporary Russia, it has been happening with the simultaneous marginalization of independent memory agents, in the end I provide some further connections of shifts traced in the museums, to the changes happening in other spheres of public life in the country.

Chapter 1. Museumification of Soviet Political Repression in the 1980s-2000

“I am not a historian and not a philosopher. I am a person of action.

I get bored theorizing – there is something more to spend your life on.”

(Elena Zhemkova, a board member of the International Memorial since 1995) ⁴⁵

Russian Historical Politics from the 1980s to 2000

Under Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko, the critical view on Soviet repression was pushed out of the public discourse but not eradicated altogether. Rather, the critique became the prerogative of opposition agents who formed tighter underground communities under the regime’s pressure. Understanding how the knowledge of Soviet injustices was collected and disseminated in circumvention of the official politics – through *samizdat* and *tamizdat*, underground radio stations and secret meetings in the 1970s is crucial, as in many ways it defined how the topic is presented even by today’s oppositional agents. In the following chapter, I would consider the early stages of collective memory field in Russia and the way governmental and non-governmental actors participated in its formation and, in particular, the construction of the narrative about Soviet repression.

The Underground Origins

Perhaps the most prominent human rights initiative of the period was the *Chronicle of Current Events*, a bi-weekly samizdat bulletin created in Moscow in 1968.⁴⁶ The aim of the *Chronicle* was not to take a historical perspective in analyzing the past but to inform people about the ongoing injustices and violations of human rights in the Soviet Union. The records of the violations that ended up on the pages of the *Chronicle* were gathered through the network of friends and acquaintances both in and outside of the punitive system – “Simply tell it [the information] to the person from whom you received the Chronicle, and he will tell the person from whom he received the Chronicle, and so on. But do not try to trace back the whole chain of communication yourself, or else you will be taken for a police informer,”⁴⁷ instructed Natalia

⁴⁵ Cited in “Memorial: Episod I” [Memorial: Episode 1], <http://prequel.memo.ru>

⁴⁶ Another important samizdat of the same sort was “Memory” (1976-1981), founded by Arseni Roginski who would later become one of the most active members of the International Memorial, and its head from 1998

⁴⁷ Cited in Hopkins M. *Russia's Underground Press: the Chronicle of Current Events* (NY: Praeger, 1983), 28

Gorbanevskaja, the first editor of the bulletin, on the pages of the first issue. Thus gathered records were re-typed by the editors and distributed among the trusted friends, who, in their turn, re-typed, re-wrote, or memorized them and passed on the information. Connections to the Western press were also crucial from the very beginning. Dissemination of samizdat materials on the other side of the Iron Curtain was mostly done through emigre press and radio stations (*Radio Liberty*, *Voice of America*, *Deutsche Welle*, and others), the records of which often ended up being transmitted back to the Soviet Union, thus reaching even wider audiences. People involved with the *Chronicle* were under constant pressure from the KGB and often suffered from repressive measures taken by the state to curtail the activities of the organization – by exiles, denunciations, falsified trials, and punitive psychiatry, which made the ongoing political repression a defining factor in the early formation of their collective memory.

Apart from the local grassroots initiatives in the Soviet Union, the ground for the appearance of the collective memory of repression was also prepared abroad. In the 1960s and 1970s, the large bulk of the literature dedicated to first-hand experiences of the Soviet punitive system that was banned from being published in the USSR appeared in the Western émigré press. Marchenko's *My Testimony* (London, 1969), Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* (Paris, 1973), and other publications gave a more distanced, historical perspective on the Soviet political persecutions. Just like the *samizdat* materials smuggled to the West, these publications were often secretly brought to the USSR, read and retold among the dissident circles. Thus, both in and outside the Soviet Union, the fertile ground was prepared for the creation of the public memory of Soviet repression. In spite of the official throwback to tighter censorship and harsher persecutions of dissidents, the notions of the historical freedom launched in Khrushchev's Thaw continued to exist: in the West – maintained by the historians, activists, emigres, and writers, and in the Soviet Union – by the closely connected to them dissidents.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Etkind A. *Krivoye gore. Pamyat' o nepogrebennykh* [Wrapped mourning: stories of the undead in the land of unburied] (Moscow: NLO, 2018), 61

Gorbachev's Glasnost and the Coming-out of Collective Memory of Repression

In 1985, Gorbachev was appointed the General Secretary of the State, and “The Great Silence”⁴⁹ surrounding the repression was finally broken on the state level. Glasnost’ enunciated by Gorbachev marked the rediscovery of the Soviet past and even if Merridale’s suggestion that “In Russia, anyone who could read was talking about the past by the late 1980s”⁵⁰ might be considered as an overstretch, certainly more people would publicly acknowledge the presence of the Soviet repressive apparatus for the first time. The history of Soviet repression in the mid-late 1980s was transmitted through testimonies that were first allowed to be published in the official Soviet press. The main sources were thick literary magazines – *Novyj Mir*, *Ogoniok*, *Znamja*, popular among ordinary Soviet citizens. Indeed, during 1987-1989, on their pages, the readers first encountered such key testimonies to the Soviet repressive machine as Akhmatova’s *Requiem*, Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales*, Eugenia Ginzburg’s *Journey into the Whirlwind* and others.⁵¹ The “Golden age” of literary magazines released an unprecedented amount of vivid first-hand descriptions of inhumane tortures in the NKVD headquarters, unbearable conditions of the Gulag camps, and the unjust and severe nature of Soviet totalitarianism. Most importantly, the agents who had been marginalized in the official party discourse, for the first time were granted the main voice in forming the collective memory of Soviet repression.

The Russian Orthodox Church, which became the major agent of memory politics in the 2000s, was also actively involved in the commemoration process already from the late 1980s, although its activities were not as noticeable in the large cities. Unlike secular NGOs, it mostly

⁴⁹ Hochschild A. *The Unquiet Ghost: Russians Remember Stalin*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, (1994/2003), 30

⁵⁰ Merridale C. “Redesigning History in Contemporary Russia,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 38/1 (January 2003): 17

⁵¹ For more, see Epplée N. *Neudobnoe Proshloe: pamyat o gosudarstvennyh prestupleniyah v Rossii i drugih stranah*, 58-60; Khazanov A. “Whom to Mourn and Whom to Forget? (Re)constructing Collective Memory in Contemporary Russia,” 133-134

focused on commemoration of repression “on the sites”, transforming the former shooting grounds and Gulag sites into the places of mourning by marking them with the “hardware of historical memory”⁵² – memorial crosses and plaques.⁵³ From 1992, preparations of canonization of the New Martyrs – outstanding victims of the 20th century repression who were persecuted for their religious beliefs – was under making, to be implemented in 2000. The role of the Orthodox Church in the memorialization process in Russia will be discussed in more details in the next chapter, however, it is worth noting that, if in the 1980s-1990s, it was rather involved in revelation and the initial work of not letting the history of repression fall into oblivion, in the early 2000s its work, including the development of the New Martyrs narrative, became more subscribed to and dependent on the state politics.

The overtake of the public history writing process by “uncontrolled”⁵⁴ agents became possible largely because the state politics towards a reassessment of Soviet repression took an ambiguous and indecisive form. Thus, Gorbachev’s assessment of repression consisted of balancing between acknowledging their presence, downplaying their significance by arguing that they only affected a small circle of party cadres and intelligentsia, and emphasizing the party’s achievements. Among the few steps taken by him was the creation of the Politburo Commission for “Additional studies of documents pertaining to repressive measures of the 1930s – 1940s and early 1950s” in September 1987, in the realms of the upcoming anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, that did not achieve much in regards to public history writing.⁵⁵ Another aspect of state historical politics was the new wave of rehabilitations. In February –

⁵² Etkind A. “Hard and Soft in Cultural Memory: Political Mourning in Russia and Germany,” *Grey Room* 16 (Summer 2004): 41

⁵³ For more, see Bogumił Z. *Gulag Memories. The Rediscovery and Commemoration of Russia’s Repressive Past* (NY: Berghahn Books, 2018), 34-41

⁵⁴ Koposov N. *Pamyat’ Strogogo Rezhima: Istoria I Politika v Rossii* [Memory of high security: history and politics in Russia], (Moscow: NLO, 2011), 111

⁵⁵ Smith K.E. *Remembering Stalin’s victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR* (NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 41-49

June 1988, the Supreme Court rehabilitated Bukharin, Zinoviev, and Kamenev, while the decrees of 1988-1989 included more rehabilitations of the ordinary citizens.

Historical Politics after 1991

In 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist, leading to the disappearance of the “guilty state” that brought the discussion of repression into a new level of political significance in many post-socialist countries.⁵⁶ For Russia, however, it was not exactly the case. Right after his appointment to the post of the first Russian president, Boris Yeltsin declared the course to democratization for the country. For the public discourse on Soviet history, it had twofold consequences. On the one hand, in the official rhetoric, democratization was closely connected with the West, which led to the accusation of the Soviet period for holding Russia back from the normal path of development it would have gone if the October Revolution never happened. Therefore, the Soviet era came to be perceived as the destruction of historical continuity,⁵⁷ while its place in the public discourse became occupied by “discussions about the choice of an economic model for the New Russia.”⁵⁸ On the other hand, already from Gorbachev, democratization also envisaged multiplicity of opinions – reflected not only in multi-party elections, but also in rising state support of free associations and NGO initiatives.⁵⁹ Secured with the governmental backing, historical NGOs (such as the Memorial society or the Sakharov Center) were allowed unprecedented freedom of being the main voices condemning the Soviet regime for its atrocious character (with the relaxation on prohibition of public demonstrations, discussions, and other cultural activities).

In his first address to the Federal Government, Boris Yeltsin declared, among other things, the importance of “understanding of natural historical and cultural continuity [...], and

⁵⁶ Epplee N. *Neudobnoe Proshloe: pamyat o gosudarstvennykh prestupleniyah v Rossii i drugih stranah*, 65

⁵⁷ Koposov N. *Pamyat' Strogogo Rezhima: Istoria i Politika v Rossii*, 68, 129

⁵⁸ Khapaeva D. “Historical Memory in Post-Soviet Gothic Society,” *Social Research* 76/1 (Spring 2009): 364

⁵⁹ White A. *Democratization in Russia under Gorbachev. 1985-91. The Birth of a Voluntary Sector* (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1999), 1

value of the human life and dignity.”⁶⁰ In the same year, the Law № 1761-1 “On the rehabilitation of victims of political repression” (from October 18) was enacted. The Law provided the definitions of political repression and its victims, as well as the timeframe of Soviet political repression (1917-1990), and fixated the rehabilitation process, all of which are still relevant today. Above all, the Law condemned “the long-years terror and persecutions of own people as incompatible with the idea of right and justice”.⁶¹ After the Law was accepted, the President Commission on Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression was created, whose exact competencies, except for the formal existence, were (and still are) quite obscure and limited. Other subtle steps taken by the state to “fill in” the blank spots in Soviet history were connected to unveiling some of the places of mass persecutions (e.g., Butovo range near Moscow, discovered in 1993), albeit their “discovery” usually came from below – from individual researchers or independent organizations (mainly, the Memorial members).⁶² Another formal act pressured forward from below was the partial opening of the state archives containing information on repression. Thus, the Law on the State Secrets from 1993 forbade access restriction to the documents related to the repressed under the reason of “the state secret”, and, although rarely followed, was still a significant gesture from the side of the government.⁶³

In 1993, the official assessment of the Soviet period continued to be negative, contrasted in the official state rhetoric with Russia’s aspirations for the future. In his June speech at the Constitutional Assembly, Yeltsin said, “We (the country) need an order. But not the terrifying order of Stalin’s labor camps. Not the iron hand, but the democratic state power that will secure the development towards normal and decent life of our citizens.”⁶⁴ Three years later, in view of

⁶⁰ Message of Boris Yeltsin to the Federal Assembly “Ob ukreplenii Rossijskogo gosudarstva” [On strengthening the Russian sovereignty], Moscow, 1994, 77

⁶¹ Law on Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression N 1761-1 (18 October 1991), 1

⁶² E.g., see Mikhalkov’s case in: Smith, *Remembering Stalin’s Victims*, 163-165

⁶³ Koposov N. *Pamyat’ Strogogo Rezhima: Istoria i Politika v Rossii*, 134

⁶⁴ Yeltsin B. “O demokraticesloy rossijskoy gosudarstvennosti i proekte novoj konstitutsii” [On democratic Russian sovereignty and a new Constitutional project], 1993 (cited in: Malinova O. *Actual’noe Proshloe. Simvolicheskaya politika vlastvuyuschei elity i dilemy rossijskoj identichnosti* [Relevant past: symbolic politics of powerful elite and dilemmas of Russian identity] (Moscow: Political Encyclopedia), 40-41)

the forthcoming presidential elections of 1996, on which the Communist Party presented a strong opposition to Yeltsin's team, official condemnation of the Soviet system and the "never again" paradigm intensified. In an annual message to the Federal Government, Yeltsin argued that "Mass repression, political monopoly, class purges...are the features of the totalitarian regime. And it means that the going back (to the Soviet model) equals going to the historical dead-end, to unavoidable destruction of Russia."⁶⁵ To a large extent, it was in realms of the same inner-Kremlin struggle that Yeltsin renamed the official holiday of the October Revolution celebrated annually on the 7th of November into the Day of Accord and Reconciliation (which was abolished in 2005).⁶⁶

Still, as in the mid-1990s the state had more urgent matters on its agenda,⁶⁷ reassessment of Soviet repression largely stayed on the level of political discourses, hardly bearing any consequences for the public history writing. As Alexander Etkind put it, the so-called "second destalinization of Russia, which started in 1985, suffocated in the new stagnation which condensed to the beginning of the 2000nds."⁶⁸ With relative relaxation of the state control over cultural field, the creation of collective memory about Soviet political repression fell into the hands of human rights activists, who, during this period, united into the two organizations to be discussed further in the chapter: the International Memorial Society (created 1988-1990) and the Sakharov Center (1991-1996). Apart from their history in the 1990s, I would consider the present status of these NGO organizations in Moscow, focusing on their museum activities.

Despite the Memorial and the Sakharov Center today are mainly known for their public activities in the human rights sector, bringing public awareness about the history of Soviet repression has always been integral to their missions. Albeit the heyday of their influence fell

⁶⁵ Yeltsin B. "Rossia, za kotoryu my vse v otvete" [Russia, for which we are all responsible], July 1996, cited in Malinova O. *Actual'noe Proshloe. Simvolicheskaya politika vlastvuyuschei elity i dilemy rossijskoj identichnost*, 54

⁶⁶ Khazanov A. "Whom to Mourn and Whom to Forget? (Re)constructing Collective Memory in Contemporary Russia," 138

⁶⁷ E.g., Economic crisis of 1991, Constitutional crisis of 1993, the First Chechen War (1994-1995)

⁶⁸ Etkind, *Krivoye gore. Pamyat' o nepogrebennyh*, 65

on the 1990s and by 2020 has been constrained (for various reasons to be discussed in the next chapter), in this part I would refer to their status both in the 1990s and in the contemporary Moscow.

The Memorial Museum

There is no clear date or even year from which the existence of the International Memorial can be counted, and the first years after its emergence bear haphazard, unrecorded, and to this day unstructured character. For this reason, complete and precise reconstruction of its activity during the early – mid-1990s is, for now, impossible, which is highlighted and warned against by the members of the International Memorial themselves.⁶⁹ The haphazardness, being an obstacle for anyone who wishes to study the early history of the Soviet human rights movements, at the same time provides a deeper perspective onto the nature of the NGO human rights initiatives in Russia today, which are still lacking the proper conditions and resources required to work on their history. The International Memorial today less reminds of the “loose, informal, non-hierarchical” structure described by Adam Hochschild in 1994, however, the structuring of its history, and especially of the archives related to exhibition activities, is still at a very early stage, so the analysis presented on the following pages, mostly based on the documents published by the International Memorial or stored in their archive, in no way claims to cover every detail and event related to the early history of the society. Furthermore, here the organization is addressed as the International Memorial from 1987, even though it was officially registered as the “All-Union non-profit historical educational organization” only in January 1990, before that time existing as an informal group of activists.

⁶⁹ During my conversation in September 2020 with Irina Ostrovskaia, who has been a member of the Memorial from the very beginning, and now is one of the heads of the archival department, she highlighted several times that during the first years of the Memorial existence, nothing was recorded, as no one thought about the future and was rather concerned with solving the ongoing problems.

1. Origins of the Organization: the Solovetsky Stone

The earliest point from which the history of the Memorial Society is usually counted is 1987 when the circle of people interested in the creation of the more structured organization formed from the other participants of the human rights initiatives. During that time, those interested in the topic of political repression were usually gathering in the Moscow club “Perestroika”, where, in the auditorium for 400-500 people, the lectures and public discussions on the topic were usually held. Around that period, as noted by the oldest members of the International Memorial, some people started to stay after official programs to discuss how the memory of soviet political repression can be brought to the wider public. The initial idea formed in this group of activists (Elena Zhemkova, Yuri Samodurov, Yuri Skubko, and others) was to create the center that would include research facilities, archive, museum and, most importantly, the memorial dedicated to the history of repression.⁷⁰ Eventually, the ambitions were rounded up to the memorial construction, thus starting the long process of petition writing, public demonstrations and fundraising events.



Figure 1. Solovetsky Stone on Lubyanka Square, Moscow, October 30, 1991. Archive of Igor Stomahin

⁷⁰ Interview with Arseni Roginski in: “Uchreditel'naja konferencija Memoriala” [Foundation conference of the International Memorial] (Moscow, 1989), December 21, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvQ-5Z-y1T4>

Even though initial ambitious plans of the Memorial members were not realized and years of struggle with the state authorities resulted in a modest, less than two-meter high Solovetsky Stone erected on the Lubyanka square in 1990,⁷¹ the process surrounding it was central to the formation of the core group of the Memorial society, and dissemination of knowledge about its mission and the history of Soviet repression. In 1987-1988, the promotional and fundraising campaigns started: members of the Memorial Society went on the streets, holding the handwritten posters “Here the collection of signatures for the application to the Supreme Council of USSR about the creation of the memorial to victims of Stalinist repression is happening”⁷² – by spring, several hundred people subscribed. The turning point in getting public attention was the public demonstration organized by the Memorial in 1988, at the result of which the appeal got over 45 thousand signatures and approval from the Politburo, which issued the order to construct the Moscow memorial for “victims of lawlessness and repression of the period of the Cult of Personality”⁷³, sanctioning the Memorial society to launch the public competition of the memorial designs and the fundraising for its construction. Both of these activities created an even great outreach – the designs for the memorial were published in popular magazines, while the money was collected through charity concerts, cinema and poetry evenings, which attracted large audiences. The exact number or chronology of these events remains hidden in the unsorted piles of posters kept in the Moscow Memorial archive today. However, the fact that such famous artists as Vladimir Vysotsky and Evgeni Evtushenko were among the performers, signifies the scale of support and value the Memorial had at the beginning of the 1990s.

⁷¹ For more about the history of the Solovetsky stone, see: Forest B., Johnson J. “Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet–Era Monuments and Post–Soviet National Identity in Moscow,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92/3 (November 2002): 541; Smith K. *Remembering Stalin's victims*, 153-160

⁷² Poster from the Memorial Archive, Moscow

⁷³ The wording of the directive is important in itself, as it already implied limitation of repression to Stalin’s era, which is still characteristic to today’s Russian historical politics.

2. Week of Conscience: the First Public Exhibition on Soviet Repression in Moscow

The first public exhibition, the Week of Conscience, dedicated to victims of Soviet political repression was also organized as part of the fundraising campaign for the memorial construction. The exhibition was held in the House of Culture of the light bulbs factory from 19th to 26th of November 1988, with over 33 thousand visitors coming to see the exposition during the 7 days' time. At the beginning envisaged as an exhibition of the projects submitted for the memorial design, it ended up hosting discussions and lectures on Soviet repression's history, as well as providing the visitors with guidelines on how to search for information about the repressed relatives and collecting the documents related to the history of repression brought by them.

The exhibition occupied the large hall of the Culture House, and, apart from the displays of various projects of the memorial laid down on the glass tables, focused on the history of repression itself. The centerpiece of the exposition was the "Wall of Memory," the huge white paper board fixated on the wall, designed by the theatre producer Dmitry Krymov. On the board, the photographs with the names of people who perished in the Gulag camps and other places of political persecutions were pinned. The visitors were encouraged to contribute to the exposition by writing the names of the victims they knew, thus creating an "active act of remembering",⁷⁴ making the wall multi-layered with comments related not only to the victims, but also to the contemporaneous political situation in Russia. Apart from widening the name database, the exhibition worked with getting the information about the territorial expansion of places of Soviet political detentions – the labor camps, prisons, shooting grounds, and psychiatric hospitals. For that aim, the large brick map of the Soviet Union was installed on the wall, where the already known places of detention were marked, and the visitors had a chance to add those known to them. Under the map, stood a wheelbarrow, where people were encouraged to put

⁷⁴ Assmann A. from "Canon and Archive," in: Olick J. K. (ed.) *The Collective Memory Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 335

their donations for the construction of the memorial. Interestingly, the wheelbarrow later became widely used in the expositions dedicated to the Gulag camps,⁷⁵ thus counting as one of the “trauma icons”⁷⁶ for the representation of the narrative about the Soviet political repression.

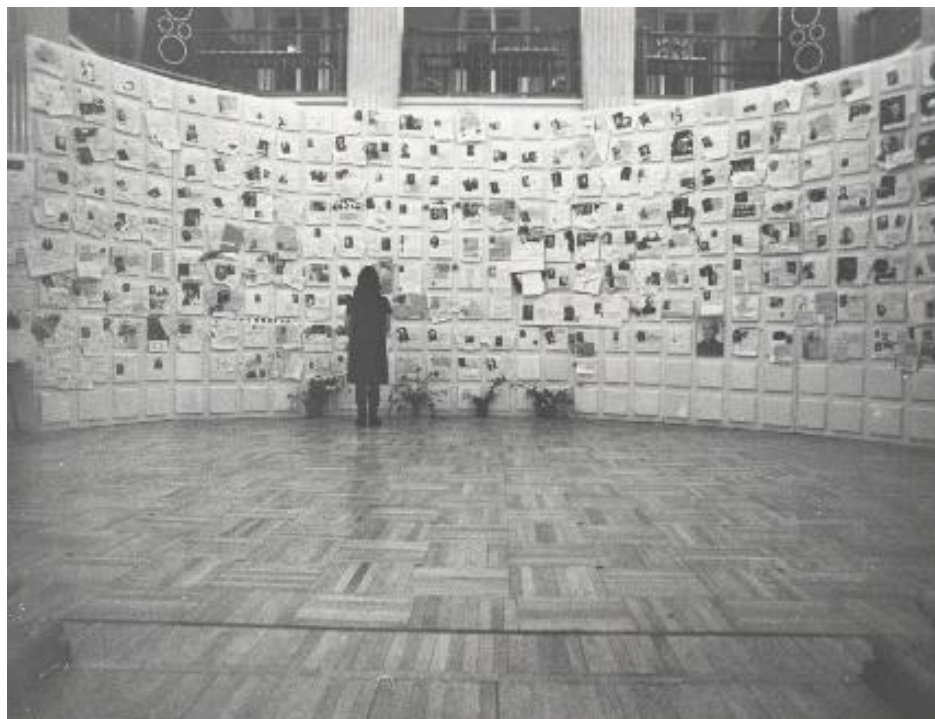


Figure 2. Wall of Memory in the Week of Conscience exhibition, Moscow, 16-19 November 1988. The International Memorial Archive



Figure 3. The map and the wheelbarrow for donations in the Week of Conscience exhibition, Moscow, 16-19 November 1988. The International Memorial Archive

⁷⁵ For example, in the exposition “A man and a Power in the 19th – 21st century Russia” in the State Museum of Political History of Russia in Saint Petersburg

⁷⁶ Simine A. S. *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 80

To a large extent, the Week of Conscience set the format of the early exhibition agenda of the Memorial. In 1989, along with the foundation conferences on which the statute of the society was approved, and several anti-Stalinism demonstrations, the Memorial continued being engaged in the exhibition activities. On 23-30 August 1989, the exhibition “Friendship sealed by blood”, dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was held in the Rusakov’s House of Culture. Little records remained from the exhibition layout, however, judging from the few photographs kept in the Memorial Museum archive, it consisted of text documents and photos, as well as contemporaneous caricatures on the topic. Another cycle of the exhibitions, started by the Memorial around the same time and continued into the early 1990s, was dedicated to the “repressed art”- where objects created by the repressed artists were exhibited. The choice of the topic was largely dictated by the specificity of the formation of the collection of the Memorial Museum, which started from the very first years of its existence, and consisted of objects that relatives and friends of the repressed brought to the Memorial.⁷⁷ It was a traveling exhibition, the content of which varied from place to place, with the only condition that the object had to be created in the place of detention. In the 1990 catalogue from its Cologne version,⁷⁸ it was stated that in Moscow alone it was held in over seven different places, however, neither in the records kept in the Memorial archive, nor in the memories of the Memorial members I have spoken to, the exact locations or dates of these exhibits are traceable. The early ambit of the Memorial exhibition activities, therefore, followed the more general “campaign for de-Stalinization”⁷⁹ that envisioned unveiling the blank spots in the history of the Soviet era, which was also pursued by the organization in other public spheres.

⁷⁷ Irina Galkova, the current director of the Memorial Museum (conversation with the author, September 2020)

⁷⁸ GULAG Art. Exhibition Catalogue, Moscow Memorial and Moscow Branch of the Artist’s Union of the Russian Federation, 1990

⁷⁹ White A. *Democratization in Russia under Gorbachev. 1985-91. The Birth of a Voluntary Sector*, 119

3. Creation of the Museum

In November 1990, after the successful accreditation, the Memorial Society received the building in Maly Karetny Pereulok in downtown Moscow, which the organization still occupies today. For the first time, the Memorial had a place to store the documents, art pieces, *samizdat* and *tamizdat* materials of various forms, as well as a collection of books related to Soviet repression it acquired throughout the previous years. Simultaneously with settling in the new place, the Memorial continued its public activities, including the exhibition practices. Since the place where the Memorial lodged was too small, the members widely used the format of “poster exhibitions”, particularly education-oriented ones, which were shown at schools around the country. Furthermore, from 1994 to 2008, the annual poster exhibition dedicated to the Day of Remembrance of Victims of Political Repression was held in Moscow city hall. Unfortunately, the records of these poster expositions are lost, and the years or locations of their existence are debatable even by the participants themselves. Apart from the Moscow grounds, importantly, the Memorial society was organizing exhibitions abroad. Among the largest ones were “Gulag. The System of camps in USSR” [*Gulag. Il sistema dei lager in URSS*] in Castello Sforzesco in Milan (4 December 1999 – 23 January 2000), “Gulag: the Land of Zeks” [*Gulag: Le people des zeks*], in Geneve (2004), and “Gulag. Traces and Testimonies. 1929-1956” [*Gulag – Spuren und Zeugnisse. 1929-1956*] traveling exhibition in Germany (May-June 2012).

Since the Memorial is an NGO organization, it has always existed on private donations. Today, the majority of private donors and sponsor organizations that support the Memorial activities are located abroad.⁸⁰ The Museum of the Memorial has never had a permanent exhibition, although its collection counts over 6 000 objects related to Soviet repression – from paintings created by the prisoners in detention during Stalin’s Purges, to typewriters used by dissidents in the 1980s, and the museum webpage states that it still “gladly accepts drawings and paintings, handmade objects, documents and personal belongings brought from the camps,

⁸⁰ The list of donors from the Memorial’s website: <http://old.memo.ru/about/spons.htm>

connected to the history of repression and struggle for civil freedom in the USSR, as well as everyday objects of the 1920s-1940s, to record and preserve the information about them, their authors and owners.”⁸¹ In the absence of the proper facilities, with the lack of space and resources, numerous objects from the Memorial Museum are stored not only in the specially-ascribed museum storage rooms, but also in the halls and other offices of the underground level of the building where the museum is located. The only space the museum has is reserved for temporary exhibitions, which change every few months.

4. The Memorial Museum Today

Overview of the recent exhibitions organized by the Memorial Museum shows the broad scope of historical issues addressed by the institution. Just from the past few years, they included topics connected to Nazi Germany (*Objects from the Concentration Camps*, January-September 2020; *PostScript. Ostarbeiters in the Third Reich*, March-September 2020), opposition to the communist regime in European countries (*After Noon. 1968*, September 2018-February 2019; *In front of the Wall. 1989*, October 2019-January 2020) and in Soviet Russia (*A Fell, B Disappeared. Dictionary of Soviet Censorship*, January-February 2020; *Heart of a Dog. Adventures of the Forbidden Book*, March-September 2019), as well as to individuals significant for the history of Soviet repression (*Varlam Shalamov*, February 2016-February 2017; *Osip Mandelstam*, December 2018-March 2019), and general aspects of Gulag system (*Right to Correspondance*, December 2014-May 2015; *Trust the Herbarium*, December 2018-March 2019). This general overview of the topics shows that the museum does not focus on Soviet repression *per se*, but rather on the wider topic of human rights violations of the 20th century.

In terms of the format, in the lack of physical space, the Memorial museum often collaborates with other institutions in Russia and abroad, hosting its expositions there.

⁸¹ “Museum of the International Memorial”: <https://museum.memo.ru>

Moreover, its authors extensively use digital opportunities to make the collection visible to larger audiences. Thus, in 2019 the new museum website was launched, presenting the virtual overview of the collection, with an option to search for the objects not only according to the found (archaeology, graphic, everyday objects, etc.), collection (the theater of Vorkutlag, the hunger of Gulag, etc.), or timeframe, but also by the place of detention. Apart from that, the museum objects are included in several virtual exhibitions – such as the Virtual Gulag Museum⁸² created by the Saint Petersburg branch of the International Memorial, OSA online exhibition “Forced Labor Camps”,⁸³ or the “Beauty in Hell: Culture in the Gulag”⁸⁴ in the Glasgow University Museum.

It can be said that the heyday of the Memorial’s influence on the public representation of the history of Soviet political repression fell on the early-mid-1990s, when the organization played a crucial role in embedding the reassessment of Soviet history to the democratization discourses. By the second half of the 1990s, and especially in the early 2000s, the visibility of the Memorial activities in the cultural sphere started to decrease,⁸⁵ with the focus of the institution shifting to defending the legal rights of victims of repression, doing historical, archival, and archaeological research, and continuing to develop educational programs for schools and universities. The most noticeable interference of the Memorial Society into the city space today is, perhaps, the annual commemorative action “Return of the Names” held in front of the Solovetsky Stone in conjunction to the Official day of Victims of Political Repression on October 29 it organizes. Being officially sanctioned in 2007 and by 2020 being held in over 30 Russian cities, the demonstration has aimed to give the voices to victims of Soviet repression killed in the respective area. Thus, each participant is given a short biographical note about a certain victim (retrieved from the Memorial database) and is offered to read it aloud at the

⁸² “Virtual Gulag Museum,” *International Memorial*: <http://www.gulagmuseum.org/start.do?&language=2>

⁸³ “Forced Labor Camps” virtual exhibition, OSA: <http://w3.osaarchivum.org/gulag/>

⁸⁴ “Beauty in Hell: Culture in the Gulag,” *The Hunterian*: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/hunterian/visit/exhibitions/virtualexhibitions/beautyinhellcultureinthegulag/>

⁸⁵ Dorman V. “Ot Solovkov do Butovo: RPC i Pamyat’ o Sovetskyh Repressyah” [From Solovki to Butovo: Russian Orthodox Church and memory of Soviet repression], *Laboratorium* 2 (2010): 329

microphone.⁸⁶ In 2017, a similar action – “The Bell of Memory,” was initiated by the Gulag History Museum, supposedly to overtake the influence of the Memorial action, the consequences of which for the narrative would be discussed in the next chapter.

The agenda of the Memorial Museum, overall, is still defined by its early set onto shedding light on the wide spectrum of the history of human rights violations, which corresponds to the mission of the institution. Soviet repression there is regarded as part of the traumatic experiences happening in the world in the 20th century and, when considered separately, cover the whole period of 1917-1991. However, due to the absence of permanent exposition, the Memorial Museum today does not present (and does not aspire to present) a tangible place where the visitor would be able to get an overview of the whole history of Soviet repression, rather providing insights on separate aspects of it.

From the mid-2000s, the development of the Memorial Museum was largely defined by the limitations imposed on the institution by the government. The monopolization of collective memory creation, stigmatization and de-legitimization of work of the independent historical societies that would be discussed in the next chapter, affecting the Memorial Society in general, could not but influence the reality of the Museum that has to function in the constrained (both physically and legally) environment. Thus, along with the Sakharov Center, in 2014 the Memorial fell under the category of “NGO that functions as a foreign agent”, and was obliged to pay the fine and subscribe this charge in every publication it issues. Furthermore, active members of the Memorial Society often fell victims of the falsified charges, the most well-known and recent of which is the case of Yuri Dmitriev, the member of the Karelian branch of the Memorial.⁸⁷ Not elaborating on the state strategies of diminishing the public influence of the International Memorial, which would be considered when speaking about the historical politics in Putin’s Russia, it can be argued that, in the realm of Moscow memorial museums,

⁸⁶ Official webpage of the action: <https://october29.ru>

⁸⁷ For more on the case of Dmitriev, see: “The Dmitriev Affair. The Life’s Work and Trials of Yuri Dmitriev,” <https://dmitrievaffair.com>

the Memorial Museum today does serve as a place where people can get an insight onto fragmentary aspects of Soviet repression or other injustices of the 20th century, but cannot learn the entirety of the phenomenon.

Sakharov Center Museum

Unlike the Memorial Society, the Sakharov Center named after the Soviet physicist and human rights activist Andrei Sakharov (1921-1989) has been almost entirely absent from the publications on collective memory or human rights initiatives of the Soviet Union, which complicates studying its origins and early years. Thus, I would not focus as much on the 1990s activities of the institution as in the case of the Memorial, which, to a large extent, was the defining player in the collective memory field of the time, and would rather concentrate on its current status and museum exposition.

1. The Origins, Mission and Today's Standing of the Sakharov Center

Founded around the same time as the Memorial, in 1990, the Sakharov Center grew from the overlapping circle of people interested in the revelation of the dark pages of the Soviet past while simultaneously struggling against the ongoing violations of human rights. However, while the Memorial was initially focused on the action – construction of the memorial, which brought it more public attention, the Sakharov Center's core team was united around the preservation of Andrei Sakharov's legacy and archive, which, from the onset, required less interaction with the general public or other institutions. Right after the death of Andrei Sakharov, the Soviet nuclear physicist and human rights activist, in January 1990, the Public Commission to Preserve the Legacy of Academician Sakharov was created by his wife Helena Bonner, his colleagues and friends. In May 1991, the Commission organized the congress for "Peace, Progress, and Human Rights". In January 1993, it officially registered as a non-governmental organization in the Ministry of Justice and received the building on Zemlyanoi Val to accommodate the archive and the research center.

In 1994, the museum and public center bearing Sakharov's name were created. The initial mission of the organization was "To preserve and develop the heritage of A.D. Sakharov. To form the historical memory about Soviet totalitarianism and resistance to freedom restrictions, promote democracy and human rights, support quality and free discussion of the relevant historical, human rights, and humanitarian challenges, and to promote the development of civil society".⁸⁸ Thus, the Sakharov Center members from the very beginning made the preservation, formation and promotion of collective memory of repression in the USSR one of their main objectives.

Being an NGO organization like the Memorial Society, Sakharov Center has been supported by donations from individuals and corporate bodies, the majority of whom are located abroad (including the Found of Andrey Sakharov in the USA). Except for the museum activities, today the Center actively develops other projects connected to advocacy for human rights: public lectures, book presentations, discussions and cinema evenings. Moreover, like the Memorial, along with the museum, the Sakharov Center has a research center with primary sources related to the history of repression and a library with a collection of books on the topic, today functioning with open access. The one difference from the Memorial activities, however, has been the seemingly lesser engagement of the Sakharov Center in the active revelation of the history of Soviet repression. In its historical endeavors, it has rather functioned within the agenda of preservation and dissemination of the already known information than organizing research exhibitions or projects like the Memorial. This focus could, to a large extent, stand behind the lesser popularity of the Sakharov Center: not having to actively engage with other institutions and activists in the different Russian cities, Sakharov Center generally limited its activities to Moscow and the already established circle of stakeholders.

⁸⁸ "Statute of the Sakharov Center," (Moscow, March 2012), 2

Looking at the activities of the Sakharov Center today, the twofold character of them can be noted. On the one hand, the Center still works with the preservation of memory of political unfreedom in the USSR – mainly through its museum that regularly holds free-of-charge excursions. On the other hand, Sakharov Center’s focus seems to be shifting towards advocacy against and revelation of the ongoing injustices and human rights violations in Russia and abroad. Thus, even the museum collection, still accepting objects from the citizens, is described as developing in two directions: “The Totalitarian Past” and “The Contemporary Problems.”⁸⁹ Although the current problems are not necessarily reflected in the permanent exposition of the museum, some of them are shown in temporary exhibitions, which are hosted in the building located nearby.⁹⁰ Moreover, the prevalence of the human rights agenda is reflected in the official accounts of the organization on social networks and on the Sakharov Center’s blog, which largely focus on coverage of the recent news.

2. Museum Collection and Current Exposition Design

Like in the Memorial case, the collection of the Sakharov Center beyond the archive of Andrei Sakharov was formed collectively – people were encouraged to donate the documents, photographs, every day and handmade objects related to repression, as well as periodicals and samizdat materials related to human rights agenda of the late USSR, to the museum fund. The permanent exposition of the Museum was created in 1997, by the architect Evgeni Ass and the human rights activists already engaged with the Memorial activities – Nikita Ohotin and Yuri Samodurov, and has not significantly changed ever since.

The Museum, located on the top floor of the two-story building, occupies one spacious room divided into five sections: Mythology and ideology in the USSR, Political repression in

⁸⁹ Information provided on the main page of the Sakharov Center Museum: <https://www.sakharov-center.ru/node/11659>

⁹⁰ For example, the exhibition “My vybiraem” [We choose] (March-April 2012), timed with the 2012 Presidential elections, or the exhibition “Ostorozhno! Religija!” [Beware! Religion!] (January-February 2003) that caused a great public outcry. (for more about the scandal, see, e.g., “Artistic Expression under Threat from Religious Intolerance” *International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX)*: http://old.sakharov-center.ru/museum/exhibitionhall/religion_notabene/hall_exhibitions_religion_tol_21_06.htm)

the USSR, The road through the GULAG, Resistance to oppression and Andrey Sakharov: Personality and Destiny, by the brick, metal, wooden, glass and fabric walls, symbolizing the movement “from restrictions – to freedom, from the darkness – to light.”⁹¹ The exposition aspires “to present the history of the USSR through the prism of resistance to political repression of the Soviet regime,”⁹² and, to this day, is the only permanent museum exposition dedicated to the entire history of Soviet political repression in Moscow. Nevertheless, the Sakharov Center Museum is, as was already noticed, little known not only in the researchers’ community, but also among the general Moscow public, despite the fact that promotion of historical knowledge has been integral to the institution’s mission. One possible explanation of this situation is the circumstances independent from its founders. Thus, unlike the Memorial Museum, which is located in the vicinity of other cultural attractions, the building that the Sakharov Center received from the Moscow government stands on the crossing of the two busy streets – Zemlyanoy Val and Polujaroslavskaja Naberezhnaja, which are distanced both from the other cultural attractions and convenient public transport connections spots. Despite being secluded by the small square, also named after Andrei Sakharov, Sakharov Center is still located in the much less attractive district, flanked by the petrol station and a fitness center. On the other hand, the museum organizers (again, largely because of the lack of resources that does not depend on them), do not seem to be willing to actively modernize and change their museum activities to create a greater outreach in today’s Moscow community. Thus, unlike in the Memorial Museum, the Sakharov Center does not have a digital version of its exposition except for the word description of it presented on the official website in isolation from the exposition objects⁹³ and does not collaborate with other digital museums of repression, except for the already mentioned Virtual Gulag Museum of Saint-Petersburg’s Memorial. Moreover, on the level of physical arrangement, the Museum, opened every day and free of charge, is hard to

⁹¹ Sakharov Center Museum: <https://www.sakharov-center.ru/node/11659>

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ “Political Repression in the USSR,” Sakharov Center Museum: <https://www.sakharov-center.ru/node/11677>

find in the inner corridors of the institution and usually stays empty without a museum guide or anyone to whom the questions about the content can be addressed.⁹⁴

In contrast to the somewhat confusing experience that visitors are likely to get if they attend the museum individually, the free-of-charge excursions offered by the museum staff provide a coherent narrative throughout the issue. However, these excursions are also not available for the order on the spot – instead, one should apply to them via the google form linked on the museum website. At the same time, the website of the museum does provide the historical context for every part of its exposition, but in isolation from the exposition itself. This dichotomy of experiences could also hint at the target audience of the Sakharov Center museum curators – the former dissidents, people affiliated to them, or simply those interested (and already educated) in the topic, who would most likely come to refresh the knowledge they already have rather than to learn the history of repression from scratch. At the same time, there is little chance that people who do not know much about Soviet totalitarianism or the dissidents' movement would find out about the Center or its museum activities, which creates a vicious circle not allowing the Sakharov Center to fulfill one of its primary objectives of disseminating the knowledge about the repression's history.

Having outlined the limitations, further I would like to focus on the historical narrative of Soviet repression that the museum provides. My analysis is divided into several parts: overall definition and conceptualization of Soviet repression created by the exposition curators, their definition of victims (and victimhood) and perpetrators. As with the other museums, I consider the content of exposition rather than the guided tour or the way it is described on the website,

⁹⁴ The disappointment that the visitors unfamiliar with the topic are likely to get is reflected in the feedback left in the visitor's book of the Museum. Thus, one comment states: "...Your museum was just a waste of my time. The guide was not there, the exposition does not tell anything about the topic...I understand that it is not the Gulag History museum, but you could have done a better job. The Gulag History Museum is the best museum in Moscow. Maxim, Moscow, 08.09.2020"

as my analysis primarily targets the tangible representation of history in the physical exhibitions' surrounding.

2.1. Defining Soviet Repression

According to Sakharov Center Museum curator Natalia Samover, the guiding objective behind the exposition was to disseminate knowledge on the history of Soviet totalitarianism.⁹⁵ The focus on totalitarianism in general, rather than on political repression per se, defined the overall arrangement of the exposition, which presents the whole history of the USSR in the version alternative to the officially promoted one: “through the prism of political repression and social opposition to Soviet regime.”⁹⁶

Being told from the perspective of integrity of terror to totalitarianism, the origins of political repression are pinned down in the communist ideology. The first two confronting aisles: “Mythology and Ideology in the USSR” and “Political Repression in the USSR,” represent the coercive nature of the system, with the one side exhibiting collages made out of Soviet propaganda posters and slogans, and the other – contrasting to them decrees that defined the repressive state politics. These two parts of the exposition are entirely document-based and provide a detailed history of the development of Soviet repression from the 1917 Revolution and the Civil War, to anti-religious campaigns of Lenin, dekulakization campaign, the establishment of Gulag, the Great Terror, repressions in the party and army, finishing with Khrushchev’s Secret Speech of 1956. Without any explanatory texts available on the spot except for the short description located at the beginning of each aisle, the visitors are encouraged to make a critical assessment of the presented documents by themselves, which, indeed, provide the full overview of the repressive apparatus before Stalin’s death, but do not explicitly explain what is understood as repression.

⁹⁵ Natalia Samover, curator of the Sakharov Center Museum, in: “Muzei Rossii” [Museums of Russia], *TV Station SGU TV*, December 18, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjUk-1bwitA>

⁹⁶ Sakharov Center Museum: <https://www.sakharov-center.ru/node/11659>

Gulag, being contextualized in the overall development of repressive politics, has a separate aisle “The Road to Gulag.” Also building on the NKVD documents that regulated the Gulag system, this part of the exposition for the first time introduces the victim’s perspective, on which I would elaborate in the next section. Overall, however, with no written explanations even under some photographs, the set of the documents is difficult to make sense of for someone unfamiliar with the history of Soviet repression, although the labor instruments, closely associated with Gulag in collective memory, make the narrative more real and not exiting only on the paper decrees.

If Lenin and Stalin’s repression campaigns are narrated from the perspective of the state institutions that stood behind them, political persecutions under Khrushchev and Brezhnev are told from the view of the opposition, through the installation “The Resistance to Oppression in the USSR.” Being the most saturated with information, this part is also the easiest to comprehend, since the chronological movement through the 1960s-1970s-1980s is marked by the charts outlining the key events in the human rights sector of the periods (e.g., 1973: newspaper campaigns against Sakharov; trial of Yakir and Krasin; publication of Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*) and some explications in form of witness statements of the Soviet dissidents.

Largely focusing on the opposition, however, the exposition does not provide information on actual repression – the late Soviet labor camps, hospitals that practiced punitive psychiatry, forced expulsion from the country or waves of imprisonments. Rather, it represents the history of the activists that worked on the revelation of information on these injustices: writers, human rights activists, underground artists. Being explained by the background of the museum founders, such a presentation virtually divides the narrative about Soviet repression into two parts. The first, covering the Lenin and Stalin eras, follows the top-down narrative, describing repression from the perspective of the governmental system to which they were integral. The second part, related to repression under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, presents a

narrative from the bottom-up perspective of the struggle against the political system, but not the repression itself. Such a construction of the narrative, perhaps unintentionally, limits the late Soviet repression to the persecutions happening against the human rights activists in the large Russian cities – Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, showing the reflection of the museum creators on the activities to which they were involved, but not historicizing the actual events.

2.2. Defining the Victims

As the museum exposition is largely based on the official documents that present the top-down view on repression, voices of the repressed are largely left out from the narrative. Focusing on all types of repression in the first half of the USSR's existence, the authors mention different groups of victims but hardly provide any tangible connections to their personal lives, exhibiting pieces of state propaganda but not pictures, citations, or objects that would have given insights into the perspective of people whom they affected.

The only place where victims of repression get some personalities is the section on Gulag, which is filled with small photographs – the mug shots of people who were “accused of counter-revolutionary activities” and shoot in Moscow and Moscow region,⁹⁷ which, formally, falls out from the Gulag narrative. Williams wrote that in presenting the stories of trauma through mug shots, the contextualization of the latter is crucial for the work of reconciliation.⁹⁸ Without names or dates, the photographs in the Sakharov Center Museum, unintentionally perhaps, leave the anonymity of the victims. The exposition does reveal some details of the life of inmates, being inspired by Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* and consisting of six “circles of the Gulag hell”⁹⁹: arrest, investigation, sentence, labor camp (camp life, camp culture, letters), release and rehabilitation. Not providing any personal stories, this narrative about victims' reality is mostly constructed through “trauma-icons:”¹⁰⁰ clothes, handmade

⁹⁷ Explication at the beginning of the section “The Road through the Gulag”

⁹⁸ Williams P. *Memorial Museums. A Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, 64

⁹⁹ Explication at the beginning of the section “The Road through the Gulag”

¹⁰⁰ Simine S. *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia*, 74

games, art objects and diaries, and tools of labor brought from the campsites – bricks, sickles, rusty lanterns and shovel blades, seen in other expositions dedicated to Gulag, including the one in the Moscow Gulag History Museum. The depersonalized approach towards victims is suggested to be fulfilled by the visitor independently: in several places of the exposition, the signs recommend consulting the archive of the museum to search for information on concrete victims or one's relatives.



Figure 4. Section “The Road through the Gulag”, Sakharov Center Museum, Moscow. October 14, 2020. Photo by the author

In the section dedicated to the opposition, the narrative about the victims is also somewhat more personalized. As already mentioned, this section is not built explicitly on the primary sources, but includes some citations of agents active at that time (e.g., description of the Soviet underground by Alexander Daniel). In this part, the exposition also includes folders with printed materials related to personal cases of political prisoners (e.g., Lev Netto) that can be flipped through, photographs reflecting working of some underground circles, and some photographs of the inmates, this time including their names and short biographical notes.

In general, the presentation of victims is difficult to judge, as the museum does not aspire to show the repression from their perspective, as it would be, for example, in the case of the Gulag History Museum. In general, however, when present, they become the personalized and active actors in case of the late campaigns of repressions, thus partially fulfilling the already mentioned description of “victim-heroes” suggested by Daria Khlevnuk. Still, in the narrative about the repression in Lenin and Stalin’s eras, victims are virtually not represented at all, except in the forms of the numbers from the official directives or labor tools used in the Gulag.

2.3. Defining the Persecutors

As the museum authors aspired to present Soviet history through the prism of repression, focus on the perspective of the persecutors is anticipated from the very beginning. However, the source-based presentation of displays eliminates the personal histories of the persecutors as it does with the victims. Rather than appealing to the names normally associated with Soviet repression and evoked in the other expositions (incl. the Gulag History Museum and “Russia – My History”): Dzerzhinsky, Lenin, Stalin, Beria, Molotov, etc., Sakharov Center Museum demonstrates them only through the documents they have issued, not specifically marking the names of their authors. This narrative, then, suggests considering the history of repression as, indeed, part of the totalitarian system – embedded into its legal regulations rather than being a product of personal decisions of concrete historical agents. Concrete leaders behind the repression campaigns, absent from the displays, are only shown once – in form of monumental papier-mâché heads overlooking the first two aisles of the exposition. However, since among the facial features only Stalin, Andropov and Gorbachev are recognizable, and there is no explanation provided, the actual meaning behind this installation and its relation to the exposition remains unknown for the common visitor. At the same time, the narrative about the late Soviet repression, being centered on the opposition, obfuscates the question of the persecutors altogether, reproducing some official decrees dealing with the concrete cases, but not showing the repressive system that stood behind them.



Figure 5. Sections “Mythology and Ideology in the USSR (left)” and “Political Repression in the USSR” (right), Sakharov Center Museum, Moscow. October 14, 2020. Photo by the author

The lack of information on the persecutors, as well as on contextualization of repressive decrees, is compensated in the detailed descriptions of sections provided on the website, where the text mentions Trotsky, Dzerzhinsky for the repression under Lenin, and Vyshinsky, Yagoda, Yezhov and Beria for Stalin’s period, highlighted in the bold print.¹⁰¹ However, since none of the explications is provided “on the spot,” the names neither of the persecutors, nor – of the organizations that carried out the repression, are presented in the exposition, subscribing the source of repression to the more generalized concept of totalitarianism.

The Museum of Sakharov Center, therefore, represents the objective story of repression – but, for the sake of objectivity, deprived of any explanations above the presented primary documents. Conceptualizing repression in the paradigm of the human rights violations and

¹⁰¹ Section “Political Repression in the USSR,” Sakharov Center Museum: <https://www.sakharov-center.ru/node/11677>

struggle for democratization that corresponded to the notions in the public sphere of the 1990s described above, the museum presents the more historicized vision only on the repression before the death of Stalin. The second half of repressive politics, as already mentioned, focuses on the history of the opposition to repression and not the repression itself. Although these two narratives – the human rights activism and persecutions against it, are interconnected, the absence of the top-down perspective, or the perspective of victims of those late Soviet repressive campaigns, with the high probability creates an image that the persecutions only affected the relatively narrow circle of Moscow or Saint-Petersburg dissidents and their sympathizers.

Conclusion: The Memorial and Sakharov Center from the Heyday to Decline of Public Influence

The two institutions considered above present the formation, development, and the present state of the independent publicly available historical narrative about the Soviet repression. The heydays of the Memorial and Sakharov Center activities fell on the early-late 1990s, when they were not tied by the state-imposed regulations, had wide public support and, indeed, were the main agents creating and disseminating the collective memory of Soviet repression. Since 2000, with the intensification of state historical politics, their significance in the memory field has been in constant decline and, despite still being able to function as places for alternative historical narrative, at least on the pragmatic level, the organizations, pressured from above, have been limited in the public outreach they can aspire to get.

The historical narrative about the repression presented in temporary exhibitions of the International Memorial Society and the permanent exposition of the Sakharov Center, covers the years from 1917 to the mid-1980, thus including the Red Terror, the Great Purges, Gulag, and the post-Stalinist repression against the dissidents. Although the institutions were intrinsically linked to the collection and preservation of the memory of victims of Soviet political repression, today both of them widened their horizons onto other cases of human rights

violations. Thus, in the Memorial Museum, this expansion fell into the inclusion of international cases of totalitarian systems and repressions of the 20th century, while in Sakharov Center – onto the post-socialist repression and reflections on the injustices happening in present time.

The Sakharov Center, being the only institution with the permanent exposition on Soviet repression, narrates their history from the perspective of the struggle against political unfreedom, thus showing the perspective that can be called the dissident's perspective. Having the potential to serve as a place to teach about the history of Soviet repression, the Museum of the Center does not, it seems, aspire to become one, not simplifying or explaining the presented documents or developing the digital tools to do so. Rather, it stays on the same stage as it was in the late 1990s, not being able (or not willing) to compete with the more attractive, easy-to-learn narratives presented by state-sponsored institutions.

Zuzanna Bogumił argued that the collective memory field was left by the independent agents naturally, as a consequence of the aging of people who were involved in the “carnival of memory of the late 1980s.”¹⁰² Having considered the development of the Memorial and Sakharov Center, I would not completely agree with this statement, as it only relates to one marginal aspect of reasons behind the decline of the independent agents' influence. The more important in this regard, then, was the intensified monopolization of the memory field by the state agents who promote the new view on the history of repression that falls more neatly into the political agenda of Putinism, on which I would elaborate in the next chapter.

¹⁰² Bogumił Z. *Gulag Memories. The Rediscovery and Commemoration of Russia's Repressive Past*, 204

Chapter 2. Museumification of Soviet Political Repression in 2000-2020

“Every new regime rebuilds the past so radically...and every time the heroes turn to villains, survivors are rewritten as devils, the names of streets are changed, faces scrubbed out from photographs, encyclopedias re-edited. And so every regime destroys and rebuilds the previous city.”
(Pomerantsev P., *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible*, 146)¹⁰³

Russian Historical Politics from 2000 to 2020

The election of Vladimir Putin to be the president in 2000 signalled profound changes in Russian social, political, and cultural spheres, which made the researchers distinguish the 2000s as a separate period of Russian historiography – the “Putin’s Russia,” which I find a convenient framework to adapt in this research. In general, the main changes as compared to Gorbachev and Yeltsin’s governments were in the strengthening of the vertical of power undertaken by Putin from the very start of his presidency, which allowed him “to eliminate key sources of opposition and consolidate authoritarian rule.”¹⁰⁴ At the same time, the prevalence of members of the governing party “United Russia” in all the major governmental branches, further homogenized the government and consolidated the power in the hands of Kremlin-loyal agents. In such a framework of power relations, the election of Dmitry Medvedev, another member of the “United Russia” in 2008 that happened with the active support of Putin and with the simultaneous promise of the former to appoint Putin a Prime minister, “had virtually no effect on the balance of power in Russia.”¹⁰⁵ For this reason, mentioning some advancements in historical politics done by Medvedev, I would not consider the period of his presidency (2008-2012) in separation.

This omnipresent nature of Putin’s regime, aspiring to establish control over all spheres of public life, also allowed the researchers to develop the term for defining the governing model

¹⁰³ Pomerantsev P., *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible. The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014)

¹⁰⁴ Levitsky S., Way L.A. *Competitive Authoritarianism. Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 186

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 199

developed by him – “Putinism”. According to Brian D. Taylor, the main features of Putin’s “hyperpresidential structure” is the “dominant belief...in the need for a strong state to protect Russia against internal and external enemies,” which intensified with the re-election of Putin in 2012 and reached its peak during the annexation of Crimea in 2014.¹⁰⁶ The key ideas of Putinism, which are reflected in historical politics I further consider, are “statism, anti-Westernism (in particular, anti-Americanism), conservatism/ antiliberalism,” with the key advertised features being control and order, unity, loyalty and hypermasculinity¹⁰⁷ – creating the image that Russia needs a strong authoritarian leader, to a large extent reviving the culture of the personality cult of the country’s ruler.

For the discursive pattern about Russian history, the coming of Putin to be a president signalled the shift from a Western-oriented model of development characteristic for Yeltsin’s period to searching for Russia’s unique path, its *Sonderweg* that was to confront the general frustration with the failed attempts of the 1990s democratization. Naturally, in this process of searching for Russian uniqueness, historical politics and history in general, came to be regarded as a tool engaged in internal and external politics, too indispensable to be left uncontrolled by the state’s central power. When it came to assessment of the 20th-century events, the new historical identity as it was developing from the early 2000s, was haphazard and somewhat ambiguous: Nikolay Kaposov defined the new paradigm of state historical politics as *partial presentism*, “politics without historical project.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, in the official perception, the “uniqueness” of contemporary Russia simultaneously meant its historical “greatness”, thus automatically refuting the possibility to present any period of Russian history in a negative light. The pre-1917 glory of the Russian Empire needed to be organically connected with the achievements of Soviet Russia and, subsequently, with the early-21st century standing of the Russian Federation. Within this pattern, the history of Soviet repression acquired an ambivalent

¹⁰⁶ Taylor B. *The Code of Putinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5-6

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 20-30

¹⁰⁸ Kaposov N. *Pamyat’ Strogogo Rezhima: Istoria I Politika v Rossii*, 144

form, with the government-supported public memory agents having to solve the dilemma of its seeming discrepancy with the main nation-building narrative of the Russian greatness – the victory in the Great Patriotic War.

As in the 2000s historical politics in Russia underwent a rapid intensification, in the following sub-chapter I will only focus on the most notable and, eventually, influential events for the re-writing of the history of repression. Mainly, changes in historical politics over the last two decades followed the overarching goal to consolidate the history-writing process in the hands of government-controlled agents. Naturally, it envisaged the implementation of protective measures that restricted uncontrolled interventions into the memory field – from legal constraints put on the individual researchers, to the creation of state-sponsored alternatives to grassroots commemoration initiatives from the 1990s. At the same time, analysis of the situation in the field of Russian memory politics shows the persistent domination of the public history field by the narrative of the Great Victory of 1945. In this light, public history of Soviet repression became subordinated to the new paradigm of presenting Russian history as a history of winning stakes and great achievements, which, in its turn, corresponded to the newly assigned role of historical discipline in nurturing Russian patriotism. Further, I will consider how some of the state initiatives have shaped the public image of Soviet repression through various spheres – legal, educational, social and cultural initiatives.

Protective Measures: Archival Counter-Revolution

Assigning the greater role to the already mentioned “Russian patriotic upbringing” from the early 2000s automatically delegitimized public accusations of some national heroes (e.g., Stalin) or state structures (e.g., NKVD), who, in the official historical discourse, were essential for Russia’s historical development. Such a perception created a halo of their integrity and elicited further legislations, which aimed to “protect” them, simultaneously minimizing the opportunity of any external interference into their assessment.

First and foremost, this new paradigm affected the functioning of state archives, which underwent the so-called “archival counter-revolution” that restricted their accessibility for non-state-affiliated users. Yeltsin’s era was characterized by the relative public openness of archival materials, declassification of which was defined by the 1993 Law “On State Secrets” that set the security-classifying period of 30 years from the document’s creation. In Putin’s Russia, the shift in the archival policies was signaled in 2004, when the government introduced the new Law “On Archival Management in the Russian Federation,” the main outcome of which was complication and restriction of access to primary sources, mainly those produced in the Soviet period, and especially the documents related to political repression. The new regulations set a 75-years restriction on access to any document classified as “private” for anyone who is not a relative of the person to whom the given document is related. “Privacy,” at the same time, was ill-defined: practically any document related to the history of Soviet repression – be it official persecution decrees or individual cases of victims, could be declared “private” and concealed from the researchers. Simultaneously, some of the earlier de-classified documents were again classified – the most telling example of which was the re-classification of 116 out of 134 documents related to the Katyn massacre in the same year.¹⁰⁹

From the early 2000s, the inner working of the state archives also became more concealed from the public gaze – and the direction to which the archival regulations have been moving can be judged only from the individual cases leaking into the media. From the known cases described by Anton Weiss-Wendt (2020), the reactionary character of the archival regulations becomes obvious. Thus, as a response to the Ukraine Parliament’s proclamation of famine of 1932-1933 an act of genocide in 2005, three years later, the Russian Federal Archival Agency published a collection of documents “Famine in the USSR, 1930-1934”, where, in the preface, it stated that “Not a single document supporting the concept of ‘Holodomor-genocide’

¹⁰⁹ Koposov N. *Pamyat’ strogogo rezhima: istoria i politika v Rossii*, 156

in Ukraine...has been discovered.”¹¹⁰ The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia in 2014 and the followed-up crisis caused another wave of classifications of documents related to 20th century Russian history. The new regulations put forward by the Intergovernmental Commission on the Protection of State Security mainly targeted NKVD-KGB archives, extending the classification term for their reports to another 30 years.¹¹¹ In 2018, the staff of the Gulag History Museum discovered that in the same 2014 the Russian government issued a secret act declaring the destruction of personal cards of Gulag prisoners. These documents containing unique information on sentences, transfers between places of confinement and release (or death declaration) of the prisoners, received the 80-years retention period, at the expiration of which they were to be destroyed.¹¹² The inner working of the state archives containing other documents related to repression (State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), Russian State Military Archive (RGVA), Central Archive of the Federal Security Service (TsA FSB)) remains hidden from the researchers, however, the leaked news give evidence to the clear reluctance of the Russian government to not only publish, but to even preserve the information on the atrocious pages of the Russian past.

Russian Patriotic Upbringing: Historical Politics in the Educational Sphere

In the public sphere, the utilitarian charge of history with the aim to nurture the patriotic upbringing most visibly resonated in the educational programs. Raising the generation proud of its past became the major aim of the education system of Putin’s Russia. History, therefore, became regarded as a tool of disseminating the officially sanctioned morals. In this new paradigm, the government took decisive steps towards the unification of content and transmission of historical knowledge. In 2000, the model of “Unity of Education and Upbringing” was introduced. Its concept implied that the main aim of historical education was

¹¹⁰ Weiss-Wendt A. *Putin’s Russia and Falsification of History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 42

¹¹¹ “Voprosy Mezhdvdomstvennoj komissii po zashchite gosudarstvennoj tajny” [Questions of the Intergovernmental Commission on the Protection of State Security] N 563 (Moscow, August 11, 2014), <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=102088876&rdk=&backlink=1>

¹¹² “Terror snimajut s arhivnogo ucheta” [Terror is Removed from the Archival Accounting], *Kommersant* 99, June 8, 2018, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3652040>

to “nurture the pride and love for the Motherland.”¹¹³ Naturally, any discussions of the wrongdoings of any of the country’s officials became immediately labeled anti-patriotic and threatening for the working of the government trying to “defend” the country’s footing on the international scene. In practice, the decree on the unity of education caused the wave of examinations of the already existent history books for schools and universities, and the introduction of the new ones, written by the pro-Kremlin “academicians.”¹¹⁴

The new historical narrative promoted by the government-loyal actors of the educational field abandoned the conceptualization of the Soviet Union in a totalitarian analytical model and substituted it with the modernization model of presenting the Soviet history as a succession of achievements – in social, industrial, and cultural developments.¹¹⁵ The way this new paradigm affected the presentation of Soviet repression can be understood from one of the officially recommended history textbooks – the textbook for history teachers by Alexander Filippov (2007). One of the most characteristic passages from it was that “not without tragic mistakes, Soviet Russia achieved great goals in modernization and now firmly stands on the path of democratic development, despite the obstacles created by the West.”¹¹⁶ Repression, thus, was treated as “a mistake”, moreover, mostly caused by the “evil West” – reflecting the already mentioned anti-West notions of Putinism.

In 2013, President Putin again voiced the necessity to create a universal history course book. In April 2014, the Center of Political Information (loyal to Kremlin) have prepared and presented a report “On the issues of teaching history in Russian educational institutions.” In general, this extensive document repeated the earlier critique of presenting the Soviet period as

¹¹³ “Konceptcija istoricheskogo obrazovaniya v obshheobrazovatel'nyh uchrezhdeniyah Rossijskoj Federacii” [The State Program of Historical Education in the Country] (project), 2000: <https://his.1sept.ru/2000/no08.htm>

¹¹⁴ I put the quotation marks here because many of the “official Kremlin” historians have earned their history degrees through distortion of historical facts, plagiarism, and un-scientific approach. See, e.g., the scandal around dissertation of Vladimir Medinsky, Russian Culture Minister, in 2017-2018: “Russia's 'Myth'-Busting Culture Minister Embroiled in Doctoral Thesis Scandal.” *Radio Liberty*, October 3, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-medinsky-culture-ministry-thesis-scandal/28771952.html>

¹¹⁵ Miller, “Politika pamyati v Rossii. Rol' gosudarstvennykh agentov” [Memory politics in Russia. Role of non-governmental agents]. *Gefter*, January 31, 2017, <http://gefter.ru/archive/20967>

¹¹⁶ Cited in: Koposov, *Pamt' strogogo rezhima*, 158

“the time of total violence, repression and contempt of human rights,”... while “nullifying or consciously distorting objective conquests, achievements, and heroic acts of that period.”¹¹⁷ However, unlike the earlier decrees, the report clearly stated that any negative interpretations of the (especially, late) Soviet period are the acts of the country’s enemies – i.e., the USA and the EU, striving to undermine the Russian reputation in the international arena. “In general, this time [the late USSR, Brezhnev and Gorbachev’s eras] is interpreted in the ideological clichés: stagnation, fight against the dissidents, punitive psychiatry, the absolute power of KGB, moral and ethical degradation, etc. [...] gradually leading the students to think of desirability of the world-leadership of the USA. [...] This way, the anti-Russian myths set in the contemporary school books persuade the pupils in the historical harmfulness of our country’s sovereignty.”¹¹⁸ The novelty of this rhetoric was not only in its open and pure presentism, but also in substituting the previous discourse of repression being “overstated” to it being coined as a completely made-up “myth.” By issuing this statement in 2014, the government practically heralded that after-Stalin campaigns of repressions (to the actual presence of which there are no doubts) were a non-existent product of anti-Soviet (i.e., anti-Russian) propaganda.

The idea to universalize historical education and to make it transmit only state-sanctioned views on history has not been abandoned by the Russian government up until today. Thus, in April 2021, in his annual speech to the Federal Government, Putin expressed his concern about some history books presenting the history of the Great Patriotic War “as if it is not [written] about us,”¹¹⁹ which led to another wave of the commissions’ checks. Along with the recently accepted amendments of educational activities (to be put in force in June 2021), which drastically restricted (if not yet eliminated completely) the ability of individual

¹¹⁷ “O problemah prepodavaniya istorii v rossijskikh uchebnykh zavedeniah” [On the issues of teaching history in Russian educational institutions], *Center of Political Information* (Moscow, 2014), 15

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 20

¹¹⁹ Putin V. “Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniju” [Message from the President to the Federal Government] (Moscow, April 21, 2021), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65418>

researchers and non-governmental organizations to pursue educational activities,¹²⁰ the standardization of history books early on signaled that the government has stopped disclosing its desire to monopolize the public history production, and started to do it openly, with the noble connotations of defending Russian sovereignty from the external enemies.

Monopolization and re-purposing of the history sphere have been happening with the simultaneous conceptualization of the Great Patriotic War as the main nation-building narrative. Protective measures towards the fixation of the Great Victory as the main object of pride and Russian patriotism included the development of the legal acts that were to assess its inviolability. In 2009, Sergey Shoygu (then – the Minister of Emergency Situations), for the first time advocated for the necessity to criminalize the “incorrect statements about the history of WWII and the role played in it by the USSR.”¹²¹ This initiative fell in line with the historical politics direction pursued by Dmitri Medvedev. In 2009, he also voiced the necessity to protect the memory about the Great Patriotic War, which, later the same year, was followed by the law draft for the creation of “Presidential Commission on Fighting the Falsification of History.” The initial suggestion, though never reaching the State Duma, suggested the creation of the public tribunal for directing the historical politics and issuing additional correctives to the Criminal Code, as well as monitoring and taking actions against anti-Russian historical politics of the neighboring countries.¹²² In May 2009, the commission was established, chaired by the head of the President’s Administration. Being heavily criticized both in Russia and abroad for its obvious aim at imposing the state ideology in a country where it is forbidden by the constitution, the commission was abolished at the end of Medvedev’s presidency in 2012, without producing any tangible outcomes of its functioning. Nonetheless, the existence and the wide discussion of it has fixated the phenomenon of “falsification of history” in the Russian

¹²⁰ “Kakim budet novyj zakon o prosvetitel'skoj deyatel'nosti?” [What would be the new law on the educational activities?] *The State Duma of the Russian Federation Federal Assembly*, March 16, 2021, <http://duma.gov.ru/news/50970/>

¹²¹ Miller A. “Rossia: vlast i istoria” [Russia: power and history], *The Moscow Carnegie Center* (November 25, 2009), <https://polit.ru/article/2009/11/25/miller/>

¹²² For more, see Koposov N. *Pamyat' Strogogo Rezhima: Istoria i Politika v Rossii*, 228-238

public discourse, as a credible threat imposed on Russia by the external enemies and the fifth columnists trying to shatter its stability and well-being.

Practical Reconciliation: Patriotic Mourning?

The persistent muting of public memory of the atrocious side of Soviet totalitarianism could not completely eradicate the field of the collective memory of repression developed over the earlier years. However, in the paradigm of nation-building based exclusively on the glories of its historical past, the conceptualization of Soviet repression took a contradictory form regarding both subscribing it to a certain model of treating the traumatic past and the sanctioned content of it. Looking at the top-down historical initiatives of the last 20 years, it becomes clear that the government has established the “acceptable” framing of history of Soviet repression, admitting the atrocities of Lenin’s Red Terror and Stalin’s Great Terror, while largely downplaying the scale of repression campaigns after the Great Patriotic War, and completely denying their presence in the late Soviet period. Such temporal limitations of repression allowed to partly avoid the contradictions discussed earlier. Another tactic that aimed at employing the history of repression as another tool of “uniting the Russians” was in presenting it as a national trauma of all Russian people, not elaborating on the concrete victims or groups of people, thus making it not only more relatable, but also easier to exploit for different purposes.

Dmitry Medvedev, despite his contribution to the defensive framing of Russian history,¹²³ is generally considered to be a more radical anti-Stalinist politician than Putin. On the 30th of October 2009, the annual Day of Victims of Soviet Political Repression, he published a new entry on the official Presidential blog headed “Memory of National Tragedies is as Sacred as the Memory of National Victories.” In the post, Medvedev condemned people who try to justify human suffering by “some higher state purposes” and “hide justification of those who

¹²³ See, e.g., the blog entry “Russia, forward!” published by Medvedev in September 2009, where the then-president suggested that in history people should see “great victories and tragic mistakes; examples that should be followed and features of the best national character.” Medvedev D. “Rossia, Vpered!” [Russia, forward!], *Presidential blog*, September 10, 2009: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/5413>

destructured their own people behind the façade of restoring historical justice.”¹²⁴ Interestingly, in the text, Medvedev directly mentioned the harmful effect of oversaturation of Russian public history with the Great Victory narrative. However, while calling for higher awareness about the atrocious Soviet totalitarianism, he only mentioned one name of the persecutor – Stalin, and only one timeframe – 1937-1938, virtually restricting the officially sanctioned history of repression to the years of the Great Terror. The questions of who is mourned and why were not even raised, substituted instead by the useful model of the “national trauma”, needed to be memorized and exercised by all Russian people.

Another approach towards the inclusion of the history of repression to the narrative of unification of the Russian nation was in adopting the mourning model already developed by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Zuzanna Bogumił argued that from the late Socialism, the Church has been developing the narrative about the repression that went in contrast with the state-accepted one: “Rather than urging that the nations’ past glories be renounced, this discourse argued that the repression’s victims were necessary and their lives had some point.”¹²⁵ However, if the development of the state’s approach towards Soviet repression and the simultaneous convergence of ROC with the secular political power in contemporary Russia is considered,¹²⁶ it becomes clear that it was convenient for the government to adopt this framework, using it for reconciliation through admitting the “gratefulness” for the victim’s sacrifice rather than presenting it as an outcome of the pointless destructive state system. Rapprochement of the secular officials with the ROC in historical politics became noticeable already in 2007, when, on the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repression, President Putin, together with Moscow Regional Governor, attended the religious ceremony in

¹²⁴ Medvedev D. “Pamyat’ o natsionalnyh tragediyah tak ze svyachenna kak pamyat o pobedah” [Memory of national tragedies is as sacred as the memory of national victories], *Presidential blog*, October 30, 2009, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/5862>

¹²⁵ Bogumił, *Gulag Memories. The Rediscovery and Commemoration of Russia's Repressive Past*, 195

¹²⁶ One peculiar example of the last few years is the creation of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in Moscow region in 2020. (see, e.g., “Russia’s Controversial New Military Cathedral is Consecrated”, *RFE/RL*, June 15, 2020: <https://www.rferl.org/a/consecration-of-the-main-cathedral-of-russian-armed-forces/30671707.html>)

Butovo held by Patriarch Alexis II. This was the first time the head of the Russian Orthodox Church and head of the Russian state took part in a commemorative ceremony for the victims of Soviet terror.¹²⁷

In 2010, the government initiated the creation of the Patriarchate Council of Culture, providing the church authorities with more channels to promote their views on the past. One of the first interferences into the secular field of public history from the church was in preparation of the exhibition “Orthodox Rus” that was held in Moscow in honor of the Day of the National Unity and which was curated by the archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov. The success of the exhibition allowed some of the highest officials of the Russian Orthodox Church (headed by Shevkunov) to pursue further expansion into the field of public memory. In 2013, for the 400-anniversary of Romanov’s rule, the Russian Patriarchy developed the second exhibition, “Romanovs,” which was financially supported by the Moscow government and was displayed in one of the main exhibition venues of Moscow – Manege.¹²⁸ In the next year, the Patriarchal Council of Culture developed the exposition “20th Century. 1917-1945. From the Great Turbulence to the Great Victory” and, in 2016 – “Russia – My History. 1945-2016”. These expositions, their content and highly digitalized and accessible modes of presenting Russian history laid the foundations for the “Russia – My History” parks which were established in 2015 all around the country and will be discussed further in the chapter.

Intensification of Cultural Politics and Monopolization of Collective Memory

Production: 2012-2020

After being re-elected as a President in 2012, Putin also put more effort into the development of cultural politics. “Since the Russian Constitution explicitly forbids any state

¹²⁷ Sniegon, “Dying in the Soviet Gulag for the Future Glory of Mother Russia?” 120

¹²⁸ The secular-religious character of the exhibition is also important. Being dedicated to the historical topic, it exhibited some relics (e.g., the icon of the Mother of God from Feodosiia) and, at the closing of the exhibition, in the secular space of Manege, the religious ceremony was held in front of the icon. (in “Vystavku «Pravoslavnaja Rus'. Romanovy» v Moskve posetili bolee 300 tysjach chelovek” [Exhibition Orthodox Russia in Moscow was visited by more than 300.000 people] *Official website of the ROC*: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3391568.html>)

ideology, Putin's call was formulated as a question of identity and as a need for a Russian 'national idea,'" wrote Lena Johnson.¹²⁹ Indeed, Vladimir Medinsky, the new Minister of Culture appointed in May 2012, more actively embarked on reorganization of the Russian cultural sphere. In December 2014, he issued the decree "Foundations for a New State Cultural Policy,"¹³⁰ which continued the thread of the no longer hidden instrumentalization of culture already laid by the first term of Putin's presidency. In particular, the document stated that "the state cultural politics are integral to the national security of the Russian Federation."¹³¹ And, among the "most threatening aspects for the Russian future", listed "deformation of historical memory, negative assessment of crucial periods of Russian history, dissemination of the fallacious views on the Russian historical backwardness."¹³²

Apart from the individual or church interferences into the field of historical politics, the Russian government pursued to establish alternative historical organizations that would legitimize the top-down historical initiatives by framing them as being launched – or, at least, supported, by the academic community. In 2012, the Russian Historical Society (RHS) headed by the chair of the State Duma Sergey Naryshkin was created, with the aim to "popularize Russian history in Russia and abroad, preserve historical legacy and traditions and support historical education."¹³³ Ideology-wise, the organization established itself as a continuation of the Russian Imperial Historical Society (existed from 1866 to 1920), supporting the idea of bearing connections to the Russian imperial greatness. Formally being an NGO, today the organization is mostly sponsored by the fund "History of the Fatherland," founded by President

¹²⁹ Johnson, *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin's Russia*. 2018, 15

¹³⁰ Among other things, the document highlighted the specificity of the Russian mentality and even provided the list of sources "On the characteristic features of Russian Mentality" ("Ukaz prezidenta rossijskoj federacii ob utverzhenii osnov gosudarstvennoj kul'turnoj politiki" [Foundations of the State Cultural Politics] Moscow, Kremlin, December 24, 2014, N 808, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/acts/files/0001201412250002.pdf>, 41-42)

¹³¹ Ibid, 3

¹³² Ibid, 6

¹³³ Information from the official page of the fund "History of the Fatherland" <https://fond.historyrussia.org/fond/o-fonde.html>

Putin in 2016.¹³⁴ Another crucial player in the field, the Russian Military-Historical Society (RMHS) headed by the Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky, was also established in 2012. Bearing a similar agenda to the RHS, it has focused on working with the military history, actively engaging in the preservation of monuments, organizing historical reconstructions and festivals, carrying out educational and museum projects. Similarly to the RHS, the RMHS claimed its connection to Imperial Russia and the Imperial Russian Military-Historical Society (1907-1917).¹³⁵ Much like the RHS, this organization never aimed to hide its purpose of disseminating the ideology-driven view on history, specifically using in its program the word “propaganda” without any negative connotations and dedicating the separate section on its official reports to the “monumental propaganda” activities. Both organizations are actively involved in the creation of the “desired” memory of the 20th century, controlling, initiating and supporting the projects that form the public perception of history, creating monuments, museums, festivals and open discussions that, thanks to the wide governmental support and facilitated access to sources, overshadow similar initiatives initiated by the much lesser powerful independent historical agents.

From 2015, the Russian government started to be more active in curating the collective memory of Soviet repression. The first significant step towards developing an officially-sanctioned reconciliation project was taken in 2015, when, on August 18, the Russian government, under the signature of Dmitry Medvedev, posted the “Concept of State Policy to Perpetuate the Memory of Victims of Political Repression” to be implemented on the governmental level in 2015-2019.¹³⁶ The main objective with which the authors of the

¹³⁴ “Ukaz prezidenta rossijskoj federacii o sozdanii fonda «Istorija Otechestva»” [Presidential Decree on creation of the Found “Istorija Otechestva”], *Moscow, Kremlin, April 6, 2016, N 163*, <https://fond.historyrussia.org/images/documents/ukazprezidenta.pdf>

¹³⁵ “Otchet o deyatelnosti 2013-2020” [Activity report for 2013-2020], *Russian Military-Historical Society* (2020), 3

¹³⁶ This document was an outcome of the plead put forward to Dmitry Medvedev in February 2011 at a meeting of the President Administration’s Council on the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights (created in 2004). In December, the president signed a decree “On formation of the working group to prepare the suggestions towards realization of the program of commemorating victims of political repression”. Importantly, the working group included some members of independent historical NGOs. Thus, the initial program was drafted in cooperation with the department of International Economics and Politics at the Higher School of Economics and

document entrusted the necessity to start the reconciliation process was that it should unite the people and reestablish historical continuity interrupted by the 1917 October Revolution. Among the listed principles in accordance to which the commemorative politics should be exercised, were: “acceptance of the inheritance of historical development of Russian Federation; understanding the tragedy of the social breakup which led to the events of 1917, the Civil War and the mass political repression; the necessity of objective analysis of both the achievements and the tragic pages of Soviet history, including political repression; condemnation of the ideology of political terror.” However, the way the document was formulated suggested little focus on commemorating historical events and victims, but rather – on upbringing the new generation of “active patriots” – the term regularly mentioned in the text, although with no clear connections to the commemoration of victims of repression. Aiming to serve as a tangible step towards the reconciliation process, the document did not offer any concrete suggestions on what has to be done and by whom, while the commissions’ assemblies focused almost exclusively on the rehabilitation process. Neither did the commission mention some of the already existing commemoration projects (by the Memorial, Sakharov Center, or ROC) or the possibilities to cooperate with other memory agents. Without reaching any tangible outcomes, the commission stopped its activities in 2019.

In 2017, the Russian government undertook another large-scale commemorative project by erecting the first state-initiated monument dedicated to victims of Soviet repression, the Wall of Grief in downtown Moscow. The development of the monument started in 2014, with the President’s endorsement on its creation. The next year, the competition for the monument’s design, judged by the board that included both civil and cultural officials (Roman Romanov, the director of the State Gulag History Museum, was charged to oversee the implementation of the project) and historical experts (including some members of the independent human rights

the Memorial society. In October 2014, the paper was presented to Putin, who had by then resumed the presidency. (Smith K.E. “Monument of our Times. Commemorating victims of repressions in Putin’s Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 71:8 (2019), 1323)

organizations: Kaganov, Roginskii, Alexeeva, Pamfilova), was carried out, resulting in the winning project by Grigorii Fragyluan.¹³⁷



Figure 6. The Wall of Grief in Moscow, Wikimedia Commons, November 9, 2019

The monument's construction mostly funded by the city of Moscow was finished in 2017 and caused a number of discussions and critiques from the independent memory agents. One of the most debatable aspects of the monument was its location, unlike Solovetsky's Stone, not bearing any historical connections to Soviet repression. The Wall of Grief is located on the busy Moscow Garden Ring, with the heavy traffic and little cultural objects located in the vicinity, making it concealed from what is usually considered as the cultural center of the city. "We met several times with human rights activists and we found a spot which satisfied everyone. This is a relatively large space, approximately a hectare, so it is possible not only to put up a monument but to create a memorial complex where people can come, sit on a bench with their children, and talk," commented Ombudsperson Ella Pamfilova on the choice.¹³⁸ Still, after the establishment of the monument, there were no signs of any development of the larger memorial complex on the site. The form of the monument, although not to be discussed in detail

¹³⁷ Fragyluan is also the author of the memorial plaque dedicated to Varlam Shalamov, placed on Chistoprudnyj pereulok, Moscow, on the 30th October, 2013

¹³⁸ Cited in: Smith K., "Monument for our Times. Commemorating victims of repressions in Putin's Russia," 1329

here, was also questioned. It represents a gigantic (6 x 35 meters) bronze curved wall, with a bas-relief of faceless human figures pressed against each other, and narrow cuttings that “give visitors the chance to physically put themselves in the place of the victims”¹³⁹ by standing under them. Both the form and the discursive framework constructed around the monument gave an idea of what Kathleen Smith called “mourning without reflection.”¹⁴⁰ Indeed, the lack of delving into the history of Soviet repression conveniently enabled the government to avoid the question of responsibility, quoting the opening speech of President Putin, presenting repression as “a tragedy for all our people, all our society...culture and self-consciousness.”^{141 142}

Simultaneously with launching the state-sponsored cultural campaigns of commemorating the repression, the government started taking more radical steps towards monopolization of this field of collective memory, which largely aimed at delegitimization of the work of independent memory agents. Thus, while the State Gulag Museum received a new building and generous funding from the city government, the grounds and former barracks hosting the Perm-36 Museum opened by Perm Memorial in the former late Soviet labor camp in 1996, were overtaken by the regional government. The Museum lost its independent status and was turned into a state institution, with the newly assigned museum director and the subsequent change in the exposition, including partial demolishment of the facilities preserved from the time of the labor camp.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Ibid., 1333

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 1337

¹⁴¹ President Putin’s Speech on the opening of the Wall of Grief: “Opening of Wall of Grief memorial to victims of political repression,” October 30, 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55948>

¹⁴² Apart from monumental expression of commemoration of victims, the government suggested an alternative commemorative ritual connected to the Wall of Grief, “The Bell of Memory”. From 2017, on the 30st of October, it established, under the supervision of the Gulag History Museum, the commemorative action that, on the one hand, followed the Memorial’s action “Return of the Names,” discussed in the previous chapter, on the other hand, presented history of repression in the new sanctioned light. Instead of reading the names of the victims as in the “Return of the Names”, “The Bell of Memory” suggests people to silently lay the flowers to the monument and to ring the symbolic bell to honor the memory of the “tragedy.”

¹⁴³ For more, see: Bogumił Z. *Gulag Memories. The Rediscovery and Commemoration of Russia’s Repressive Past*, 141-164

The government also introduced a number of legal amendments destined to limit the potential influence of independent researchers in the public sphere. Weiss-Wendt (2020) listed the four articles from the Russian Penal Code that affected independent researchers and historical organizations: Article 354.1, “glorification of Nazism and desecration of symbols of Russian military glory”; Article 282, “incitement of ethnic, racial, and/or religious hatred”; Article 244, “desecration of dead bodies and burial sites” (specifically in the context of the Second World War); and Article 20.3, “display and dissemination of Nazi symbols.”¹⁴⁴ Individual historians of Soviet repression also often fell victims of falsified accusations in other crimes – as happened in the case of the Karelian Memorial historian Yuri Dmitriev,¹⁴⁵ while historical NGOs were affected by the earlier decree on the “foreign agents”, introduced by the Duma in July 2012.¹⁴⁶ The Memorial Society and the Sakharov Center, both declared “foreign agents” in 2014,¹⁴⁷ were sentenced to paying significant fines and constrained in their activities while the listening processes were happening.

The New State of Collective Memory of Soviet Political Repression

When the last two decades of the collective memory of Soviet repression are considered, significant shifts in both the agency of memory representation and the discursive framework can be noticed. The most visible change lies in the intensified monopolization of the memory field by the government or government-supported agents, overtaking the places of independent researchers and cultural activists and establishing the newly assigned executors of the memory politics (the RHS and the RMHS being the most prominent among many others). This power struggle shows that the state has shifted the question of remembering the repression from the

¹⁴⁴ Weiss A. *Putin's Russia and Falsification of History*, 243

¹⁴⁵ For more, see, e.g. “Yuri Dmitriyev: Russian historian's sex abuse sentence increased” *BBC News*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54334555>

¹⁴⁶ This new law allowed the Ministry of Justice to declare a foreign agent any Russian organization that deals with politics and receives funding from abroad.

¹⁴⁷ For more, see, e.g.: “Russian Court Fines Sakharov Center Under 'Foreign Agent' Law,” *RFE/RL*, March 23, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-sakharov-center-foreign-agent/26916484.html>; “Leading Russian NGOs Muzzled By 'Foreign Agents' Label,” *RFE/RL*, July 23, 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-muzzles-ngos-foreign-agent-law/25467789.html>

democratization and human rights agenda to which it was included under Gorbachev and Yeltsin to the question of national unity and sovereignty. The revision of the discourse sanctioned de-legitimation of any interpretation of the history of repression that does not coincide with the officially approved one. Likewise, framing the history of repression in the sovereignty agenda allowed the government to use legal measures against the “undesired” views of history – by implementing the new laws and projects specifically targeted at limiting uncontrolled participation in the construction of the collective memory.

Another crucial amendment of Russian historical politics was connected to the growing importance of the narrative about the Great Victory. Acquiring the central place, the history of the Victory has been continuously used not only to silence the discussion of repression as being executed by the same political leaders who won the War, but also to drastically change the whole narrative about it. The official framing of the past 20 years has created the depersonalized image of repression being “a national tragedy,” with no one to blame except for the “difficult and controversial stages.”¹⁴⁸ The definition of victims has also been generalized to include “all the people,” with scarce discussions of the concrete individuals or social and national groups that suffered from the state terror. Moreover, the preoccupation of historical politics with the narrative of the Great Victory automatically diminished any discussions of the late Soviet campaigns of repressions, approaching the period of the late 1950s – 1990s as a period of decline of Soviet Russia caused by the Western powers who “invented” the myths of late-Soviet repressive totalitarianism for undermining the Soviet Union’s reputation and eventually leading to its collapse. The content of the officially sanctioned memory will be analyzed further in the chapter, on the example of the Gulag History Museum and the “Russia – My History” history parks. However, from the considered cases of historical politics, it becomes clear that Putin’s Russia approach to the role of history in the society has become alarmingly similar to the one

¹⁴⁸ President Putin’s Speech on the opening of the Wall of Grief

exercised by the Soviet leaders: widely employing the state cultural propaganda and silencing the independent voices.¹⁴⁹

The Gulag History Museum

The Gulag History Museum located on Pervyj Samotechnyi Pereulok in downtown Moscow was initiated by the former dissident Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko in 2001 and opened its doors to the public in 2004. Throughout the 16 years of its existence, the museum lived through a number of changes – from the first exposition on Petrovka Street to the appointment of the new director in 2012, the transition to the new building in 2015 and a change of the permanent exposition in 2020. Since the first exposition of the museum has already been a subject of several research works,¹⁵⁰ I would briefly mention its Petrovka years and focus my analysis on the museum after the move. The division of the museum's history into two periods is especially convenient since the appointment of the new director signaled not only the change of location, but also self-presentation of the museum in the memory field, with the institution gaining a much wider public and financial support from the Moscow government in the last five years. I will analyze the Gulag History Museum from the point of it being a “museum of conscience.”¹⁵¹ Looking at how this concept guided the exhibition set-up, I would also consider how Gulag is explained in connection to the larger topic of Soviet repression, how victims and persecutors are presented, and what overarching message the museum strives to convey to the visitors. Analyzing today's status of the Gulag History Museum in the memory field, I argue that it has become an officially sanctioned alternative to the Memorial and Sakharov Center,

¹⁴⁹ This rapprochement is especially obvious if one considers recent modifications in the Russian Criminal Code, which criminalized any public expressions of views on Russian history that contradict the official point, and are alarmingly reminiscent of the 1960s Soviet laws employed in the war against the dissidents. (e.g., Articles 581, 581a—581g, 582—584 from the Criminal Code of 1922, or Article 70 from the Criminal Code of 1960).

¹⁵⁰ E.g., see: Dubina V. *Virtual Place of Memory and the Real Space of Gulag in Contemporary Russia* (in *Politics of Affect: Museum as a Space of Public History*, ed. Zvatsky, Sklez, Suverina, NLO, 2019), Kindle edition; Williams P. “Treading Difficult Ground: The Effort to Establish Russia's First National Gulag Museum,” (National Museums and the Negotiation of Difficult Pasts Conference Proceedings from EuNaMus, Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Brussels 26-27 January 2012); Postnaya E. “Muzej Gulaga kak otrazhenye travmaticheskogo opyta,” 2016; Hardy J. “Commemorating and Forgetting Soviet Repressions: Moscow's State Museum of Gulag History” (in *Museums of Communism*, ed. Norris S.N. Indiana University Press, 2020), pp. 275-303

¹⁵¹ Postnaya E. “Muzej Gulaga kak otrazhenye travmaticheskogo opyta,” 70

largely adapting their mission in the public memory field in 21st century Moscow. However, the top-down support of the institution also caused significant adjustments of the narrative presented by it, and my further analysis would reveal the conditions under which the “museum of conscience” is allowed to talk about Soviet political injustices and human rights violations in Putin’s Russia.

1. Origins and the First Exposition Design

The Gulag History Museum was founded in 2001 by Soviet historian and journalist Anton Antonov-Ovseenko (1920-2013). He came from the family of victims of repression: his father, a revolutionary, was arrested in 1937 and executed in 1938, and his mother was imprisoned in 1929 as an enemy of the people and committed suicide in 1936 in prison in Khanty-Mansiysk. Anton Antonov-Ovseenko himself went through Stalin’s labor camps as a “son of the enemy of the people,” however, while being a harsh anti-Stalinist, he did not refute the communist ideology for which his father once fought. In July 2001, Antonov-Ovseenko appealed to the Moscow city government to found the State Museum of Gulag History. His request was approved and the museum received the 300-square meter facility hidden in the passageway on Petrovka Street dominated by posh boutiques and expensive restaurants. The building was the former mansion of Rayevskys and did not have a direct connection to the history of repression: suggestions to establish the museum in the former shooting house of NKVD on Nikolskaya Street were refuted, while the chosen facility already rented out to the society of victims of political repression “Return to the Truth” seemed like an acceptable compromise.¹⁵² After three years of preparations, the museum opened its doors to the public.

In the early 2000s, the Memorial and Sakharov Center were the two established organizations curating the museum formation of the history of repression, as discussed earlier, building their narratives on the political struggle against the system with the condemnation of

¹⁵² Official website of the organization: <http://rosagr.natm.ru/organization.php>

which they worked. Naturally, the Gulag History Museum being founded with state support and by the communist-sympathizer, and entering this field without having the “roots” of the struggle that would have “justified” its creation, caused a wave of suspicion and neglect from the older memory agents. Grigori Revzin mentioned the skirmish between the member of Moscow Memorial Sergey Kovalev and Antonov-Ovseenko, which revolved on the pages of the *Gazeta Memorial* and *Moscowskij Komsomolets*. The former urged fellow citizens to avoid visiting the Gulag History Museum for its fallacious view on history, while the latter refuted the accusations by arguing for it being the only “lawful” museum presenting the history of repression.¹⁵³ Surely, the fact that Antonov-Ovseenko was a convicted communist, while most of the Memorial members grew from the struggle against this ideology, played its role – and communists seemed like a lesser threat for the government than the liberal dissidents. The integral juxtaposition of the Gulag History Museum with the Memorial and Sakharov Center signaled the split of the memory field that in the later years grew into a dual status of Gulag Museum, on the one hand, being a “museum of conscience,” on the other hand avoiding the conversation about the human rights, democratization and the late Soviet Union.

The first exposition of the museum occupied 100 square meters and consisted of three rooms, exhibiting personal belongings and creative works of inmates donated by the Gulag survivors or their families, official historical documents, a map marking locations of labor camps, and other “trauma icons” typical for representation of Gulag.¹⁵⁴ Part of the exposition was dedicated to the reconstructions: the NKVD interrogation office, which featured the wax human-size mannequins of the NKVD-officer and a convict, the barrack with two wax inmates and the solitary cell with a wax prisoner. The theatricality that aimed to immerse the visitor into the world of Gulag was reinforced by the fact that the tour guides were dressed in the uniforms

¹⁵³ Revzin G. “Repressii v natural’nyu velichinu” [Repression in the natural scale], *Kommersant Weekend* 3, January 30, 2009, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1106339>

¹⁵⁴ For more on the first exposition, see: Postnaya E. “Muzej Gulaga kak otrazhenie travmaticheskogo opyta”; Hardy J. “Commemorating and Forgetting Soviet Repressions: Moscow’s State Museum of Gulag History”

of the NKVD workers. The awe of the fearsome atmosphere also extended to the museum's exterior: the passage to the main entrance was decorated with barbed wire and a reconstructed watchtower, with portraits of famous victims of the Gulag pinned to the walls of the building. The focus on the reconstruction of the past, albeit somewhat naïve in comparison with the more informational expositions developed by the Memorial and Sakharov Center, fixated Gulag as an object of the past, the far-gone époque of Stalin's rule that can be conveyed by reconstruction rather than by the application of the situation to the more relatable reminders of Soviet repression (such as the human rights issue).



Figure 7. Reconstruction of the solitary cell in Gulag History Museum. Photo by Revzin G. for Kommersant, February 2014

During the first decade of its existence, the Gulag History Museum was not extremely popular among the Russian public (in 2004-2015, it was visited approximately by 50,000 people a year), but, according to Sniegon, was popular with foreigners interested to discover the dark pages of Soviet history.¹⁵⁵ The government, at the same time, expressed little interest in the museum, allowing for its existence, but giving little financial and public support to promote its activities. The situation changed in 2012, when, among the general revival of historical politics after the re-election of Putin, with the creation of the RHS and RMHS, overtake of the Perm-

¹⁵⁵ Sniegon T. "Dying in the Soviet Gulag for the Future Glory of Mother Russia?" 126

36 Museum by the state and unification of historical education, Roman Romanov was appointed a new director of the Gulag History Museum.

2. The Gulag History Museum after 2012

The appointment of Romanov, who, being born in 1982, did not have direct connections to repression or dissidents, coincided with the growing interest in the museum by the Moscow government: in the same year, it was given the large building on Pervyj Samotyochnyi Pereulok and received generous funding for its reconstruction. The building itself was unrelated to the history of repression, however, finding tangible connections to the historical footprints of repression in Moscow did not seem to be the primary aim of the museum creators. Rather, they aspired to “reconstruct the informationally-rich experience of remembering” for the audience that “does not necessarily relate to this history”.¹⁵⁶ Reconstruction of the building and preparation of the new exposition took two years, and in 2014 the Gulag History Museum reopened to the public in the 900 square meters of exhibition space.¹⁵⁷ The main façade of the building overlooking the street was reconstructed in its original design, while the other three walls were covered with cooper that, darkening with time has been turning the glowing construction into the intimidating dark monolithic building.¹⁵⁸ Apart from the museum building, the complex received the surrounding territory, where it opened “The Garden of Memory” with plants, trees, and rocks brought from the places of Soviet labor camps. The museum premises were surrounded by a concrete wall, from 2019 featuring the project “Rains of History,” with portraits of famous Gulag victims appearing on it under the impact of water.

Despite not as openly theatrical as the first project, the museum was still designed to create the space evoking hostility and discomfort of the history it talks about. Inside, the color

¹⁵⁶ “Konzeptsia razvitiia Muzeia Gulaga” [Concept of development of Gulag History Museum], (Moscow Gulag History Museum, 2012), <http://gmig.ru/upload/ckeditor/Концепция%20ГМИГ%202012%20-%205.pdf>

¹⁵⁷ “Godovoj otchet o deyatelnosti muzeja za 2013 god” [Annual report of the Museum activities from 2013], (Moscow: Gulag History Museum, 2013), 15

¹⁵⁸ The design technic of using signs that transmit the idea of traumatic experience that is presented inside the museum facility, to the outside, is not uncommon for memory museums. For instance, one can remember the metal-carved letters of **TERROR** on top of the Terror Háza Museum in Budapest.

pallet varies from the red brick walls to black doors connecting the rooms, with the dim lighting and concrete and metal elements. The museum occupies all three floors of the building, with café, lecture and cinema halls, museum shop and open storage on the first floor, and permanent exposition with the documentation center stretched between the second and the third levels. Apart from that, the Gulag History Museum has a research center, a library, a volunteer center (involved not only with cultural activities, but also with providing aid for the victims of repression), and a visual anthropology lab, the major project of which has been “My Gulag,” recording interviews with Gulag survivors.¹⁵⁹

Before moving to the discussion of the presented narrative, it is important to mention a few acts of Romanov, which illustrate the shift in the museum’s standing on the field of the public history of repression in Moscow. In 2014, Romanov was assigned to oversee the competition for the construction of the already mentioned Wall of Grief, a top-down alternative to the Solovetsky Stone memorial. Following the monument’s inauguration, the Gulag History Museum initiated an annual action “the Bell of Memory” happening near the monument on the Day of Victims of Political Repression, analogous to the Memorial’s “Return of the Names,” mentioned in the previous chapter. From 2015 onwards, Roman Romanov has also been a member of the State Commission that developed the above-mentioned program for “State Policy to Perpetuate the Memory of Victims of Political Repression.” As part of the realization of it, in 2015, Romanov initiated the “Memory Fund,” aimed to create “conditions for understanding mass repression and aid in the dissemination of humanist values in Russian society.”¹⁶⁰ The fund also initiated the creation of the association of Russian Museums of Memory, which today unites 36 Russian museums dealing with the topic of repression, including the Memorial and the Sakharov Center Museums. The association, chaired by the Gulag History Museum, collects and allocates the donations, carries out research and museum

¹⁵⁹“My GULAG project,” The Gulag History Museum, <https://mygulag.ru>

¹⁶⁰ “Fond Pamyati” [Memory Found], <http://memoryfund.ru>

seminars and curates programs directed at preservation and museumification of history of repression.¹⁶¹

It can be said that a certain compromise between the oppositional-minded actors of the collective memory field and the Gulag History Museum as a state-supported institution has been reached – for instance, the board of “Museums of Memory” includes representatives of the Memorial and Sakharov Center. Nonetheless, the very fact that instead of engaging and promoting the already existent manifestations of memory of repression, the Gulag History Museum practically created their “doppelgangers,” so that there are two “main” monuments for victims of repression and two commemorative rituals in today’s Moscow, shows the remaining discrepancy of the public memory field. Jeffrey Hardy called the Gulag History Museum’s approach “negotiated commemoration,”¹⁶² and my further analysis of the exposition would reveal what it meant for the presented historical narrative.

3. Current Exposition

The Gulag History Museum identifies itself as a “museum of conscience,”¹⁶³ appealing to experiences of other memorial museums dealing with traumatic past.¹⁶⁴ As described on the website, the museum aims to serve as a “center to study, reconsider and openly discuss the history of mass repression in the USSR,” with the main mission “to tell about mass repression and evoke reflections on values of human life.” Already from the agenda, the Gulag History Museum uses the terms “Gulag” and “repression” interchangeably, neither in the documents nor in the exposition explaining what exactly is meant by these two phenomena. Covering cases of repressive Soviet politics not necessarily related to Gulag (show trials, forced resettlements,

¹⁶¹ Chairs of the Memory Found include members of the Memorial Society (Elena Zhemkova, Arseni Roginski) and Sakharov Center (Natalia Solzhenitsyna), thus having the potential to overcome the discrepancy between the two sides of the collective memory field.

¹⁶² Hardy J. “Commemorating and Forgetting Soviet Repressions: Moscow’s State Museum of Gulag History,” 277

¹⁶³ Postnaya E. “Muzej Gulaga kak otrazhenye travmaticheskogo opyta,” 70

¹⁶⁴ For more on memorial museums, see: Williams P. *Memorial Museums. A Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (Oxford and NY: Berg, 2007)

dekulakization), the current museum exposition stops at 1953 – the death of Stalin.¹⁶⁵ Such an unclearness of definitions appears to be convenient for legitimizing the museum’s refusal to talk about the late Soviet repression – as shortly after Stalin’s death the Gulag system was, indeed, liquidated as an organization. At the same time, promising the visitor to present the whole history of repressive policies exercised in the Soviet Union, the museum virtually repeats the narrative developed by the Russian government that Soviet repression was characteristic only to Lenin and Stalin’s eras – the narrative that the Gulag History Museum does not pronounce explicitly, but adheres to.

The ideological agenda of the Gulag History Museum does not address the human rights issue, a political struggle for which could be considered “too sensitive” by the state. Instead, it is using the repentant model of “never again,” suggesting the visitors to contemplate on the tragedy of repression and “What should we do today in order to prevent the return of the past tomorrow?”¹⁶⁶ The formula, having fluid interpretations in the field of the public memory,¹⁶⁷ in this case appeals to emotional mourning rather than taking responsibility for the atrocities or starting a meaningful discussion about them. The “negotiated commemoration,” therefore, suggests remembering the “tragic and destructive consequences” that repression brought for society and people,¹⁶⁸ rather than activating the fundamental critical reassessment of 20th-century Russian history. In this realm, the Gulag History Museum, having become the major memory agent, on the one hand, overtakes the responsibility for creating the public reflections on Soviet repression from the older independent organizations, on the other hand, becomes an agent that keeps this memory in the sanctioned frames suggested by the state agenda. Further,

¹⁶⁵ Despite the official plans on the exposition stated that it will cover all Soviet history, from 1917 to the early 1990s, with the final room “Gulag and Memory” specifically assigned for the period of the 1960s-1980s, “samizdat, the Gulag memory and state secrecy, Perestroika and liberation of Gulag memory” (in: *Konzeptsiia razvitiia Muzea Gulaga* [Concept of development of Gulag History Museum], 2012, 11), the current exposition stops with the death of Stalin.

¹⁶⁶ One of the questions asked in the last room of the museum, where, on the pieces of paper, a visitor can continue the phrase or answer the question (available both in Russian and English)

¹⁶⁷ Epplee N. *Neudobnoe Proshloe: pamyat o gosudarstvennykh prestupleniyah v Rossii i drugih stranah*, 541

¹⁶⁸ “Godovoj otchet o deyatelnosti muzeja za 2014 god” [Annual report of the Museum activities from 2014], (Moscow: Gulag History Museum, 2014), 29

I would consider what historical narrative this duality of being a “museum of conscience” while not being able to fully condemn the state regime that caused the sufferings for which the repentance is needed, creates.

3.1. Defining Gulag and Soviet Repression

As already mentioned, the Gulag History Museum does not make a clear delineation between Soviet political repression as a wider phenomenon of state-orchestrated persecutions existing from 1917 to 1991 and Gulag as a system of NKVD-overseen labor camps existing in the 1920s-1950s and formally disbanded in 1960. Initially, the museum program suggested covering all years of existence of the Soviet Union,¹⁶⁹ however, the new permanent exposition opened in 2018 starts with 1918 and the first labor camps and finishes with Stalin’s death, claiming that it “stopped mass political repression.”¹⁷⁰ Indeed, repression after 1953 was never as large in scale as during Lenin and Stalin but was not stopped altogether as is presupposed by the museum’s exposition that seems to refute the existence of punitive psychiatry, expulsion from the country and imprisonment widely exercised in the late Soviet Union. The absence of the definitions, already stated by Hardy,¹⁷¹ allowed the museum curators to treat the main theme of their exhibition changeably, narrowing or widening the definition depending on the rooms’ topics.

Overall, Gulag (or the world of repression) is presented as a reality secluded from Soviet society. Symbolizing this distance, the first hall exhibits the doors brought from different buildings related to the history of repression (here used in the wider sense of the word) as a sign of transition from the 21st century Moscow to the world of the dark Soviet past. At the same time, the museum shows the relation of the Gulag to the everyday life in the Soviet Union mainly through economy rather than destinies of the people, dedicating two rooms to the

¹⁶⁹ Postnaya E. “Muzej Gulaga kak otrazhenye travmaticheskogo opyta,” 11

¹⁷⁰ Quote from the explication in Hall 14 “The Postwar Gulag System: from the Height of its Use to the Liquidation”

¹⁷¹ Hardy J. “Commemorating and Forgetting Soviet Repressions: Moscow’s State Museum of Gulag History,” 293

economy of Gulag and the use of forced labor on major Soviet constructions. Having a large accent on punitive labor, exhibiting tools found on the former Gulag sites, the exposition also reveals the inner working of the repressive apparatus, reflecting on it as the larger phenomena, exhibiting some key documents and – for some periods – providing the informational boards (e.g., on the Great Terror).

Thematically, the museum exposition covers the phenomena not necessarily related to Gulag but rather to the whole repressive system of 1917-1956: the first concentration camps opened during the Civil War, Solovetsky labor camp, the show trials, re-education through labor, the Great Terror of 1937-1938, forced resettlements of the people shortly before and after the Great Patriotic War, destiny of children of the repressed and the postwar Gulag system. If compared to the first exposition opened in 2015, the current exposition was adjusted not the least because of the critique it received. For instance, the first exposition did not mention resettlements of the nationalities and generally focused on the persecution of Russian Soviet intelligentsia. Adding more aspects to the discussion of Soviet repression was an important improvement for giving a more inclusive picture of it, at the same time, with the museums' dedication to Gulag, the demand to include other topics while not changing the formal focus of the museum seems questionable.



Figure 8. Hall 3 “The First Prisons of the Soviet Power,” The Gulag History Museum, Moscow, October 16, 2020. Photo by the author

With the lack of definitions, the main topic of the current exposition is “repressive system” – or, rather, the fear of it being able to “knock on everyone’s door.”¹⁷² This system, according to the museum narrative, ended in the late 1950s when the Gulag was abolished and “more than 500,000 political prisoners were released, and almost all of them were subsequently rehabilitated.”¹⁷³ At the same time, the museum puts a special emphasis on its memorial agenda of being a “museum of conscience,” dedicating the last hall to memory of repression and featuring interviews with Moscow citizens who are unaware of the history of the Gulag. Through screening the lack of awareness in the topic and exhibiting pictures of the abandoned places connected to the history of repression, the museum conveys the message that people should remember the traumatic past that they have just learned about through the museum visit. This educational agenda is further supported by the questions asked from the visitors before they leave: “It will never come back if I...”, “What should we do today in order to prevent the

¹⁷² Explication in Hall 1 “First Prisons of the Soviet Power”

¹⁷³ Connection of the end of repressive politics with the death of Stalin is especially emphasized in the museum exposition. At the end of the passage leading from the Hall 14, there is a white line with inscription (in Russian) “Stalin died. 05.03.1953,” crossing which, the visitor hears the transmission of the official news broadcast released after the death of Stalin and broadcasted on the national radio.

return of the past tomorrow?” or “To understand the past, you have to...”.¹⁷⁴ However, the generalization and lack of clear definitions of what has to be remembered except for the “tragedy” restricts the memory work to the mourning without a clear object or conscious understanding.

3.2. Defining the Victims

One of the biggest changes made to the exposition in comparison to its first version was the promise to introduce the “human perspective” to the narrative, “considering the repressive system through the prism of human destinies”.¹⁷⁵ To personify the historical narrative, museum curators placed plaques with personal stories of some victims in every hall. Written in Russian and English, they cover the biographies of people related to the aspect of the repressive system that is discussed in the respective room. Most rooms also feature separate vitrines dedicated to prominent Gulag inmates (e.g., Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov), exhibiting their personal belongings and extracts from the diaries read aloud by famous Russian actors.

While centering the narrative on the victims, the exposition, nonetheless, reveals little about the prisoner’s life outside the Gulag, making their “victimhood” overtake their identities. This shift towards depersonalization of victimhood is especially evident as the last reconstruction of the exposition abolished the room dedicated to rehabilitation and return of the Gulag inmates to society, restricting their lives to the walls of repressive facilities. In this paradigm of victimhood, the applicability of the category of “victim-heroes” suggested by Daria Khlevnuk is doubtfully suitable. In Khlevnuk’s definition, the “victim-heroes” paradigm envisages the accent on the creative life of victims of repression, their living rather than the pure survival. Partly, this agenda is supported by the Gulag museum through exhibiting personal belongings and handmade objects created by inmates, giving them some personal

¹⁷⁴ The questions are written on the slips of paper (in English and Russian) and, after being answered, can be pinned to the wall near the exit.

¹⁷⁵ Romanov R. “Muzej Gulaga” [Gulag Museum], *Rossija i sovremennij mir* 2/87, (2015): 216

voices.¹⁷⁶ Nevertheless, this personification is presented as relevant only inside the world of the Gulag, not having connections to the outside world that the victims had before or after the confinement. At the same time, in some cases, depersonalization of victims is pushed to the maximum, justified by the desire of museum curators to demonstrate the scale of repression – for instance, in the room dedicated to the Great Terror, where the nameless mugshots of victims are screened and the floor is laid with empty pistols corresponding to the number of people killed during 1937-1938.

The categories of victims covered by the exposition, due to the already mentioned ambiguity of the museum's focus, are also very diverse, covering most groups affected by repression (and not exclusively Gulag) before the 1950s. Thus, parts of the exposition are dedicated to the forced resettlement of the people (the part absent in the exposition of 2015), de-kulakization, victims of the Civil War repression campaigns, children of repressed and the POWs. Despite this diversity, attention to all the groups is allocated unequally – for example, the forced resettlement of the people is somewhat secluded from the overall chronological narrative and lacks any personalization: each suffered nation is presented by the pile of soil brought from its homeland. The same can be said about the religious persecutions – even campaigns against the Orthodox believers are rarely mentioned (only when speaking about Solovki), while the persecution of other confessions is not mentioned at all. While arguing that “any individual from any stratum of the population could be subjected to hostage taking,”¹⁷⁷ the exposition gives agency only to the “high-profile professionals from central economic departments, engineers, scientists, and the old technical intelligentsia.”¹⁷⁸ Of course, this limitation can be explained by the availability of sources: surely, some groups of Gulag prisoners left more things to be handed over through the generations to later end up in the museum display. Still, the unequal attention of the Gulag Museum to all groups of victims sent

¹⁷⁶ For example, in Hall 9 “Camp Life and Survival Strategies”

¹⁷⁷ Explication in Hall 2 “Legal Basis for Political Repression”

¹⁷⁸ Explication in Hall 7 “The Great Terror”

to Gulag (even if not all campaigns of repressions are considered), is surprising, although whether it was a conscious decision to downplay the all-inclusive nature of state repression or a decision driven by the design concerns, is unclear.



Figure 9. Hall 9 “Camp Life and Survival Strategies,” The Gulag History Museum, Moscow, October 16, 2020. Photo by the author

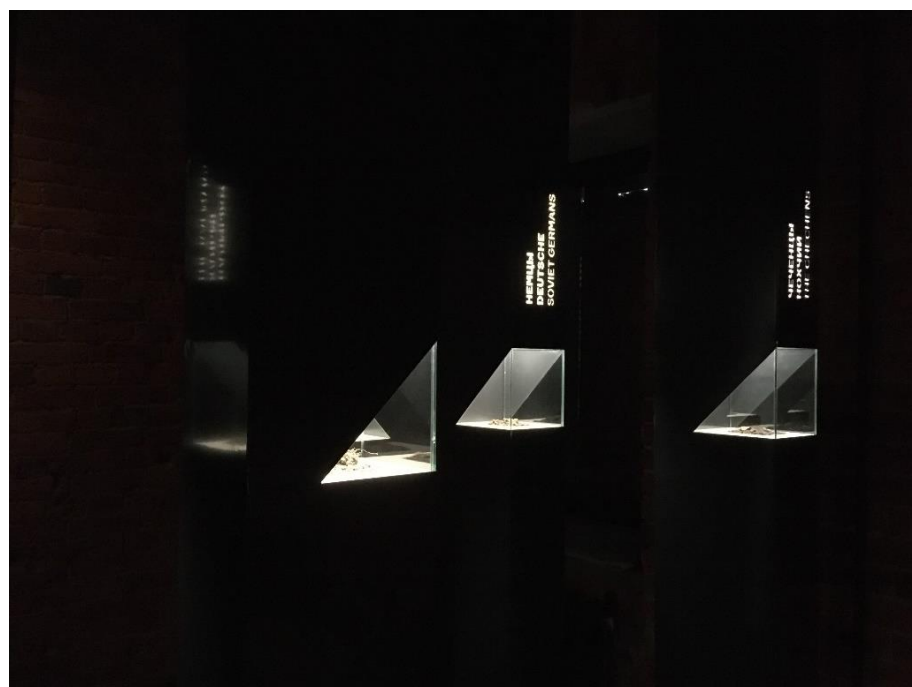


Figure 10. Hall 12 “Special Settlers,” The Gulag History Museum, Moscow, October 16, 2020. Photo by the author

The focus on mourning over the victims rather than on the victims themselves culminates in the final room of the museum “In Memoriam” or “The Temple of Memory.”¹⁷⁹ Designed as a prolonged and dark room with a square window of light coming from the top, this hall aims to “name them all,” playing the voice reading aloud the names of the victims from the list compiled by the Memorial (today containing 3.5 million names). According to the museum’s statement, it would take over two years to voice all the listed names, while the new names are being constantly added to it. The content of the message conveyed by this installation is illustrative in two respects. First, the Memorial list that is used includes names of all victims of political repression in the USSR as defined by the 1991 Rehabilitation Law,¹⁸⁰ including the late Soviet repression, despite, according to the description in the previous room, political persecutions stopped after Stalin’s death. Second, placing the final accord on mourning for the repressed rather than the return of survivors to the society or struggle against the repressive system outside the world of Gulag and places of confinement, presents victims as passive sufferers, unavoidably crushed by the repressive machine of the persecutors.

3.3. Defining the Persecutors

The way museum exposition talks about persecutors represents the ambiguous footing that it has, being a museum of conscience destined to represent the struggle against the repressive state system while functioning within the framework imposed by its successor-state. While the Memorial Museum and the Sakharov Centers developed the discussion of Soviet repression around the coercive state system, in the Gulag History Museum, the focus on victimhood and mourning significantly downplays the discussion of people responsible for carrying out the repression.

In general, the museum concentrates on the persecutors only in three places of the exposition: “The Legal Basis for Political Repression” in the second room, the sixth room

¹⁷⁹ “Khram Pamyati” [Temple of Memory], <https://gmig.ru/projects/khram-pamyati/>

¹⁸⁰ “Zhertvy politicheskogo terrora v SSSR” [Victims of political repression in the USSR], *International Memorial*, Official website with the database: <https://base.memo.ru>

dedicated to “Extrajudicial Bodies and the Punitive System” and the informational display at the entrance to the room about the Great Terror. In all cases, the main persecutors and their acts are shown through the legal basis that defined their policies. When talking about persecutors themselves, the exposition is limited to Stalin and his closest circle (Dzerzhinsky, Beria, Ezhov, etc.), and even to the lesser extent – on Lenin as a founder of the Gulag system (in the exposition, his name is mentioned only a few times). The most telling example explaining the idea behind the presentation of persecutors is the installation “Legal Basis of Repression.” Stretched between the two walls, by the red thread, it connects the quotes of Soviet officials to excerpts from their decrees with the legal acts that formed the basis of repressive politics, which, when looked at from the distance, form the portrait of Stalin. The main idea behind this installation was to allow people “to contemplate about the role of personality in history” and “analyze how the repression became possible.”¹⁸¹ The only other time when the personalities of the persecutors are shown is in the info-screen dedicated to the Great Terror, where portraits of Soviet officials: Zhdanov, Kalinin, Chubar, Andreev, Krylenko, Stalin, Yagoda, Ezhov, Beria, Molotov, Voroshilov, Kaganovich and Konsor merge into each other, changing and supposedly symbolizing the self-centered character of the system rather than it being a product of individual decision-makers. Moreover, there are no biographies or personal stories of even the few persecutors who are mentioned – their existence, thus, is subscribed into the framework of their role in the repressive state machine, which allows avoiding the necessity to mitigate between their role in other aspects of Soviet history.

More often, the museum exposition uses the names of the organizations when talking about the responsible agents behind the repression. Their chronological evolution is presented in the sixth room, where, on the walls, the evolution of state bodies from the People’s Commissariat of Justice to NKVD is shown, finishing with the liquidation of MVD USSR in

¹⁸¹ Andreev K., the head of the Education department in Gulag History Museum, on: “Museomania,” *Russkij mir* (August 2020): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQKPrUKJNhw>

1960. Another method of shifting the focus from thinking about the personal responsibility of Soviet officials used in the exposition is talking about the repression in the passive tone (the technique widely used in the “Russia – My History” exposition that would be discussed further). Thus, in the explanation of the Great Terror, the “mass repression... began... and continued...,” the mass operations of national resettlements “were launched... carefully planned and centrally executed...” The passive voice leading to the perception of repression as being an unavoidable part of the Soviet system is reinforced by the tendency of the exposition to build its narrative from the viewpoint of the state. It is especially noticeable due to the focus of the museum on the place of Gulag in the Soviet economy, writing on which the curators completely alienate from their initial promise to focus on the human perspective, instead, engaging in discussion of aims or sufficiency of the punitive labor in the USSR. Therefore, while aiming to condemn the regime, the museum does not engage in the revelation of it, repeating the formula of “necessity” or “unavoidability” of the system, not evoking the human rights issues or personalizing those responsible for the repression (be it Gulag or other forms of political repression).



Figure 11. Hall 7 “Mass Repression and the Great Terror,” The Gulag History Museum, Moscow, October 16, 2020. Photo by the author

Conclusion: the Negotiated Commemoration

The analysis of self-conceptualization and content of the Gulag History Museum proves the feasibility of defining its mission as “negotiated commemoration.”¹⁸² In today’s Russia, the museum plays a role of the state-sponsored equivalent to the Memorial and Sakharov Center, easier to control due to its dependence on the state funding and an already developed inclusion of it to the official historical politics. The usage of Gulag History Museum in the monopolization of the public history field is especially obvious with the recent increase of memory projects initiated by the museum in cooperation with the government, which serve as equivalents to the earlier projects of Memorial and Sakharov Center. This process is happening on many levels – through museum work, monumental projects (the Wall of Grief), research expeditions and commemorative rituals (the Bell of Memory). The Gulag History Museum adheres to partial inclusion of “oppositional” historical NGOs, Memorial Society and Sakharov Center, into its projects – although mostly only formally, not allowing them to influence the content of the transmitted historical narrative.¹⁸³ The reluctance to cooperate is, of course, two-sided – independent historical organizations, largely having the dissidents foundations, also do not have a desire to cooperate with state-supported projects. The seeming cooperation, then, can be considered as a formal illusion created by the government to appeal to the more liberal masses, while in fact concealing the contested nature of the field.

The necessity to subscribe the repression’s history to the officially sanctioned historical program imposed strict guidelines on the narrative presented by the museum exposition. Thus, the assignment of the Gulag History Museum with the mission to tell the whole history of repression while initially being an institution dedicated only to one aspect of this phenomenon

¹⁸² Hardy J. “Commemorating and Forgetting Soviet Repressions: Moscow’s State Museum of Gulag History,” 277

¹⁸³ For example, on one of the Bell of Memory actions, Elena Zhemkova, one of the heads of Moscow Memorial invited to make a speech, was the only person attempting to talk about the concrete victims and the relevance of Soviet repression to the present. Her speech was interrupted by the ring of the bell in the middle, and then taken over by the other spokesman, who urged to assure the journalists that these repressions are far gone, and today’s political processes have nothing similar to them. Life Novosti “Akcija “Kolokol pamjati” v Moskve” [Action The Bell of Memory in Moscow], October 30, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqhNcAuFOVk>

– the system of NKVD labor camps, restricts the museum from a clear definition of the object of its work. Mentioning some aspects of repressive politics, the museum exposition stops at 1956; claiming that political persecutions stopped after Stalin, it reads the names of the victims of late Soviet human rights violations.

The vagueness of the definition of repression extends to the way the museum presents victims and persecutors. First, both groups are subscribed to the existence only in the secluded world of Gulag, thus distancing it from the other aspects of life in the Soviet Union – for instance, not providing information on Gulag returnees. Aspiring to present the history of repression through the eyes of the victim, museum curators mostly follow the official view on repression, focusing on its utilitarian or ideological purposes developed by the official Soviet discourse. In such a narrative, victim's perspective becomes limited to their victimhood, passive suffering and not having agency other than the one defined by the repressive system that captivated them. At the same time, not all groups of victims receive equal agency, with people affected by anti-religious campaigns or forced resettlements not having individual voices, which are mostly given to inmates coming from the Soviet intelligentsia. When allocating responsibility for repression, the narrative of the new exposition, like in the first exposition opened in the new building, is reluctant “to assign blame beyond Stalin and his top henchmen.”¹⁸⁴ Rather, the responsibility for repression is placed on the repressive apparatus, using the names of the organizations more often than the names of people who orchestrated its work, or addressing repression in a passive voice of it “being carried out.”

The necessity to mediate self-conceptualization of being a “museum of conscience” with following the agenda of the government that is unready to reconcile or admit the wrongdoings of some of its officials, lead to the inability of the Gulag History Museum to carry out the coherent narrative of the repression. The vagueness of the subject of the exposition complicates

¹⁸⁴ Hardy J. “Commemorating and Forgetting Soviet Repressions: Moscow’s State Museum of Gulag History,” 277

the memory work being unable to answer what has to be mourned and for what reasons. Instead, the museum exposition simply suggests “to remember not to forget,” offering emotional mourning instead of conscious inquiry into the negative pages of the country’s history. Whether or not this ambiguity is recognized by the visitors lies beyond the scope of my research, although the growing number of visits shows that the museum’s reputation is firm enough for its content not to be questioned. The generally positive remarks on museum exposition and gratitude for it revealing the dark pages of the Soviet past show that the Gulag History Museum is, indeed, perceived as a place telling the full history of Soviet atrocities, which cultivates the official historical politics directed to bury after-Stalin political repression in oblivion.

The Gulag History Museum case is unique in the field of Russian museums working exclusively with the history of Soviet repression in it being a state project “mimicking” working of non-state memory agents. The next case to be considered – “Russia – My History” parks, are different in a way that they do not seek support from the more “liberal-minded” museum visitors, who are likely to visit the museum already having some prior knowledge about the topic. Having a firm reputation of being the state-sponsored and state-curated historical project, “Russia – My History” parks mostly attract people who embrace the state ideology, and in the next part of the chapter, I would consider the historical narrative about the repression that this ideology transmits through museum space.

“Russia – My History” Historical Park

*If state terror was a crime, then who was the criminal? The state?
Stalin as the head of state? But we won the war against Absolute Evil,
and so we were not the subjects of a criminal regime,
but a great country, the embodiment of everything good in the world”*
(Roginski A. *Fragmented Memory* (2008))¹⁸⁵

Multimedia history parks “Russia – My History,” from the prototype expositions organized in Moscow in 2015, to 2020, when 23 identical museum branches have been established all around the country have become, according to the creators themselves, “the largest expositional complex in Russia.”¹⁸⁶ Aspiring to present “the objective picture of the history of our country, with all its victories, achievements, and problems,”¹⁸⁷ this government-organized, supervised and supported project has caused series of critique from the professional historical community for the factual mistakes and the overall presentation of materials,¹⁸⁸ while still hardly being considered within the framework of Russian historical politics.¹⁸⁹ At the same time, “Russia – My History” is a very peculiar project that can be analyzed from the different sides: its format (of a digital museum without objects), organization (a joined production of secular and church officials), and content (revealing the official view on the Russian history from 862 to the present day). In my research, I would mostly concentrate on the content, looking at the presented narrative about Soviet political repression. However, since contextualization of organizational structure and agents involved in the complexes is necessary to deconstruct the

¹⁸⁵ Roginski A. *Fragmented Memory. Stalin and Stalinism in Present-day Russia*, *Eurozine*, March 2, 2009, <https://www.eurozine.com/fragmented-memory/>

¹⁸⁶ “Russia – My History,” About the project, <https://myhistorypark.ru/about/?city=msk>

¹⁸⁷ Putin V. Feedback from the main page of the “Russia – My History” historical park, <https://myhistorypark.ru/about/?city=msk>

¹⁸⁸ “Razmnozhenie deleniem: istoricheskie parki Rossia – moya istoria” [Deublication by division: historical parks Russia – My History], *Istoricheskaya Expertiza* 1/14 (2018): 59-102; Laruelle M. “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Conquest of the History Market,” *Point & Counterpoint* (June 7, 2018), <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-russian-orthodox-church-s-conquest-of-the-history-market/>; Kurilla I. ““Russia, My History”: History as an Ideological Tool,” *Point & Counterpoint* (August 2018), <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/russia-my-history-history-as-an-ideological-tool/>

¹⁸⁹ As already mentioned, the only study of “Russia – My History” parks for their content on the given topic that connects the presented narrative with wider notions of Russian historical politics, is the article by Ekaterina Klimenko (Klimenko E. “Building the Nation, Legitimizing the State: Russia—My History and Memory of the Russian Revolutions in Contemporary Russia,” *Nationalities Papers* 49:1 (2021), pp. 72-88)

presented narrative, I would first address the origins, institutional affiliations and actors who created the exposition, self-conceptualization of the parks and specificity of their format. As for the content analysis, it would be based on the materials collected from the two branches of “Russia – My History”: in Moscow (August 2020) and in Saint-Petersburg (April 2021), which, as would be indicated below, still allows to consider the expositions as one, as the content that interests me is shared by all the museums.

1. Russia – My History: Origins and Organizational Structure

“Russia – My History” is a network of multimedia historical parks opened in Russia by the joined forces of regional governments (initially – the Moscow City government) and the Patriarch’s Council of Culture. Ekaterina Klimenko traced the origins of the complexes to the 1990s and the emergence of the annual Ecclesial-Public Exhibition-Forum “Orthodox Rus” organized by the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow.¹⁹⁰ The fact that cultural events developed in the forums have taken place on the two public holidays – The Day of People’s Unity (national) and The Fest of Kazak Icon of the Mother of God (orthodox) already demonstrates the mixed nature of the origins of “Russia – My History”, which combined patriotism and religious values in the secular space. Although the forum have been organizing some exhibitions from the beginning, they reached wider audiences only after the establishment of the already mentioned Patriarch’s Council of Culture in 2010. From that moment, the main person responsible for the organization and content of the exhibitions that later developed into the “Russia – My History” parks was metropolitan (then – archimandrite) Tikhon Shevkunov. Since Shevkunov is not only the main initiator and curator of “Russia – My History” parks, but an illustrative example of the secular-religious public history agent of Putin’s Russia, it is worth presenting a brief overview of his biography.

¹⁹⁰ Klimenko E. “Building the Nation, Legitimizing the State: Russia—My History and Memory of the Russian Revolutions in Contemporary Russia,” 74

Tikhon Shevkunov was born in 1958 in Moscow and got his first education in the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, graduating in 1982 with specialization in “Literary work.” Right after graduation, Tikhon was baptized and entered the Pskov-Caves Monastery as a novice. In 1986, in light of the upcoming celebrations of one thousand-years anniversary of Baptism of Rus’, he was transferred to the Publishing House of Moscow Patriarchy, where he worked under the supervision of Metropolitan Pitirim. Despite in the 1980s, there was freedom of religion in Soviet Russia, Gorbachev’s government was highly reluctant to it, with the state-supported atheistic propaganda and close supervision of the sanctioned religious communities and parishes still being in full swing.¹⁹¹ To supervise the congregation, many clergymen also served as KGB informants, and Pitirim, the first mentor of Tikhon Shevkunov, was one of them. Throughout the late-1990s – early 2000s, Shevkunov consequently went up on the church ranks in Moscow, becoming an archimandrite in 1998. The circumstances of Shevkunov’s introduction to Vladimir Putin have never been publicized, but at the beginning of the 2000s the archimandrite often accompanied the president in his trips to religious sites, and by 2010 was already unofficially called “Putin’s confessor.” Even before the creation of the Patriarch’s Council of Culture, Shevkunov was engaged in cultural activities promoting a certain view on Russian history that could be best characterized as conservative-orthodox and anti-Western. The most resonated incident was the film “Destruction of Empire. Byzantium Lesson,” directed by Shevkunov and shown on one of the federal channels in 2008. The film, not to be discussed here in detail, had its central idea in Moscow being “the Third Rome” and, driving on the comparison of Byzantium with contemporary Russia, argued for the need in the strong, centralized and orthodox Russian state.¹⁹² The scandal around historical falsifications and

¹⁹¹ See, e.g., Anderson J. *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States, 1953-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 106-109

¹⁹² For more about the movie, see, e.g. “A Byzantine Sermon,” *The Economist*, February 14, 2008, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2008/02/14/a-byzantine-sermon>
In March 2021, Tikhon Shevkunov released another television project “Destruction of Empire. Russian Lesson,” this time dedicated to the Russian Revolution of 1917. The series are already available on the orthodox online journal Pravoslavie.ru: “Gibel' Imperii. Rossijskij urok. 18-serijnyj dokumental'nyj fil'm” [Destruction of Empire. Russian Lesson. 18-series documentary film], *Pravoslavie.ru*, March 24, 2021, <https://pravoslavie.ru/138199.html>

ideological-propagandistic nature of the film has, nonetheless, been quickly forgotten, and in March 2010 Shevkunov was appointed a secretary of the Patriarch's Council of Culture and a member of the Presidential Council on Culture and the Arts. In May the same year, Shevkunov headed the commission responsible for the interaction between the Russian Orthodox Church and the museum community and was taking an active part in preparation and supervision of all expositions from the cycle "Orthodox Rus'" and the later establishment of "Russia – My History" parks, although his exact formal position except being a public figure to whom all initiatives, content and design of the expositions are linked, is not to be found anywhere.¹⁹³

From the establishment of the Patriarchate's Council of Culture and the appointment of Shevkunov, exhibitions organized by the ROC gained unprecedented support from the Moscow government and drew vast public interest. The first exposition that formed the basis of "Russia – My History" parks was "Russian Orthodox Church – A Summary of Twenty Years: 1991-2011," and was held in Moscow Manege (the main exhibition hall right under the Kremlin walls) in November 2011 in conjunction with the Day of National Unity. The exposition, becoming "a testing ground for the technological and design solutions,"¹⁹⁴ had a wide public outreach, according to the organizers, being visited by tens of thousands of people in just the four days of its functioning. Two years later, the Patriarch's Council of Culture organized the next exhibition, this time dedicated to the secular topic: the 400th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty – "The Romanovs," which was again held in Moscow Manege in November, and was announced to be the first exhibition from the cycle "Orthodox Rus'." The resounding success (with people waiting long hours in line to see the exposition) made the organizers show it in several other Russian cities. In November, the Orthodox Council of Culture showed the next exhibition of the series – "The Rurikids", in 2015 – "From Great Upheaval to Great Victory,"

¹⁹³ In general, "Russia – My History" does not advertise the curators, content creators, or any concrete people who are responsible for the creation of the exposition or other museum activities.

¹⁹⁴ According to the organizer's statistics, the exhibition was visited by up to 15 000 people every day (Klimenko E. "Building the Nation, Legitimizing the State: Russia—My History and Memory of the Russian Revolutions in Contemporary Russia," 74)

and in 2016 – the chronologically concluding exposition “1945-2016.” Already from the success of “The Romanovs,” the Moscow Patriarchate suggested that “Orthodox Rus” should be established in some permanent physical space rather than exist only in the form of temporary traveling exhibitions. In December 2015, the first history park “Russia – My History” opened in Moscow in the 57th pavilion in VDNH, and, on the space of 28 000 square meters, hosted the three expositions existed at that time (with the one on the recent history being added in 2016).

Although it was a non-governmental project, “Russia – My History” was financially and formally linked to governmental or government-affiliated organizations. Thus, the projects were supervised and realized by the Fund for Humanitarian Projects, created in 2013 and headed by Ivan Yesin, the former legal counsel of Gazprom Neft, the largest Russian oil company with close ties to the Kremlin. The Fund, having its mission in “dissemination of cultural and historical knowledge in Russia”¹⁹⁵ and being financed from the Presidential Executive Office, the Moscow Patriarchate, the Ministry of Culture, the Government of Moscow and Saint Petersburg and private donations, according to the information provided on the website, has not widened its activities beyond the “Russia – My History” parks, which are listed as the only realized projects. The reconstruction of the VDNH pavilion, according to the study of Marlene Laruelle, cost 1.4 billion rubles, all paid from the Federal budget,¹⁹⁶ although the real costs of implementation and maintenance of the projects have never been publicized.

¹⁹⁵ “Fund for Humanitarian Projects,” About the Fund, <http://expohistory.ru/?page=content&id=1>

¹⁹⁶ Laruelle M. “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Conquest of the History Market”



Figure 12. “Russia – My History” building on VDNH, Moscow, September 10, 2020. Photo by the author

Among the partners of the park, cultural organizations – the Ministry of Culture, VDNH Park, coexist with corporation giants – Nornikel, or state media agents – for example, Moskva-24 and the Federal Press. Successful advertisement of the park’s activities in all the major state channels and persistent recommendations of the Ministry of Education to implement the expositions into the history lessons in schools and universities have provided the inexhaustible flow of visitors from the budgetary Russian institutions. By the summer of 2021, ‘Russia – My History’ parks exist in 23 Russian cities and have plans for further expansion. Except for the permanent three exhibitions, which are identical in every branch, the parks exhibit “regional components,” dedicated to the history of the region in which they are located.¹⁹⁷ Moreover, “Russia – My History” regularly hosts separate exhibitions on the history of the Great Patriotic War (closing for it parts or all exposition on the history of the 20th century), organizes events

¹⁹⁷ The regional aspect of representation of Soviet repression is beyond the scope of my research, which I have based on the content shared by all branches of the historical parks. However, the difference between presentations of regional aspects of Soviet history in “Russia – My History” parks can be a separate and curious topic of comparison.

for school and university students and forums for teachers, cultural workers or some hardly related to the museum sphere state organizations.¹⁹⁸

2. Mission, Ideology and Specificity of the Format

Ideology-wise, the “Russia – My History” history parks have been perceived by the independent academic Russian community as a clear project of state propaganda. First concerns about it were raised in 2017, when the Free Historical Society¹⁹⁹ published an appeal to the Minister of Education and Science Olga Vasilieva, in response to the published recommendations of the latter to implement “Russia – My History” parks into the school educational system, pointing at the numerous factual mistakes of the exposition.²⁰⁰ In response, Shevkunov, Yesin and other organizers of the park called the press conference with TASS, refuting all the accusations and emphasizing their cooperation with professional historians to oversee the content of the expositions. Accusations in the ideology-saturated character of the exposition were also raised by the individual researchers, usually following the same threads of the creators promoting “monarchism, clericalism and all-pervasive conspiracy theory”²⁰¹ to the disadvantage of historical accuracy. Indeed, propaganda of conservative values similar to other works of Shevkunov and the official historical politics discussed above seems to be the defining aspect for the expositional content. However, not going in too much detail into the explicit and

¹⁹⁸ E.g., in April 2021, “Russia – My History” park in Moscow hosted the annual meeting of Intercity CIS Council (“Istoricheskij park prinjal u sebja ezhegodnoe zasedanie Mezhgossoveta SNG” [Historical park hosted the annual meeting of Intercity CIS Council], *Russia – My History*, April 8, 2021, <https://myhistorypark.ru/news/istoricheskij-park-prinjal-u-sebja-ezhegodnoe-zasedanie-mezhgossoveta-sng/>)

¹⁹⁹ “Vol’noe istoricheskoe obshchestvo” [Free Historical Society] is an NGO organization founded in February 2014 by historian Nikita Sokolov. The main aim of the Free Historical Society has been to support the development of historical knowledge, freed from the political or social agenda. Among the objectives of the organization are: support for the dissemination of the scientific comprehension of the past; professional assessment of socially-important events and public statements of politicians and public leaders, which touch upon the ideas about the past; fight against the falsification of historical sources and facts; resistance to limitations of scientific research and academic freedom; assistance in declassification of archival documents.” (in “Manifest VIO” [Manifesto of the Free Historical Society], Moscow, February 28, 2014, <https://volistob.ru/static/manifest-vio>)

²⁰⁰ “Obraschenie Volnogo istoricheskogo obshchestva k ministru obrazovaniya i nauki Rossijskoj Federatsii O. U. Vasilievoj” [Appeal of the Free Historical Society to the Minister of Education and Science of Russian Federation O. U. Vasilieva], *Free Historical Society*, December 7, 2017, <https://volistob.ru/vio-news/obrashchenie-volnogo-istoricheskogo-obshchestva-k-ministru-obrazovaniya-i-nauki-rossiyskoy>

²⁰¹ Kurilla I. ““Russia, My History”: History as an Ideological Tool”

implicit coercions on history already revealed by other researchers, I would rather concentrate on the means through which “Russia – My History” creators legitimize their view on history.

The main mission of “Russia – My History” parks has been in “spreading the humanitarian knowledge, development of the high social activity, civil liability, spirituality (duhovnost’), contribution to the formation of civil society members with positive values, identifying themselves with Russia, its history and culture.”²⁰² The educational mission of “Russia – My History” and its conceptualization as a new format of history book that can “turn Russian history from the category of a black-and-white history book to bright, engaging and nonetheless objective narrative,”²⁰³ have also been advertised from the very start of the project. The overlap of the content of parks with the Russian history state exam, indeed, makes it convenient for the preparation, especially since both the graduate exam and the content of parks are supervised from above, hence, eliminate the chance of contradictions students have when preparing with non-state-sanctioned historical sources. In the educational mission of the parks, their ability to address “challenging topics of Russian historiography,” among which Stalinism, repression, and dissident movement are listed, is especially highlighted,²⁰⁴ with Putin’s official approval sanctioning them to dictate the “correct” view on these still contradictory parts of Russian history.

Although Shevkunov can be considered as the main executive director of the museum, the park organizers prudently enlist the support of professional historians (although the extent to which their voices influence the museum’s content is unclear), as well as collaboration with state scientific organizations and archives. Thus, according to the museum website, “Some of Russia’s most respected scholarly and educational institutions,” including the Institute of History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Russian State University of Humanities, and

²⁰² “Istoricheskij Park – vizualizacia istorii. Metodicheskoe posobie” [Historical park – visualization of history. Methodological recommendations] (Saint Petersburg, 2018), 7

²⁰³ “Russia – My History,” About the project, <https://myhistorypark.ru/about/?city=msk>

²⁰⁴ “Istoricheskij Park – vizualizacia istorii. Metodicheskoe posobie,” 45

the State Archive of Russian Federation²⁰⁵ are mentioned as having contributed to the creation of content. The choice of curators also seems somewhat odd, with the absence of the known professionals of the field: the main scientific advisor for the 1945-2018 exposition, for example, is Andrey Abramov, a hardly known Ph.D. student from Moscow State University.²⁰⁶

Apart from crediting the organizations, historical parks creators also reassure the visitors that the narrative they present is based on the “thorough work with sources, scientific and popular science literature.”²⁰⁷ However, just an overview of the bibliography presented on the website makes one question the liability of the claims. The list of sources that was added on the website after critiques from the Free Historical Society, represents a confusing mixture of primary and secondary, scientific and popular fiction literature. Thus, Pushkin there exists side by side with Trotsky (for some reason, cited in English translation), some outdated Soviet historical studies from the 1970s and contemporary works by historians of the Russian Military-History Society. Equation of primary sources and secondary literature while claiming that heavy reliance of the museum on primary materials is what makes the narrative true to the actual historical events only facilitates the manipulation of facts. Thus, similarly to the bibliography list, in the exposition, quotations ascribed to historical figures are often cited from secondary literature, which becomes especially noticeable when the speeches of European or US politicians are taken from the works of Russian popular writers, or when a view on events is presented from the perspective of contemporaneous agents, not contextualizing their own standing.²⁰⁸ This misuse of historical knowledge, making the history parks “not so much

²⁰⁵ “Spisok literatury k vystavkam” [Source list for the exhibitions], *Russia – My History*, <https://myhistorypark.ru/blog/v-rabote-nad-vystavkoy-prinimali-uchastie/?city=party>

²⁰⁶ Personal page of Abramov A. on the website of Moscow State University states him as a departmental assistant, without any scientific publications: <http://www.hist.msu.ru/departments/8829/people/teachers/37928/>

²⁰⁷ “Spisok literatury k vystavkam” [Source list for the exhibitions]

²⁰⁸ E.g., the parks featured the quote by the Polish-American diplomat Zbigniew Brzezinski “The new order with the hegemony of the USA is being created against Russia, at the cost of Russia, and on the ruins of Russia,” which was taken from the school history book by Barsenkov and Vdovin (Barsenkov S., Vdovin A. *Istoria Rossii. 1917-2004* [History of Russia. 1917-2004] (Moscow: Aspekt Press, 2006)), declared inappropriate and withdrawn from the educational process in 2010. Another work from which the quotations are often taken is the popular history book written at the order of KGB in 1979: Yakovlev N. *CRU protiv SSSR* [CIA against the USSR] (Moscow: Molodaya Gvardia, 1979)

historical-educational but rather agitation-propagandistic” project,²⁰⁹ however, does not bother the museum creators, as the approval of the higher officials, notwithstanding their unprofessionalism, is valued much more than historical accuracy. With President Putin’s reassurance that “the exposition gives an objective image of our country’s history with all its victories, achievements, and problems,”²¹⁰ the further expansion of the park’s impact on collective memory is carried out.

The format of the historical parks also adds up to the specificity of their perception. As already said, the historical parks “Russia – My History” do not have any museum objects that would have provided tangible connections to historical events. Instead, the narration builds on the texts, causing reasonable comparisons of the museum to Wikipedia articles.²¹¹ Interactive screens, in which the texts are shown, usually contain several sections, flipping through which the visitors can familiarize themselves with the given topic. The texts, written in a simple language and often making parallels with present-day Russia, are easy to comprehend by any audience. However, the amount of the written material would hardly make one coherently read through it all: most visitors pay attention only to the welcoming screen – thus basing their perception of content on the headlines, pictures or citations provided on them – and quickly move through the exposition. Except for the information displays, to make the museum visit more attractive, the museum designers also introduced interactive screens with history-themed games or activities (for example, a screen where the visitor is offered to vote for or against the dissolution of the USSR) or video animations and reconstructions. Further, the museum rooms are equipped with music and specific lightning, creating a theatrical rather than museum experience.²¹² The only non-digital component of the exposition, then, are the citations printed

²⁰⁹ Mosin A. “Rossia – moya istoria ili moya mifologia?” [Russia – My History or my mythology?], *Istoricheskaya Expertiza* 1/14 (2018): 91

²¹⁰ “Russia – My History,” About the project

²¹¹ Selin A. “Muzey iz Wikipedii. Pochemu d Peterburge popularna vulgarnaya istoria” [Museum from the Wikipedia: Why Vulgar History is Popular in Saint Petersburg?], *RBK*, December 19, 2017, https://www.rbc.ru/spb_sz/19/12/2017/5a38de299a7947fbdda11bfa

²¹² Comparable to some European historical museums – e.g., The House of Terror Museum in Budapest (Budapest, Andrásy út 60), or Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk (Gdańsk, Władysław Bartoszewski Square 1)

on the fabric and hanging on the museum walls in a form reminding khorugvs – regiment or religious flags. The provided quotations, at the same time, do not necessarily relate to the discussed period and feature not so much the opinions of contemporaneous characters, as value judgments of events from the present-day secular and religious Russian officials.

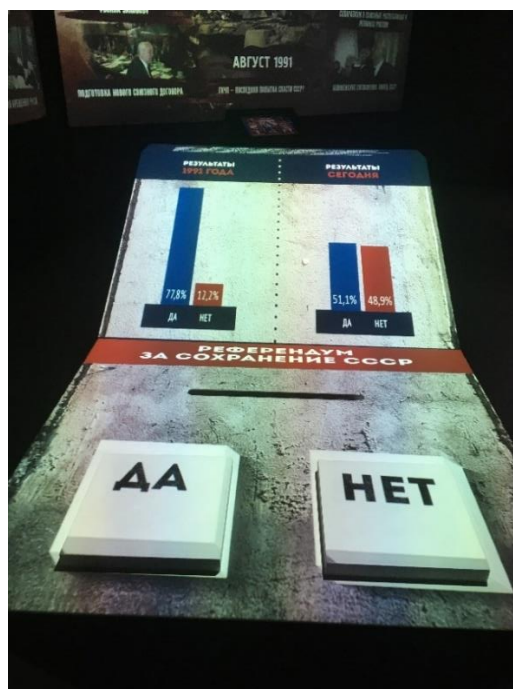


Figure 13. Interactive display with the Referendum on the preservation of the USSR in “Russia – My History” park in Saint Petersburg. The visitors are invited to vote, with the current results shown on the right (“Yes” and “No” highlighted in blue and red respectively). October 10, 2020. Photo by the author.



Figure 14. One of the rooms in “Russia – My History” park in Saint Petersburg citing Alexey Kudrin (Chairman of the Accounts Chamber), Dmitry Medvedev (former President and Prime Minister), and Sergei Ivanov (Special Representative of the President)
October 10, 2020. Photo by the author

The absence of objects makes “Russia – My History” parks resemble a digital museum rather than a conventional museum institution. At the same time, it does not have any parts of its exposition available online. Being a convenient solution that would have allowed studying the content of the exposition from home and actually using it as a history book, for some reasons, it was never considered by the museum organizers, who preferred to expand the network into the physical space. On the one hand, such tendencies can be connected with the commercial side of the project, the money-laundering role of which is beyond the focus of my research. On the other hand, physical space allows for more control over what the visitors learn from the presented exposition – the light, music, bright virtual screens and bold quotations creating an emotional rather than analytical experience that builds not on the newly acquired historical knowledge, but the un-reflexive euphoria of inclusivity and making the Russian history “my.” Further, I would consider how the narrative about Soviet political repression is presented and, through it, would reflect on the overall take of the parks’ creators on Russian history.

3. Current Exposition

As already mentioned, “Russia – My History” has branches in many Russian cities, but the content of their expositions is centrally-created in Moscow and passed down to the other regions, who are responsible for adding to it their “regional component.” In Moscow, the park exposition occupies the newly constructed pavilion on VDNH, and in Saint Petersburg, where part of the materials for this research was collected (due to the temporal closure of Moscow 20th century section to hold the exhibition dedicated to the Great Victory), is located in a similarly distanced and gigantic specifically constructed for the park’s purposes building in Moscow district, near the Victory Park. In both cases, the exhibition space is arranged in the enfilade of rooms that does not give a visitor much choice in terms of chronology of the viewing and forces him/her to follow the narrative offered by the curators. With the other aspects of the specificity

of format discussed earlier, further, I would like to focus on the way the history of Soviet repression is presented in the museums.

3.1. Defining Soviet Repression

Since “Russia – My History” is the only museum from those considered in the research that does not exclusively deal with the history of Soviet repression, presentation of this topic can be judged both by its presence on the topical stands and its absence from the discussion of other historically related topics (e.g., history of the great construction projects where Gulag prisoners worked). Explicitly, the “Russia – My History” exposition on the 20th – 21st century addresses Soviet repression only in three places. The first mention is connected to the anti-religious politics of the early years of the Soviet power and is presented on the interactive display in the room on the 1920s history. The second is the small walk-through room “Religious persecutions,”²¹³ which also includes information on the Solovki prison camp and the New Martyrs. The final and the largest attention to repression is brought in the separate room dedicated to them, which is located right before the hall on the Great Patriotic War. It includes sections “The Red Terror”, “On the Way to the Great Terror”, “Apogee of Repressive Politics”, incl. dekulakization, and “Statistics of Repression” display that features the interactive map of Gulag sites designed by the Gulag History Museum. The Late Soviet campaigns of repressions happening after the death of Stalin are not mentioned in the exposition and, moreover, explicitly denied of existence, to which I would later come back.

Chronologically, therefore, authors of the exposition frame history of Soviet repression similarly to Gulag History Museum, starting with the 1918’s Red Terror and finishing in 1953 and the death of Stalin (although the “Statistics of repression” display starts the narrative from 1921). Although the haphazard location of topics in the different displays makes it is hard to

²¹³ In original name: “Religioznye gonения” – unlike in the Gulag History Museum, Sakharov Center, or the Memorial Center Museum, exposition of “Russia – My History” parks does not offer any translations to English or other languages, despite the digitalized nature of the presentation would have allowed to do it relatively easily and conveniently.

make a consequent narrative from them, the history of repression presented by the authors can be roughly divided into three periods: first – the Red Terror, coinciding with anti-religious repression campaigns launched by Lenin, but limited to September 5, 1918 – November 6, 1918.²¹⁴ In this period, the section on Gulag is located, unexpectedly including the information on exiles and special settlers. Next, comes Stalin’s repression: the Great Terror that is framed as a logical continuation of the Red Terror, since after the Civil War, “repression had to be put into the juridical framework.”²¹⁵ This part also includes forced resettlements, as well as repression in the army during and right after the war, although it falls out from the 1937-1938 framework. According to the authors, with 1953, repression ended, and all further admission of its presence and denunciation of the repressive politics of Lenin and Stalin is presented in the negative light, starting with the Khrushchev’s Secret Speech being framed as “a heavy kick on the ideological and political unity of the international Socialist camp”²¹⁶ rather than the start of the democratization process.

In theory, the museum exposition mentions all categories of repression of Lenin’s and Stalin’s eras. However, as mentioned earlier, the way the narrative is presented makes one rarely flip through all the parts of every display, thus allowing the curators to emphasize some of them while hiding the others. The closer look allows assuming that repression campaigns, the discussion of which is allowed, are confined to religious persecutions (against the Orthodox clergy), framed as anti-religious politics of the Soviet government rather than repression per se, the Red Terror, Gulag (although the exposition does not provide information about the nature and history of corrective labor camps in the USSR), and the Great Terror. At the same time, information on the dekulakization campaign, national deportations, purges in the army and persecutions of confessions other than Orthodox, is hidden in the folders of the main screen.

²¹⁴ Explication on the display “Krasnyj Terror” [Red Terror] reads, “Despite today many people ascribe to Red Terror all punitive repressive measures of the Soviet government at the time of the Civil War, formally this regime did not last too long.”

²¹⁵ Explication from the display “Na puti k Bol'shomu Terroru” [On the way the Great Terror]

²¹⁶ Explication from the display “Bor’ba za vlast vnutri politicheskoy elity” [Power struggle inside the political elite]

The questionable grouping of different aspects of repressive Soviet politics makes it difficult to perceive them coherently – with information of Gulag, for example, being presented in “Statistics of repression,” along with the special settlers, while dekulakization being included in the display “On the way to the Great Terror” under the interparty purges of the late 1920s. The somewhat schizophrenic nature of the final narrative, nonetheless, becomes more logical if one considers the underlying paradigm in which the repression is conceptualized.

With the absence of primary documents explaining the system and order of different stages of Soviet repressive politics, the only explanation for them given in the exposition is the necessity to defend the sovereignty of the country from the real or perceived enemies in the uncertainty of upcoming wars. Thus, the First World War and the Civil War are used to explain Lenin’s repression: “the situation (what situation is not explained) was becoming so intense that Bolshevik leadership did not see another way but mass repression.”²¹⁷ Stalin’s repression, in its turn, is explained, on the one hand, by the inertia after the Civil War and, on the other, by the necessity to strengthen the country against the external threat of the Second World War. Thus, admitting that the reasons behind the 1937-1938 Terror “are still debated in the academic community,” the curators reassure that “most probably, the Soviet government, sensing the growth of international pressure... tried to preventively intimidate, disarm, and neutralize all the potential forces inside the country.”²¹⁸

At the same time, the narrative about religious persecutions stands out from the narrative of the secular repression, as it is told in accordance with the New Martyrs narrative developed by the Russian Orthodox Church. In this framework, the cause of repression, people standing behind it or legal framing of repressive politics are never considered, as repression is presented as a “catastrophe” with no clear origin, which, nonetheless, created heroic new martyrs who refused to give up their faith. In “Russia – My History” it can be best seen in the narrative about

²¹⁷ Explication from the stand “Krasnyj Terror” [The Red Terror]

²¹⁸ Explication from the stand “Apogey repressivnoy politiki” [Apogee of the repressive politics]

Solovki labor camp, which tells that “the prisoners were kept imprisoned and mercilessly exploited” (not mentioning by whom), with the only aim to continue their “heroic act (of adhering to one’s beliefs) in the extreme conditions of slave labor, tortures and abuses.”²¹⁹

Repression, therefore, is limited to Lenin and Stalin eras but does not represent a consequent development of the totalitarian system intrinsically built on centralized terror. The decrees, laws, quotes or statistics that would have helped to make some sense of the narrative, are absent from the “Russia – My History” exposition, despite its digital nature would have allowed to include them conveniently. The main cause of repression, if at all asked about, is explained by the necessity to strengthen the country against the external threat, but more often is left completely decontextualized, presenting repression as if happening in isolation from the flow of the prosperous and humane development of Soviet Russia.

3.2. Defining the Victims

The authors of the “Russia – My History” exposition, unlike the authors of the Gulag History Museum, never aimed to narrate the history of repression from the victim’s perspective. It comes as no surprise that there are virtually no names or quotations from the persecuted, except for a few extracts from Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov’s works, which are not related to personal experience, but rather to the formal aspects of the repressive system. The only victims receiving some personal remembrance are the New Martyrs, as in the room dedicated to them, there is a digital stand with names and photographs and symbolically lightened digital candles. Other victims remain referred to only in statistical numbers, with no description of the diverse composition of people who were affected by the repression. Moreover, since the exposition prefers not to focus on the persecutors or provide any details on the repressive apparatus, the victims, from just being the passive sufferers come to be considered as if suffering or dying for no clear cause. One of the means used by the authors that leads to such confusion is a vast use

²¹⁹ Explication from the stand “Solovetsky lager’ osobogo naznacheniya” [Solovki special prison]

of the passive tense word “pogibaly” (were dying), which is normally used when referring to the death in the accident, not implying the existence of any persecutor: for instance, during the Red Terror, “the second batch of detainees have died (pogibla).”²²⁰

The innocence of the victims of repression is also put into question. Thus, if the victimhood of the New Martyrs and the victims of the Red Terror is unquestioned, with other categories of the repressed the authors often argue that repression campaigns were fair or not as cruel as usually painted. For example, repression against the POWs after 1945 is framed as repression against the “revealed Hitler collaborators or those who were suspected of collaborationism,” at the same time adding that “nonetheless, regarding this group of prisoners, repression was not very strict: they were usually sent to special settlements for six years.”²²¹ Especially obvious this suggestion of the “deserved” victimhood comes in the discussion of national deportations. In general conceptualized as a sudden and unexpected mistake of the Soviet doctrine that “was deliberately directed at support for the marginal and oppressed nationalities,” it is also emphasized that part of ethnic minorities during the war “collaborated with the occupants.” Moreover, after the denunciation, the soft measures of Stalin’s repression against the “collaborators” are highlighted: the resettled people were not excluded from the party and were not deprived of their voting rights, “which provided the deportees with the preservation of their civil status.”²²²

When groups of victims of repression are considered – and there is no mention of the all-pervasiveness of the repression as it was in the Gulag History Museum, the exposition limits them to the party members (considering repression as the interparty purges) or to some members of Soviet intelligentsia, still being reluctant to giving names of the repressed. Along with the near absence of photo or video reproductions of life in Gulag, prisons or special resettlements,

²²⁰ Explication from the stand “Krasnyj Terror” [The Red Terror]

²²¹ Explication from the stand “Massovyje repressii v 1940h – pervoj polovine 1950h godov” [Mass repression in the 1940s – first half of the 1950s]

²²² Explication from the stand “Repressirovannye narody” [Repressed nationalities]

the victims, therefore, are almost entirely expelled from the discussion of their victimhood. One of the consequences of such depersonalization is the freedom from the necessity to repent or to mourn for them. Instead, the victimhood is shifted onto the “Russian people,” which contributes to the incorporation of repression into the process of national unification. President Putin’s quote presented in one of the rooms reassures the perception of victimhood as a common but undefined source of mourning (with no remorse): “It is a special tragedy for our country...Many things have to be done for it to be never forgotten.”²²³

3.3. Defining the Persecutors

The narrative about the persecutors in the exposition is, to a large extent, as inconsistent as the one about victims. Oftentimes, as in the Gulag History Museum, the history of repression is told in the passive tense. Moreover, when having to refer to some subject that carried out the repression, the authors of “Russia – My History” usually use the general terms “Soviet government” or “Soviet law enforcement officers.” At the same time, all intensifications of repressive politics are always described as being caused by the external threat to state’s sovereignty, thus allocating the blame on “the other,” which, although not explicitly pronounced on this stage of the exposition, implies the USA or the European countries.

When referring to personal responsibility, the authors only appeal to Lenin and – to a lesser extent – Stalin, not mentioning any other historical figures. Lenin’s role in the establishment of the state terror (not repression) is more clearly defined, as the room on the 1920s period hosts the separate stand with Lenin’s quotes agitating for the state terror. Without due contextualization, these citations look odd, not evoking any understanding of being intrinsically wrong or inhumane. In the biographical note on Lenin, repression is also mentioned in connection to dekulakization campaign: “the leader of the world proletariat continued to inflame the war against the peasantry.” Lenin’s name, however, is never mentioned in the direct

²²³ Putin V. cited in the stand “Krasnyj Terror” [The Red Terror]

relation to campaigns of repressions, leaving him aloof from the practical implementation of repressive politics – rather serving as their ideological founder.

More peculiarly comes the assessment of Stalin's role in repression. Despite admitting his role in the establishment of the Great Terror, national resettlements and repression in the military, the authors of the exposition always counterbalance the subtle accusations with justifications. Thus, since Stalin's main achievement was the victory in the Great Patriotic War, all his repressive politics are framed as being done for this cause. The justification is evoked even in the stands seemingly dedicated to the condemnation of Stalin. Thus, in "Personality Cult of Stalin – Tragedy of the Country," the establishment of the full-fledged repressive system in the 1930s is narrated exclusively in the passive tone: repressive politics "were established," or the "steamroller of repression went over the wealthy peasantry."²²⁴ Moreover, even in such a depersonalized narrative, the repression campaigns are justified by being aimed at "the liquidation of potential fifth column," the popular narrative among today's apologists and deniers of Soviet repression's existence. Not being mentioned personally, Stalin is lifted from responsibility and, in fact, almost victimized himself for "willingly or not becoming... an object of manipulation by his potential successors."²²⁵ Another technique of promoting Stalin's unaccountability for repression is through claiming that they were "vitally important" (*zhiznenno neobhodimy*). The authors use this convenient formula many times throughout the exposition.²²⁶ "Vital necessity" in this case again connects to the Victory in the Great Patriotic War, the highest cause that, being achieved, justified all measures taken along the way.

The culmination of the suggested view on Stalin can be seen from the film "Confrontation" which is shown at the exit from the Great Patriotic War room. The film promises to tell the history of "the after-war bipolar world, the personality cult and Gulag,

²²⁴ Explication from the stand "Kult lichnosti – tragedia strany" [Personality cult – tragedy for the country]

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ E.g., the emergence of *sharashki* (secret research bureaus established within the Gulag system) is explained by the "vital necessity" that stood behind the Soviet government that needed "to accelerate the production of the new machinery" (Explication from the stand "Apogej repressivnoy politiki")

Soviet peaceful atom and the victory-nation.” Starting with the argument that “the aggravation of the international situation” was the reason behind “tightening of the screws” in the USSR (narrated while Stalin’s picture appears in the background) the film carries on with partial denunciation of Stalin – although only by referencing to his personality cult that “he was not creating himself.” After reaching the Great Victory, however, the narrative changes, completely obfuscating any negative assessments and emphasizing the leadership genius of Stalin admitted all around the world.²²⁷ Reconstruction of the country after the war and great Soviet constructions, which showed the speed of Soviet labor “unpredicted by the Western experts,” are already told with no reflection on their employment of Gulag prisoner’s labor. In the end, the movie narrative comes back to Stalin, admitting that “with his name, both the industrialization success and the terror of mass repression will be forever connected.” However, in a second it switches back to the “victory-nation,” and the necessity to remember the heroism of the simple people who brought the victory to the country. This final accent reassures which side of the debate between Stalin being a tyrant or a great-victory-nation leader is correct and has to be learned by the visitors.

3.4. History of Repression after Stalin

The exposition of the “Russia – My History” parks confirms the concerns that the official historical narrative in today’s Russia aspires to put the existence of Soviet repression after Stalin into oblivion. Repression campaigns of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s are not so easily alienated from the present day, considering that many victims are still alive and active in the public sphere. Repentance or at least acknowledgment of political persecutions in the Late USSR is even more dangerous for the Russian government, as it, to a large extent, consists of the former KGBs (foremost, president Putin) – employees of the direct successor of NKVD, responsible for the 1970s-1980s political persecutions. The situation is further complicated by

²²⁷ According to the narrator of the film, “1/4 of the planet’s population joined the Red world voluntarily”: including the Poles, Romanians, and Eastern Germans.

the fact that the dissidents were, as explained in the first chapter, responsible for writing the public history of repression based on the primary sources, testimonies, and *lieux de mémoire*, which are much harder to manipulate for fitting into the desired political agenda. Thus, by eradicating the history of after-Stalin repression, the Russian government kills two rabbits with one blow: whitewashes the reputation of people and structures who are still in power in the country, and secures the model of remembering the Soviet Russia that was developed by them.

If in the Gulag History Museum the narrative about late Soviet repression or dissidents could be avoided as officially the museum only deals with the Gulag period, authors of the “Russia – My History” had to find ways to address this topic. As was already mentioned, repression after 1945 but before 1953 is justified or mitigated, claiming for the “soft measures” exercised by the Soviet government and questioning the innocence of the victims. However, from Khrushchev, the authors of the exposition switch to the official Cold War rhetoric and frame all violations of human rights happening in the Late USSR in the defensive paradigm of them being correct preventive measures against the traitors conspiring against the country’s sovereignty. The first public acceptance of political repression voiced by Khrushchev in his Secret Speech is presented as an “instrument of the power struggle,” all the more coercive as it caused the crisis of communist ideology, being the first step towards the dissolution of the Soviet Union.²²⁸ In relation to other leaders, repression is not mentioned explicitly, so the narrative about them can be only read from the discussion on the dissidents.

²²⁸ The voluntary nature of the united socialist world is never questioned in the exposition. Thus, all suppressions of the separatist demonstrations are presented as a peaceful intervention from the side of the Russian Soviet government, directed at restoration of peace and balance. For instance, the 1956 Hungarian uprising in the exposition is called the “Nazis riot.” Naturally, the dissolution of the USSR in this paradigm is presented as one of the most tragic events in Russian history, which adds to the contradictory nature of the narrative, since the Bolshevik 1917 Revolution is also presented as a tragedy of the country.

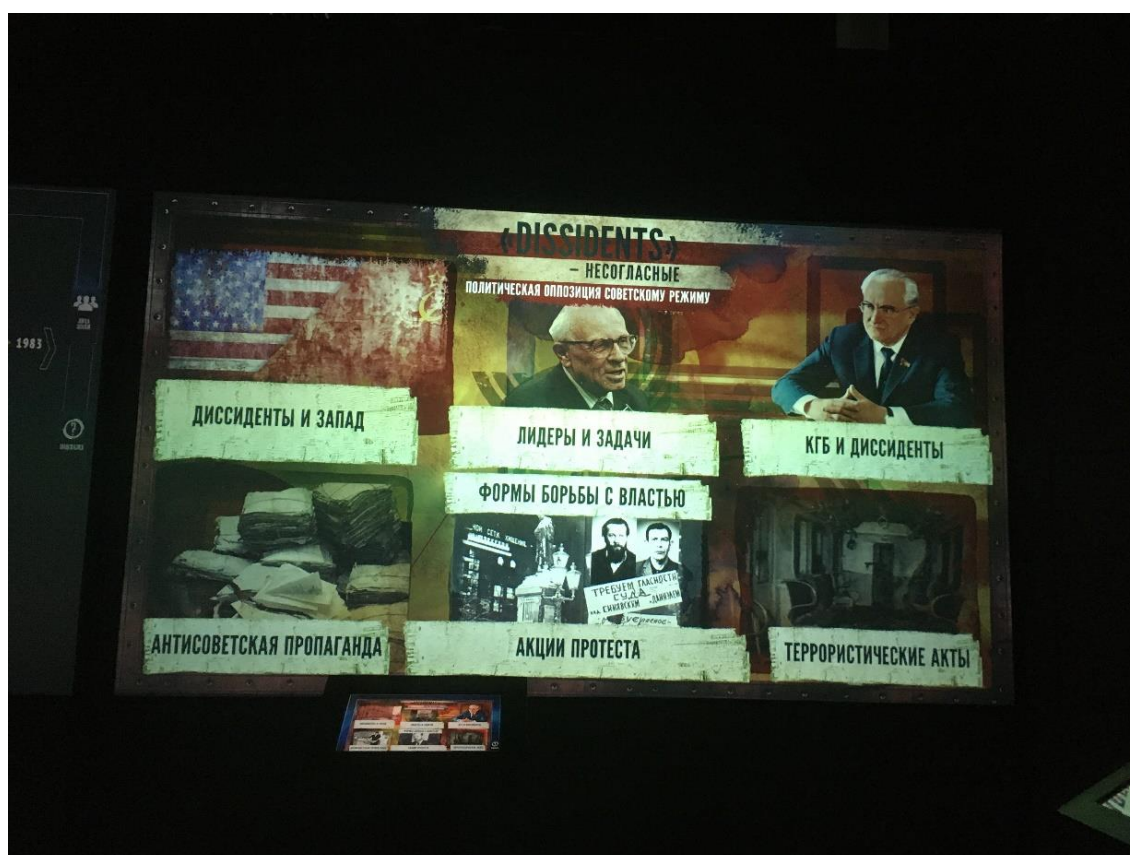


Figure 15. “Russia – My History” in Saint Petersburg: stand dedicated to the dissidents, with sections “Dissidents and the West,” “Anti-Soviet propaganda,” “Leaders and aims,” “Forms of the struggle with the government: protest actions,” “KGB and the dissidents,” and “Terror attacks.” October 10, 2020. Photo by the author

In the exposition, the dissidents are given a separate display in the room on the 1960s-1970s history. Written in English (DISSIDENTS) with the US flag on the background, the screen presupposes the further content of the narrative. Indeed, dissident’s ostensible cooperation and dependence on the West serve as the main means of delegitimization of their action. Already from the headline, the visitors read “Dissidents and the West: employment of the dissidents by the Western special services in struggle against the USSR.”²²⁹ To support these accusations, the authors employ quotes from, in fact, other dissidents, whose stories are never contextualized: for instance, Alexander Zinoviev’s words that “One has to be naïve to believe that all these people (the dissidents) are such ideologists and that they did all of it for some great ideas.”²³⁰ More often, however, the authors quote Filip Bobkov, the chief of the Fifth Directorate of the KGB responsible for repression against the dissidents (naturally, not

²²⁹ Explication from the stand “Dissidents”

²³⁰ Ibid.

mentioning his own political affiliations). Thus, Bobkov reassures that the dissidents were only the Western countries' puppets, while also arguing for the humane approach of the Soviet officials towards such people: "We were against those who, by their acts, challenged the constitutional order of the USSR."²³¹

The very values – disclosure of human rights violations, for which the dissidents fought, are mocked and presented in sarcastic light that diminishes their importance and narrows the dissident's activities to being the West-recruited agents. Thus, mentioning the radio stations – Radio Free Europe, Voice of America, etc. the authors argue that "the West supported liberal-oriented, pro-Western dissidents, while never defending the rights of Russian nationalists or Marxists who were also criticizing the USSR,"²³² – the argument supposedly destined to fill the reader with resentment for the biased character of the Western patrons of Soviet unrest. Similarly, the key words defining subjects of the dissident's struggle: "Soviet totalitarianism," "democratic values," "rehabilitation," are always written in brackets which adds to the sense of their unreality.

Discussion of the actual areas of activity of the dissidents also presupposes that their only aim was to destabilize the atmosphere in the USSR. Thus, samizdat is defined as "a form of the dissident's political activity, directed at the Soviet citizens for propagandistic purposes" (which purposes is left unexplained). Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, despite quoted as a credible source by the authors in one of the previous rooms, here described as "a literary work, allowing for the imagination." The human rights demonstrations, in their turn, are connected with either the dissident's "strive to get more attention to themselves" (not to the problem) or to shatter the social order. Among the demonstrations, exposition mentions the "Glasnost' meeting" of 1956 and the "Demonstration of the Seven," organized in response to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Since the crackdown of both demonstrations is presented

²³¹ Bobkov F., cited in the stand "Dissidents"

²³² Explication from the stand "Dissidents"

as the righteous act of the Soviet government, the punishments of the demonstrators are also justified. Thus, Natalia Gorbanevskaya, already mentioned by me in the first chapter, who was forcefully detained in the psychiatric hospital after the 1968 demonstration, is described as being, indeed, mentally unhealthy: first because she “turned out at the demonstration with the infant baby,”²³³ and second – because in 1970 she published a book in Western Germany, describing the events.

The final act of persuading visitors that dissidents were not the victims of some repressive politics, but a credible threat to the state, is in claiming their relation to the “terrorists.” This part of the dissident’s narrative is especially confusing since the connections drawn by the authors between the different people and events are hardly explained. If unraveled, the authors connect the two terrorist attacks – the 1970 passenger’s flight hijacking by the Lithuanian Braziskas and his son, “declaring themselves the Lithuanian separatists,” who killed the 19-year old stewardess that tried to stop them, and the 1977 explosions in the Moscow metro, “carried out by the Armenian nationalists.” Seemingly standing aloof from the dissidents, who earlier were described explicitly as some members of the liberal Russian intelligentsia, the section “Terrorist attacks” is included in the stand on the dissidents, and thus presupposes that they took an actual part in the events. In reality, however, the connection is based on the fact that “part of the dissidents justified the terrorists,” while “the Western countries in the excitement of confrontation with the USSR, gave them the political shelter.”²³⁴ The authors do not elaborate on any other connections of dissidents with terrorism or present any proofs for their support except for the one mention that Sakharov had doubts about the credibility of court charges against the “Armenian nationalists” (they were executed by the court’s decision). This part of the exposition, completing the narrative about the dissidents,

²³³ Alarmingly similar to the contemporary accusations and persecutions of people who bring their children to the protest actions in Russia. See, e.g., the case from the 2019 Moscow protests: “Vzjavshie rebenka na miting roditeli soobshhili o dvuh ugovnyh delah” [Parents who took a child to the protests reported about two criminal charges], *RBK*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/06/08/2019/5d49a4f09a79473e093d5052>

²³⁴ Explication from the section “Terroristicheskie akty” [Terror attacks] in “Dissidents” stand

provides the “evidence” that the dissidents – and in general all people standing in the opposition with the government – represented the credible threat to the civil society. The reassurance especially relevant in fine-tuning the minds of the visitors in light of the present-day rise of the oppositional moods in the country.

It comes as no surprise that in this paradigm Gorbachev is assessed as a weak governor. Despite his politics of Glasnost opened the previously censored literature to the Soviet readers, “the critique (presented in it) quickly grew into blackmailing, and cancelation of ideological censorship – to permissiveness” and launched a “deceitful and blatant re-writing of Russian history.”²³⁵ This promotion of the virtuous nature of censorship, anti-liberal and anti-democratic values in “Russia – My History” parks, falling in line with the political agenda of agents who stand behind the presented narrative, can be a topic for separate research. Here, however, it is important to note that by denying the dissident’s right towards not only being victims of repression, but also contributing to public history about them, the government once again reassures its exclusive monopoly on the construction of the collective memory.

Conclusion: Was the Repression Bad?

The narrative of Soviet repression presented in “Russia – My History” parks represents a purified view on 20th century Russian history that corresponds with other state historical initiatives. The simplified paradigm of it is that the government that won the war “against absolute evil,”²³⁶ cannot be responsible for any negative actions. At the same time, since the negativity of the dissolution of the USSR is as unquestionable as the greatness of the Great Victory and also cannot be blamed on the Russian nation, the history of the second half of the 20th century is presented as a continues shattering of the state order by the fifth columnists who were following the orders of “the West.”

²³⁵ Explication from the stand “Otmena cenzury. Glasnost” [Cancelation of censorship. Glasnost’]

²³⁶ Roginski A. “Fragmented Memory. Stalin and Stalinism in Present-day Russia”

Rather than developing a coherent state-sanctioned narrative, the exposition presents a disruptive, at times – self-contradictory history. Thus, political repression is largely presented as some atrocious events during which people have died, not being connected to a certain space, time, or governmental system. The victims are only allowed to be victims if they agree to stay depersonalized and passive (which eliminates all victims of the late political persecutions), and to contribute to the creation of national victimhood – a tragedy of the whole country. The persecutors, in their turn, are also ill-defined. Since chronologically the sanctioned narrative about repression falls into Lenin and Stalin eras, the names of the two leaders are evoked in the exposition. However, with the absence of any primary sources that framed the repressive politics, the degree of their responsibility is also continuously questioned. Thus, Lenin is presented as an ideological rather than practical implementer of repression. Similarly, repressions in the 1930s-1940s are narrated as happening not because of Stalin, but because of his personality cult – to which he fell victim of. The main source of repression, therefore, is allocated to the West – Europe and the US.

“The person that does not love his country, cannot love anything,” – quote the authors of the 20th century exposition the British 18th century poet Lord Byron.²³⁷ The love for the country, in the current framing of Russian patriotism, eliminates any possibility to be critical towards its history. Instead, the suggested framework of thinking about Soviet repression is not thinking too much into them. The mourning, at the same time, is much less emphasized here in comparison to the Gulag History Museum, downplayed by the history of achievements and the intrinsic innocence of the Russian political leaders.

The presented officially sanctioned narrative actively rewrites the history of 20th century Russia that has been developing since the 1980s. It presents the struggle for human rights in the

²³⁷ In general, the choice of historical personalities for quotations is usually guided by their suitability for providing ideological or emotional strengthening of authors' arguments rather than for them being exemplary for the period of which the narrative is about. For instance, the stand “Rossia i mir” [Russia and the world] dedicated to the international standing of Russia in the early 2000s, cites Plato, Aeschylus and “An Ancient Greek proverb.”

Late Soviet Union as a product of Western ideological propaganda, punitive psychiatry – as righteous eliminations of potentially dangerous elements of society, and any vocalizing of disagreement with the system – as a threat to civil society’s well-being. The aggravated monopolization of the public history field in the government’s hands allows it to rewrite Russian past in accordance with the current political agenda, and to promote its view to the masses without meeting any obstacles. “Russia – My History” exposition proves that the government, instead of searching for ways to reconcile the universality of the human rights that were violated by repression, with the generally positive assessment of the Soviet totalitarianism, decided to simply refute these values as being imposed on the Russian society from abroad. Being an alarming sign of the return of the totalitarian model, the current state of an official memory of Soviet political repression questions their coercive and inhumane nature, implicitly legitimizing some forms of persecutions, which are present in 21st century Russia.²³⁸ In the next chapter, I would like to bring together my analysis of the two eras (the 1980s-2000 and 2000-2020), ways in which the museum narrative of repression has been changing and the general shifts in Russian politics connected to it.

²³⁸ E.g., the recent decision of the government to involve the convicted prisoners in construction work. (“Osuzhdennyh nachali privlekat’ k rabote na stroikah Moskvyy” [The convicts have started to be involved in construction work in Moscow], *Meduza*, June 4, 2021, <https://meduza.io/news/2021/06/04/osuzhdennyh-nachali-privlekat-k-rabote-na-stroykah-v-moskve-i-moskovskoy-oblasti>)

Conclusion

The thesis considered the emergence and transformation of museum representation of Soviet repression in Moscow from the late 1980s to 2020, on the example of four institutions: The Memorial Museum, Sakharov Center Museum, Gulag History Museum, and “Russia – My History” multimedia history park. It brought together the study of primary documents related to historical politics – official directives, laws, orders from the Ministries and public performances of the politicians, with analysis of cultural projects and museum content. Building on the comparison between the two periods: the 1980s-2000 and 2000-2020, the thesis argued for the profound changes that happened in the sphere of memory politics in Putin’s Russia as compared to Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras and traced how these changes affected the public narrative about Soviet repression. As in the earlier period the collective memory about Soviet political repression was mostly constructed by the independent agents, while from the early 2000s – by the centralized governmental institutions, the thesis also drew the comparison between the bottom-up and top-down contributions to the collective memory field. In both cases, the considered organizations have been the crucial memory agents of their periods, and the closer look at their development within the frames of historical politics showed that they did not exist in isolation, but engaged in a dialogue with other memory agents and with each other. Tracing the shifts in discursive paradigms within which the history of Soviet repression was conceptualized, the thesis also explained the discrepancy that is characteristic of the collective memory field in Russia today.

In the 1980s-1990s, historical politics were not on the primary agenda of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, thus leaving the collective memory field open for the contributions from below. The collective memory of repression at that time was created mainly by the independent organizations, engaged in the overall investigation and revelation of parts of Soviet history previously silenced by the state censorship. In the early stages, collective memory about Soviet repression had been developing simultaneously with the collection of the information about

them, which defined the format of the first museum representations developed by the Memorial Society and Sakharov Center. “The Week of Conscience” organized by the former in 1988 and the permanent exposition of the latter, analyzed in the first chapter of the thesis, demonstrated the source-based approach used by the organizations, and an active engagement of people directly affected by the repression into the construction of the narrative. The human rights agenda of the two historical NGOs corresponded to their conceptualization of the Soviet period in the totalitarian model, which coincided with the social quest for democratization, and the narrative constructed by the Memorial and Sakharov Center in the exhibitions was modeled by the institutions’ engagement in the above-mentioned process. However, if the Memorial Society was widening its connections to other Russian regions and abroad, the Sakharov Center, initially being created around the single collection of Andrey Sakharov, largely secluded itself on Moscow and a certain circle of people, which, as suggested in the thesis, contributed to the limitations of the institution’s public outreach.

Having the heyday of public influence in the late 1980s-1990s, both NGOs have been gradually losing their standing in the 2000s, due to the political shifts happening in Putin’s Russia discussed in the second chapter. From the first presidential term, Putin set onto strengthening the vertical of power, which, among other things, led to the monopolization of public history production in the hands of the government-affiliated agents. Putin’s program, largely building on the aspiration for greater control over public life, envisaged the elimination of the possible opposition and critique. For historical politics, it meant repurposing them for strengthening the unification and homogeneity of the country, building its identity on the historical continuity with the past. In this paradigm, Soviet history came to be considered in a modernizational framework of the consequent positive development, which naturally changed the way history of Soviet repression was allowed to exist in the public field.

The memory laws, archival regulations and educational directives discussed in the second chapter, demonstrated the monopolization of history production in Russia. In this new

paradigm, the Memorial and the Sakharov Center fell into disgrace for both being independent memory agents and organizations connected to human rights oppositional movement, which was perceived as threatening the official authority of the government. With the simultaneous cleansing of the collective memory field from the opposition, from the 2010s Putin's government has been developing the network of loyal memory agents. Among the historical organizations, it was the Russian Historical Society and the Russian Military-Historical Society, the quasi-religious organizations – the Patriarchate Council of Culture, and the museums – the Gulag History Museum, whose status changed after the 2012 appointment of the new director, and the countrywide project “Russia – My History” established in 2017.

Having analyzed the transformation of the two museum institutions, the thesis argued that the Gulag History Museum was charged with taking over the Memorial and the Sakharov Center's role in the collective memory field. Maintaining the research into the “challenging pages” of Russian history, it formulated the narrative about the Soviet repression that did not question the integrity of the Soviet system and, therefore, did not oppose the official narrative of the continuity between the Soviet and the present-day Russia. This “negotiated commemoration” secluded the repression in the far-gone past of Lenin and Stalin eras and the distanced places of Gulag, hardly relatable to the contemporary generation. In terms of museum practices, this shift meant theatricalization of museum experience and appeal to the visitor's emotions rather than critical thinking and search for tangible connections with the present. At the same time, the Gulag History Museum, being the most publicized museum dealing with the history of repression in today's Moscow, have created confusion in the collective memory field, implicitly promising to cover all history of Soviet repressive campaigns, while focusing only on Gulag and concluding the existence of repression on the formal dismantlement of the labor camps system in 1960.

Analysis of the narrative provided in “Russia – My History” multimedia historical parks, in turn, provided an insight into the ultimate view of the Russian government on the history of

the Soviet Union and the place of political repression in it. Following the modernization paradigm and the alleged innocence of the Soviet leaders and the communist system in general, the responsibility for Lenin and Stalin repression was relocated on the external enemies or the fifth columnists inside the country, while late Soviet repression was presented as a legitimate response to the opposition from the Soviet government. Analysis of the “Russia – My History” historical parks showed the prevalence of historical presentism in setting the frames of officially-sanctioned historical discourse, which reflected not only the desired positive assessment of the USSR but also the negative assessment of the opposition – not only in the present but also in the past, suggested by the negative presentation of the early human rights movements.

The changes of the collective memory about Soviet repression considered in the thesis show the politicized nature of the field and its intrinsic connection to the present – for both the independent and the governmental actors. Active eradication of the challenging pages of history in 21st century Russia and marginalization of agents capable of intervening in the process, provide alarming signs of the value changes promulgated by the state officials. From being a source-based science, in the last decade, history has been repurposed for supporting the vertical authority of the government. Rather than breaking ties with the Soviet period, the Russian government does not start the reconciliation process that would have allowed the country to come to terms with its past and to, indeed, secure state repression in the “never again.” Instead, the defensive strategy and the gradual refuting of the coercive nature of political persecutions, legitimizes the anti-liberal, anti-democratic and authoritarian values, on which the current political regime has been built.

Russia is not unique in instrumentalization of history for political purposes, and in the last decade intensification of this process can be noted in other post-socialist countries – one can remember the Polish and Ukrainian Institutes of National Remembrance, recurring conflicts around the removal of Soviet monuments in Central and Eastern Europe or museums of the

“double occupation.” The Russian example, however, clearly illustrates how crucial the control over the production of historical knowledge is to the rise of authoritarianism. Subordinated to the whims of the governing elite, history becomes the powerful tool through which the regime dictates how the past, present and, ultimately, the desired future should be perceived by society.

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