Settled Images of the Unsettling Past

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Submitted to
Central European University Private University
Department of Gender Studies

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Gender Studies

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Vienna, Austria
2022

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

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Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 19,106 words

Entire manuscript: 21,235 words

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I investigate the question of what narratives and images of the past the Russian state needs to legitimize and prolong its imperialism, colonialism, and extractivism. In order to detect where these three intersect, I elaborate the notion of *osvoenie* as a practice of establishing and maintaining dominance over the place. Further, I demonstrate how different tools of *osvoenie* were employed on the lands of Taimyr Peninsula (Far North) that were first annexed by Muscovy, and then exploited by Imperial, Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian state. In order to find the narratives and images of the past that the Russian state needs to legitimize and prolong its imperialism, colonialism, and extractivism I investigate the Norilsk Museum representation of local history. It tells the stories about indigenous people of Taimyr, Russian conquest and exploration of these lands, and the Gulag camp that was located in Norilsk. I claim that narrating this, the museum produces settled images of the unsettling past, and these images in turn anesthetize the past in order to prolong the violence produced by imperialism, colonialism, and extractivism in the present. Also, I argue that these images and narratives must be considered as tools of *osvoenie* which means they are the active associates of the Russian state interested in maintaining dominance over the place.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Professor Eszter Timar, thank you for being patient with my always changing ideas, your guidance supported me and kept me motivated.

Professor Alexandra Kowalski, your generous comments and warmest words sparked the desire to continue the research, and this thesis grew out of it.

Professor Hadley Renkin, I want to express my gratitude to you for having once advised me to read Doreen Massey, it was a deeply transformative encounter as well as with Anna Tsing in our seminars. I am still processing.

Amir, it is hard to describe the way our friendship evacuated me from the very sepulchral depths. Thank you for your excitement and encouraging words, for generous sharing of ideas. I will never forget how great it was to think together.

Nikita, you have given me so much love and support, thank you for cheering me up in the most desperate moments, you have taught me not to be afraid of writing.

My dear family, despite all the difficulties of child-parent relationships, you have granted me a place hospitable to writing and suffering. Nothing can express my gratitude to my mom who cooked every day to keep me well-fed and not thinking about what I'm going to eat. It is only thanks to your care that I have enough time to write without thinking about my physical survival.

League of Tenders, thank you for being my extended family to which I can return to, no matter how far I sail away. Our kinship is the biggest source of hope during these harsh times.

My dearest Ptichka, Bro, Dasha Yu, Katya, Rebeca, Abul, Andrey, Lyosha and Olia, Dasha T, you supported me in different but so crucial ways. I cannot wish for better friends than you.

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Chapter 1. Setting the Scene

Main Concerns and Historical Context

What narratives and images, or imaginations, of the past do the Russian state need to legitimize and prolong its colonialism, imperialism and extractivism? This is the central question that motivates my research. Of course, I do not pretend to answer this question exhaustively, since there are a lot of images and narratives that fall in line with what I am looking for. In order to narrow down the scope to realistic dimensions, I focus on those events[1] that relate to the past associated with the early imperial expansion, which laid the foundation for the radical growth of the empire, the colonization of indigenous peoples, and the Gulag. What images and narratives associated with these events are considered appropriate, acceptable and useful for today's Russian state? Why do I think about these processes, what stands behind this selection? On the one hand, I am interested in these events, because they are directly related to what is happening today—Russian atrocious invasion of Ukraine, motivated partly by imperial ambitions; increasingly frequent conversations about the decolonization of Russia, where indigenous activists take the most visible and reasoned position and voice criticism of Russian and Soviet colonialities; and last but not the least, the Gulag, as I will show later, is directly related to the formation of the neo-patrimonial nature of modern Russia, which is structured by the collusion of

[1] I do keep in mind that things like settler colonialism, as Patrick Wolfe insisted, is not an event, but a structure. The same is true for conquest. But to avoid overloading my already overloaded sentences I use the word *event* or *process*.

oligarchs and the state, partly made possible by the functioning of Soviet camps, whose forces built the industrial infrastructure, which was privatized in the 1990s.

On the other hand, I am interested in these processes because all of them are the tricky stories for modern Russian memory politics. For instance, we can look at the museum representations of the Gulag. First, there are not so many exhibitions dedicated to it in the Russian cultural landscape despite the fact that almost each family had relatives that were imprisoned in the labor camps that existed between the 1930s–1950s. Second, if these sparse exhibitions or museums deal with the Gulag, the camps are often presented as an event encapsulated and reliably isolated from the present moment, something that completely belongs to the Soviet system and its history[2]. Moreover, many exhibitions seek "to justify terror, invoking either an accompanying economic and social upsurge or the victory in the Great Patriotic War"[3]. As for the imperial expansion of Russia and the accompanying settler colonialism, these things are simply not discussed in the official public field in such terms[4]. On the one hand, this is a consequence of the fact that in the Soviet hegemonic discourse both imperialism and colonialism were conceptualized as phenomena related mainly to Western capitalist countries. For example, if we look at the definition of the word *colonization* in the Soviet Encyclopedic Dictionary, we will see the following: "Colonization is the settlement of a country or region. In capitalist countries, it is accompanied by the subjugation, brutal exploitation, displacement, or extermination

[2] Gavrilova, "Regional Memories of the Great Terror: Representation of the Gulag in Russian *Kraevedcheskii* Museums"; Klimenko, "Politically Useful Tragedies: The Soviet Atrocities in the Historical Park(s) 'Russia — My History'"; Dubina and Zavadski, "Eclipsing Stalin: The GULAG History Museum in Moscow as a Manifestation of Russia's Official Memory of Soviet Repression"
[3] Gavrilova, "Regional Memories of the Great Terror: Representation of the Gulag in Russian *Kraevedcheskii* Museums", 12.
[4] Engelhardt, "The Futures of Russian Decolonization"; Shestakova, "The Heterogeneous Temporalities of Russia's Colonialism"

of the local population"[5]. Thus, the impossibility of applying these words to Soviet and then Russian realities could remain in the public consciousness[6]. But on the other hand, the state clearly has a fear of separatism, the collapse of the country, and spreading of the resistance motivated by the need to decolonize Russia. All this is eloquently evidenced by the numerous criminal cases brought against indigenous activists[7] and the Criminal Code with its heavy fines and terms for "calls for separatism and violation of territorial integrity"[8].

Trying to find what unites imperialism, extractivism and colonialism in the Russian context, I come to the concept and practice of *osvoenie*. In English, this word is often translated as mastering, exploration, colonization, and cultivation, although partly correct such translations miss the core essence of the notion, namely the will to *make something one's own*. In Russian, both colloquial and academic, *osvoenie* as a notion is often used in relation to geographical locations, for example, among the fixed collocations there are *osvoenie of the Arctic, osvoenie of virgin soils, osvoenie of Siberia*. In each of these cases, *osvoenie* has positive connotations. At the same time, the real processes behind, for example, the *osvoenie* of Siberia, included settler colonialism and brutal economic exploitation of the indigenous population. Thus, it can be argued that the concept of *osvoenie* is used as a euphemism that allows hiding obscene, contradictory, unsettling. However, little attention has been paid to this concept in the academic literature where it is mainly used with a certain degree of automatism. One of the rare exceptions is the paper written by Yuri Shabaev and Kirill

[5] Soviet Encyclopedic Dictionary, 107
[6] I am thankful to Anna Gomboeva for pointing this out
[7] For examle, The Website of Human Rights Watch, "Crimea: Persecution of Crimean Tatars Intensifies Arbitrary Detentions; Separatism, Terrorism Charges"
[8] The ConsultantPlus Website, "UK RF Stat'ya 280.1. Publichnyye prizyvy k osushchestvleniyu deystviy, napravlennykh na narusheniye territorial'noy tselostnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii"

Istomin, where they propose the following definition, "*osvoenie* of an object means the change or modification of the object (or, sometimes, of the subject) and it is by virtue of this change only that the object becomes the 'subject's own'"[9]. Being grounded on their elaborations as well as on feminist geography, in the second chapter I try to interrogate the paradoxical nature of this concept. I demonstrate that on the one hand, it is used as a euphemism to hide the obscene—imperialism, colonialism, extractivism and cruelty generated by them. And on the other hand, if we unravel its meaning, this concept can become a lens through which we can observe how the dominance over the place is established and draw the lines of continuity between heterogeneous processes. That is, I propose in this chapter a kind of re-appropriation of the concept of *osvoenie* for the sake of critical thinking, withdrawing it from euphemistic use. After all, only being disentangled, this concept reveals how imperialism, extractivism and colonialism relate in the Russian context.

If we return to the *osvoenie* as a euphemism, I would argue that without images and imaginations that would underpin the euphemistic use of this word, it would not be able to successfully camouflage the brutality produced by imperialism, colonialism, and extractivism. Therefore, there is a need in images of the past that will translate these events into a plausible form, filling the euphemism with content, giving it realism. Thus, we return to the main question—what narratives, images, and imaginations of the past do the Russian state need to legitimize and prolong its colonialism, imperialism and extractivism? Since we are dealing with images and imagination, and in order to answer this question, we need to turn to culture (the public cultural sphere), to which

[9] Shabaev and Istomin. "Historical Realities and Historical Myths of the Colonization of the 'Russian North:' from the Initial Settlement to the Post-Soviet Retreat", 208

the state has put its hand, on which, if I may say so, there is a state seal, there is its imprint. What do I mean by the image of the state seal? I think it is about literal sanctioning by the state of what is being produced by the agents of culture. Of all the cultural diversity, I am more interested in the museum as an institution that specializes in narratives, stories (like literature, on the one hand), but its narratives are unthinkable without objects, space, layout, light and many more parameters that have some their own semantics and thus deliver additional messages. All this provides these narratives and stories ambiguity and unpredictability. In turn, this ambiguity just gives space for analytical intervention, through its confusion opening up many angles for review or blurting out something over the intentions of those who made the exhibition. In this sense, the museum is hospitable to different ways of reading its exhibitions.

In the Russian context, there are notable cultural institutions, *kraevedcheskie* museums. Usually, they are referred to as the local history museums. As an extensive network consisting of hundreds of museums, this cultural and educational infrastructure was created and financed by the Soviet government. The responsible committees worked out the principles according to which exhibitions should be built, published methodological and ideological brochures that told how and what to tell, held conferences of museum workers, and the like[10]. However, it is important to say that ideological accents, politics of representation, principles of presentation of material, and even the very role of local history museums changed throughout the Soviet era. In 1990, during the transition period, many museums weakened, some even closed because of the lack of funding. But one way or another, by now in every, even the

[10] Donovan, "'How Well Do You Know Your Krai?' The Kraevedenie Revival and Patriotic Politics in Late Khrushchev-Era Russia"

smallest city there is a museum of local lore. After the 1990s, the connection between the state and museums certainly became weaker than it was in Soviet times, but it still remained — museums are financed from municipal budgets, and those who receive funding from municipal budgets are often controlled by the state through local departments of culture. The infrastructure of local history museums is a kind of cultural asset of the state.

Thus, in search of narratives and images that the Russian state needs in order to legitimize and prolong its colonialism, imperialism and extractivism, I suggest turning to local history museums, which are controlled by the state through financing and censorship on the one hand, and on the other hand, the Soviet state stands behind them in the form of memory, which manifests itself in some expositional techniques, narratives and ideologies elaborated in Soviet times. That is, the museum of local lore is a cultural institution through which two states, Soviet and Russian, shine through. However, another important feature of such museums is its strong connection with the local community and agency of the latter. On the one hand, as a rule, the staff of the museum, which tells about the place, about its history, are those who live in this city, village, or district. On the other hand, local history museums are often open to the intervention of urban communities and individual citizens if they want to initiate cooperation. All this makes the local history museum a place where there is an intersection of the wills, state, and grassroots ones.

I would posit that a local history museum situated in a place pierced by multiplicity of imperial-extractivist forces is the most uncovering case-study possible if we want to identify the narratives and images of the past the Russian state need to legitimize and

prolong its colonialism, imperialism and extractivism required imaginings and narratives. Indeed, for places permeated with cruelty, there is a need for euphemistic words such as *osvoenie*, and stories that would create the settled images of the unsettling past[11], absorb the shocks, and lull discontent. Here, I want to bring to the fore the Norilsk Museum, which is located in the city of the same name. In order to orient ourselves geographically and historically, I will now briefly tell you about Norilsk and the lands on which it is located. Since this thesis is largely based on the study of the history of these places and I repeatedly address it in detail throughout the chapters, I will not talk about it in detail here but will limit myself to a dotted retelling.

Norilsk is located beyond the Arctic Circle, on the Taimyr Peninsula, the traditional land of the Dolgan, Nenets, Nganasan, Evenk, Enets peoples. The Taimyr Peninsula itself belongs to the region of Eastern Siberia. The annexation of these lands by Russia, or to be more precise by Muscovy, dates back to the end of the 16th–beginning of the 17th century. At the initiative of the tsarist administration that wished to gain a foothold in these territories a permanent settlement of Mangazeya was founded there. On the one hand, it served as a colonial outpost for the advancement of the Russian conquerors deep into Siberia, and on the other it was an administrative center for collecting fur tribute from the indigenous population whom the Russians turned into subjects of the tsar by imposing tribute and swearing oath. Huge volumes of fur trade have made Mangazeya the richest Siberian city, and a byword. However, with the closure of the trade route, the city fell into decline and did not recover after the fire and ceased to exist in 1672. Still these lands continued to serve as a resource base and a

[11] It was Aleksei Borisionok's paper on queer temporalities of protest infrastructures in Belarus that inspired me to think about the past through the notion of unsettledness

strategically important transport point for the Russian state. Mangazeya was located 400 km from the place where Norilsk is now located, and three centuries from the time when the latter appeared. Mangazeya is no longer there, but having disappeared from the cards, she has not disappeared from memory. As I show in Chapter 3, in the collective memory, as well as in the narratives of the Norilsk Museum, these cities are connected by symbolic continuity: Norilsk is the heir of Mangazeya. Norilsk itself appeared only in the 20th century, first as a working settlement, and then as a city. Its history is inextricably linked with the Gulag, the system of Soviet forced labor camps. Firstly, because the working settlement itself appeared together with the emergence of the camp—first, the prisoners had to build basic infrastructure: road and railway tracks, barracks, as well as prepare a place for construction of the Norilsk Nickel Industrial Complex. And secondly, when the complex was already built, Norillag, the name for a local branch of the Gulag, was assigned to perform a permanent exploitation of deposits, maintenance of the complex, and the development of an entire region[12]. Skipping a long period of time, I suggest switching to 1990, the period after the collapse of the USSR, when the privatization of previously state-owned enterprises takes place. Industrial facilities built within Norillag were privatized by the financial and industrial group, and Norilsk Nickel Industrial Complex became Norilsk Nickel Mining and Metallurgical Company, a metallurgic giant closely affiliated with the Russian government[13].

The Norilsk Museum was founded in 1939, however it carried a different name, it was titled *Museum of the History of the Norilsk Industrial District*. The museum appeared

[12] Ertz, “Building Norilsk”, 133
[13] Hohmann and Laruelle, “Biography of a Polar City: Population Flows and Urban Identity in Norilsk”, 306

almost at the same time as the Norilsk Industrial Complex and was intended to function as a departmental museum displaying samples of ore and minerals mined at the Norilsk deposit. Importantly both the complex and the museum were created within the Gulag. Scientists—biologists, geologists, paleontologists, mineralogists who were imprisoned in Norillag—were involved in consultations. The first exposition was located in a large basement room of a barrack on one of the first streets of the settlement. There were many changes on the administrative and curatorial levels, but I would mention only some of them. Since 1989, a new stage has begun, the museum started to deal with the history of those who were inmates of the Gulag. This work has been initiated and run mostly by children of those who have been Norillag prisoners. In 2001, the museum was renamed to *Museum of the History of Mastering/Exploration/Appropriation (rus: Osvoenie) and Development of the Norilsk Industrial Region*. I must say that in many ways it was this past name of the museum that led to the idea that it was necessary to take a closer look at the concept of *osvoenie* and snatch it from the clutches of imperialist rhetoric, unmasking the things it covers. In 2005, the museum opened after a two-year renovation, and this is the kind of museum that we can still observe. In 2016, the title of the museum was changed, and it became known as the *Norilsk Museum*. The museum focuses mainly on everything local: local history, local nature, local artists and the like, where local means the Taimyr Peninsula and Norilsk in particular. For the thesis I analyze two permanent exhibitions, *Territory* and *Not Subject to Revision*. The first exhibition tells visitors stories about the natural world of Taimyr, indigenous people, and the history of *osvoenie* of Taimyr. And the second exhibition is dedicated to the Gulag and the memory of its victims.

Thus, to answer the main question I ask a supporting question: how does the Norilsk Museum tell the history of the place? Being a municipal museum located in a city where Norilsk Nickel is "the autocrat of Norilsk"[14] it functions under close inspection of the state and the oligarchic enterprise. This unique combination of factors suggests that by telling the stories of a place permeated with extraction, a place which became part of Russia only due to the imperial conquest, the museum produces settled images of the unsettling past that are so much needed by the state. These images and narratives help us to grasp the role of culture in maintaining imperialism, colonialism and extractivism, and as well as dependence of the state on distorted translations of the past in order to make it look like settled.

Theoretical Companions

This work is made up of synthesis and linkages between different sources that help to create a ground or perspective from which we can interrogate imperialism, colonialism and extractivism through culture and its workings. I treated papers and books as companions without too much confrontation, rather my strategy in dealing with theoretical sources was alliance, careful friendship, and the necessary prudence. Perhaps this happened because of the desires and affects that came from my positionality and rootedness in the Russian context, which became my subject of research. Perhaps this desire to confront and resist the insane amount of cruelty produced by the Russian state has pulled the rope on its side.

[14] Dahlin, "The Continental Archipelago of Norilsk. Karib – Nordic Journal for Caribbean Studies", 5

So, in Chapter 2 I focus on the concept and practice of *osvoenie*. I point out that the concept is not sufficiently developed, despite the fact that it is widely used both in colloquial speech and academic Russian-language literature. The reason why I say that this concept needs more attention is that this word implies such processes as colonization, exploration, mastering, extraction, but they are hidden behind the euphemistic use of the word. The article by Yuri Shabaev and Kirill Istomin is a rare example of academic attention to the concept of *osvoenie*, and in relation to territories, lands. They interpret *osvoenie* as a technique that allows the Russian state to acquire the title on certain territories[15]. Even though they highlight the complexity of this concept and explain the mechanics of the *osvoenie* itself, the problematic thing in their developments is that they understand a place, a territory as something static and a priori given, like the surface of the earth, for example. This has implications for how they conceptualize *osvoenie*. However, I proceed from a number of authors' elaborations for example, that *osvoenie* implies the presence of goals and means, or tools, and revise the meaning and mechanism of *osvoenie* through understanding the place proposed by Doreen Massey[16]. Being grounded in feminist geography, I suggest more nuanced understanding of *osvoenie* that allows us not to simplify its workings and outcomes. Developing these findings, I argue that we need to take a closer look at what can work as tools of *osvoenie*, since this can unravel the way *osvoenie* functions as a means of consolidating imperial expansion and legitimizing extraction. In order to conduct what I call a fragmentary inventory of tools that were used to establish a dominance over Taimyr, I rely on variety of sources that deal with Tsarist

[15] Shabaev and Istomin, “Historical Realities and Historical Myths of the Colonization of the ‘Russian North:’ from the Initial Settlement to the Post-Soviet Retreat”, 208
[16] Massey, “Politics and Space/Time”, 139–159; Massey, *For space*, 9

conquest of Siberia[17], Russian settler-colonialism[18], Soviet environmental history and Soviet industrialization in conjunction with each other[19]. Weaving these sources together I come up with an innovative understanding of *osvoenie* and I propose to link heterogeneous processes by reconceptualizing them as tools of osvoenie.

In Chapter 3, I analyze how the Norilsk Museum narrates the history of the place, Norilsk and Taimyr Peninsula. Being touched by different tools of *osvoenie* this place connects multiple troublesome stories of its past and present. Thus, the narratives and images of the past created within the Norilsk Museum, the institution authorized and sanctioned by the state, will reveal to us what narratives and images of the past legitimize imperialism, colonialism, and extractivism. In order to identify the peculiarities of the narratives and images produced by the Norilsk Museum, I create a special backdrop against which I examine the exhibitions. For the *Territory* exhibition, this backdrop components are analytical accounts on settler colonialism[20] and frontiers of extraction[21], as well as different historical and analytical sources about the region under consideration[22]. In addition to it, I investigate how the *Territory* exhibition

[17] Forsyth, *A History of the Peoples of Siberia: Russia's North Asian Colony, 1581–1990;* Kivelson, "Claiming Siberia: Colonial Possession and Property Holding in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries"; Nikitin, *Osvoenie Sibiri v XVII veke;* Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small People of the North;* Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World*

[18] Geraci, "Genocidal Impulses and Fantasies in Imperial Russia"; Morrison, "Russian Settler Colonialism"; Remnev, "Sdelat' Sibir' i Dal'nii Vostok russkimi. K voprosu o politicheskoi motivatsii kolonizatsionnykh protsessov XIX – nachala XX vek"; Remnev, "Vdvinut' Rossiiu v Sibir'. Imperiya i Russkaya Kolonizatsiya vtoroi poloviny XIX – nachalo XX veka"

[19] Bruno, *The Nature of Soviet Power: An Arctic Environmental History*; McCannon, *Red Arctic: Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union, 1932-1939*; Bolotova, "Colonization of Nature in the Soviet Union. State Ideology, Public Discourse, and the Experience of Geologists"; Ertz, Simon, "Building Norilsk";

[20] Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native"; Goeman, "From Place to Territories and Back Again: Centering Storied Land in the Discussion of Indigenous Nation-Building"; Tuck and Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting"

[21] Tsing, "Natural Resources and Capitalist Frontiers"; Richard, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World*; Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native"

[22] I have already mentioned the majority of this sources in footnotes #17, 18, 19

creates its own credibility and objectivity, and for this purpose I rely on the studies dedicated to the politics of display and knowledge production[23]. In order to analyze the exhibition about the Gulag, I create the background against which I read the exhibition, it consists of the literature about the role of the forced labor in the economy of the Soviet Union in general and in Norilsk in particular[24], neopatrimonialism of the modern Russian state[25] as well as diverse literature about modern Norilsk[26]. All these theoretical companions allow me to identify what kind of images of the past the museum creates, by what means, and why they are useful for the Russian state.

Methodological Note

Due to a number of circumstances, I was unable to fly to Norilsk on my own, so my acquaintance with the museum was based on detailed photographs kindly taken for me by my Norilsk friend, Anya Tolkacheva, video tours shot by her, 3D tours made by the museum itself. The official website of the Norilsk Museum provided a great help in studying the history and collections of the museum. Also, to learn more about the way the museum works, I conducted an interview with Katya, a former employee of the museum, for which I am very grateful to her and Anna, who connected us.

[23] Macdonald, “Exhibitions of Power and Powers of Exhibition: an Introduction to the Politics of Display”; Moser, “The Devil Is in the Detail: Museum Displays and the Creation of Knowledge”; Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, Teslow, “Reifying Race: Science and Art in Races of Mankind at the Field Museum of Natural History”

[24] Ertz, “Building Norilsk”, Applebaum, *GULAG, a History*; Ivanova, “GULAG v sisteme totalitarnogo gosudarstva”;

[25] Gel’man, “‘Porotchnii krug’ postsovetskogo neopatrimonialisma”; Matveev, “Gibridnaya neoliberalizatsia: gosudarstvo, legitimnost’ i neoliberalism v putinskoi Rossii”

[26] For example, Dahlin, “The Continental Archipelago of Norilsk”; Humphreys, “Challenges of Transformation: The Case of Norilsk Nickel”, Hohmann and Laruelle, “Biography of a Polar City: Population Flows and Urban Identity in Norilsk”

To analyze exhibitions and their narratives, I used Stephanie Moser's methodological recommendations.[27] In these recommendations, she indicates the need to pay attention to the spatial organization of exhibitions and the museum itself, the interrelation of exhibition spaces, light accents, the presence or absence of text accompanying the exhibition, layout of different exhibition components, and some other parameters that were of less importance for me. This methodological division of exhibitions into elements helped me perceive both the explicit and implicit messages of the exhibitions, as well as read the objects and space along with textual material.

[27] Moser, “The Devil Is in the Detail: Museum Displays and the Creation of Knowledge”

Charter 2. *Osvoenie* and Its Controversies

History has assigned the role of a pioneer to the Russian people. For many hundreds of years, Russians have been discovering new lands, settling them and transforming them with their labor, defending them with weapons in their hands in the fight against numerous enemies. As a result, Russian people succeeded in osvoenie*, huge spaces were settled, and once empty and wild lands became not only an integral part of our country, but also its most important industrial and agricultural areas.*

Nikolay Nikitin. The Mastering of Siberia

Introduction

As a practice *osvoenie* combines colonialism, imperialism and extractivism. However, to make this visible, we need to work on untangling the concept of osvoenie and situations when it is used as a euphemism. For example, the quote I put in the epigraph shows one of the standard ways of using the word mastering as a euphemism. In this case, this euphemistic concept can provide a ground for an affective cultural matrix that would stitches culture and gives people ways of relating to the land they inhabit, and these ways of relating include great Russian chauvinism, xenophobia, predatory attitude to nature, to name a few. In this chapter, I deal with what the concept and practice of osvoenie means and try to offer a non-euphemistic understanding of *osvoenie*, which can help to see the coherence of imperialism, colonialism and extractivism in the Russian context.

Unraveling the Meaning of *Osvoenie*

The notion of *osvoenie* is widely used in the Russian speaking context. We can encounter it in academic papers and newspapers, in everyday speech and on television. For example, a person can talk about *osvoenie* of Space, *osvoenie* of the North, *osvoenie* of the coal deposits, and alike. It is possible to grasp that in each case, *osvoenie* denotes radically different processes and carries different meanings. Despite the significance of the processes that *osvoenie* denotes, in academic literature, the concept itself has not been given much attention. In English, this word is often translated as mastering, exploration, colonization, and cultivation. However, these translations miss the mechanics and politics that are hidden behind this notion. At this point, I need to make it explicit that my central focus is on situations when one speaks about *osvoenie* in relation to the earthly spaces and places. The reason behind this choice is that it is exactly in *osvoenie* of a land that we can see the intersection of imperialism (as a struggle for land), colonialism (as a technique of establishing dominance over the land), and extractivism (as a way of exploiting land and benefiting from its use).

One of the recent papers that deals in more detail with the notion of *osvoenie* is written by Yuri Shabaev and Kirill Istomin and is dedicated to the different stages of colonization of the European north of Russia[28]. They engage in a particularly interesting discussion of what *osvoenie* means. Etymologically and morphologically, this word is deceptively close to “making something one’s own, appropriating something”. However, it has a remarkable nuance, as noted by the authors:

[28] Shabaev and Istomin. “Historical Realities and Historical Myths of the Colonization of the ‘Russian North:’ from the Initial Settlement to the Post-Soviet Retreat”

"Despite its etymology, however, *osvoenie* cannot be translated into English as "appropriation". Although the Russian word for "appropriation" – *prisvoenie* – has the same root, it features a different modifier. The difference between the two seems to be that *osvoenie* pre-supposes a certain modification of the objects themselves – rather than just of the relation between them in terms of property. <...> In other words, if *prisvoenie* (appropriation) of a certain object means a change of the owner of the object (it used to be possessed by someone else but changes hands and becomes one's own property) but not of the object itself then *osvoenie* of an object means the change or modification of the object (or, sometimes, of the subject) and it is by virtue of this change only that the object becomes the 'subject's own'. This explains why this word is rarely used when one speaks about discrete material objects such as tables or shoes, but mostly when one speaks about ideas, knowledge, raw materials or resources (e.g. *osvoenie zapasov uglia* – lit. '*osvoenie* of coal deposits')"[29].

What I would like to highlight and make more explicit in this elaboration is that the special feature of the word under consideration is that it combines *both ends and means*: appropriation through modification. Also importantly, due to "morphology of the word, which originates from the Russian root *svoi* (one's own)"[30] appropriation is more vocal in this word and in a way hides modification. If we look at some fixed collocations—*osvoenie of the Arctic, osvoenie of the North, osvoenie of Siberia*, and the like—we will notice that each time, the manifestation that the places in question are becoming one's own overshadows the difference in the means that help to achieve

[29] Ibid, 208
[30] Ibid

the final goal, appropriation. This concealment of the means, or even tools, is politically crucial, because it is behind the means, as I will show later, that the establishment of domination, and the accompanying oppression stand.

Despite the valuable and voluminous explanation of the concept of mastering, Shabaev and Istomin tend to simplify the workings of *osvoenie* as a practice and politics. They claim, "Whoever symbolically 'owned' the Russian state – the Great Prince, the Tsar or the 'working masses' – they always faced the ideological challenge of making the huge territory of the state 'their own'. Military or political control over the territory or even having some settlers there was not enough for that. The territory could become truly the state's or the working class's own only after the subjects of the state or the representatives of the working class would transform it by ploughing fields, building towns and cities, roads and railroads, coal mines and oil wells"[31]. Understanding the transformation of the territory exclusively as discrete events—ploughing of fields, construction of roads—they overlook a bunch of related factors, events, ideological prerequisites that, on the one hand, precede these actions and make them possible, and on the other, come as consequences of them. In other words, they miss what has ensured ploughing, and what happened after the fields have been ploughed. Thus, it is possible to claim that understanding of *osvoenie* of a place as a series of discrete events carried out with the help of subjects of the state, obscures both the effects of *osvoenie* and the possible repertoire of its means, or tools.

Feminist Reading of Place/Space: How to Revise *Osvoenie*

[31] Ibid, 224

I would argue that the fundamental problem of Shabaev and Istomin's elaborations of *osvoenie* as a practice stem from the way they understand place and land, or as they often call it—territory. What is implicit in their elaborations is a wide-spread understanding of place as a passive matter and stasis over which human actions such as *ploughing fields, building towns and cities* unfold in a supposedly discrete manner. Such understanding of place has been justly criticized in feminist geography as well as in decolonial thought. As argued by Doreen Massey, place as a stasis and an arena for history's unfolding is a part of the binary opposition structured in a gendered way where time is aligned with masculine, "History, Progress, Civilization, Science, Politics and Reason" and space is aligned with feminine "stasis, ('simple') reproduction, nostalgia, emotion, aesthetics, the body"[32]. What is more, thinking about a place as a fixed location divorced from the procedural nature of events and the relationships that constitute it reminds of a "stagnant or normative colonial space"[33]. Mishuana Goeman insists on the necessity of resisting to such understanding and suggests that "Conceiving of space as a node, rather than linear time construct marked by supposed shifting ownerships, is a powerful mechanism in resisting imperial geographies that order time and space in hierarchies that erase and bury Indigenous connections to place and anesthetizes settler-colonial histories"[34].

So, in order to better and more accurately understand the means that make the *osvoenie* of the territory possible, it is necessary to discard the masculine and colonial understanding of the place. Here, I would like to turn to feminist geography again through Doreen Massey and rely on her elaborations on what a place is. She posits

[32] Massey, "Politics and Space/Time", 146
[33] Goeman, "From Place to Territories and Back Again: Centering Storied Land in the Discussion of Indigenous Nation-Building", 24
[34] Ibid

that, "'Space' is created out of the vast intricacies, the incredible complexities, of the interlocking and the non-interlocking, and the networks of relations at every scale from local to global. What makes a particular view of these social relations specifically spatial is their simultaneity. It is a simultaneity, also, which has extension and configuration. But simultaneity is absolutely not stasis. Seeing space as a moment in the intersection of configured social relations (rather than as an absolute dimension) means that it cannot be seen as static.<...> Moreover, and again as a result of the fact that it is conceptualized as created out of social relations, space is by its very nature full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation"[35].

What implications does this understanding of space have when we think about the *osvoenie* of a certain space—ambition of the state or separate actors to appropriate a space through modification of something that constitutes it? First it means that the ambition and the very activity of *osvoenie* can be considered as a multiplicity of the relations that would constitute space once it is desired to be appropriated and dominated. In other words, *osvoenie* and its means can be interpreted as a number of the interactions that constitute a desired space. Also, this means that *osvoenie* has an important temporal dimension that is not isolated from spatiality. Secondly, those who have an intention to appropriate a space through modification are likely to work hard and modify many things that constitute space which means that *osvoenie* subsumes a multiplicity of trajectories of violence. That is why it is crucial not to reduce the means of *osvoenie* to ploughing fields, but instead look at the multiplicity of events, structures, ideas and relations that surround ploughing fields, make it possible and go along with

[35] Massey, "Politics and Space/Time", 153

it. Fundamentally, all these things must be also considered as a means or tools of *osvoenie*. Thirdly, *osvoenie* is not a stable practice, it inevitably changes throughout a time of its enacting along with the transformation of place and its constitutive parts. This means that in different historical moments, *osvoenie* of the territory acquires new forms and new trajectories that need to be attended to. And finally, what brings a possibility of disruptive politics here, is that "space on this reading is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made"[36]. Given all this, I would posit that it is never possible to complete *osvoenie* and victoriously claim that one has appropriated a space by virtue of its modification, as it is impossible to finally modify something that is in a constant process of making and changing. Thus, in a way it is possible to argue that the completed project of *osvoenie* is a bad utopia that will never come to its final realization.

Fragmented Inventory of Tools

As I said, in the concept of *osvoenie*, the goal is visible—to make the place your own—while the means by which the goal is trying to be achieved are hidden. Also, having looked at *osvoenie* through the prism of the feminist reading of the place, I posited that we should not reduce *osvoenie* of a remote lands to the construction of roads there because *osvoenie* as well as a place subsume complexity, duration, and multilayeredness. Developing these findings, I argue that we need to take a closer look at what can work as a means of *osvoenie*, because this revision of the means can

[36] Massey, *For space*, 9

provide a ground for the fight against *osvoenie* as a way of establishing dominance over the place and what constitutes it.

Since the visible part of the iceberg of *osvoenie* is its goal—symbolically turning the lands into state's own, and establishing dominance over it, what remains invisible at first glance is the means by which modification of something is achieved to make it his own. That is why critical interrogation of *osvoenie* requires making visible the means and tools it used. So, in what follows I arrange a fragmentary inventory of tools that have pursued then and are pursuing now the goal of establishing dominance over Taimyr and Eastern Siberia. I suggest perceiving it exactly as an inventory, and not as history, because history always runs a risk of putting some things in the past, thus isolating it from the present. However, in the case of *osvoenie* and its tools, one must keep an eye out, because in the broadest sense, *osvoenie* seeks to modify the components that constitute place, and as a rule, this modification is not instantaneous, but continued over time. It is structural, infrastructural, and ideological. All these are modifications that are produced in order to stay, to gain a foothold and consolidate dominance over the place. Thus, my proposition is to think about already familiar things—settler colonialism, taxation, geological exploration, functioning of a corporation —through the prism of osvoenie, and conceive them as tools of osvoenie.

Tool 1 – *Iasak* and Difference

The problem of *osvoenie* concerned exclusively newly conquered lands outside of the imperial core of the country. After establishing a military control over the newly annexed lands and building colonial outposts there, the state was occupied with a

twofold concern: integration of the traditional inhabitants of the land into the Tsarist realm and benefiting from them. Thus, this conversion of the natives into the subjects of the Tsar was twofold—it meant a symbolic gesture of swearing an oath to the tsar and material confirmation of the oath, paying tribute[37]. The overall reason behind these procedures was related to the integration of the natives into what Valery Kivelson calls "lucrative web of revenue generation"[38]. In order to perform this there was elaborated a proto ethnography that allowed gathering information about local dwellings—who lived in the nearby area, what customs, and beliefs people had, how they named themselves, if they were nomadic or settled, pastoral or agricultural, and what things of value that were available in the area—furs, fish, meat, ores[39]. It is exactly this data that allowed the state to orient itself in the newly conquered land and control the proper exploitation of its riches.

The integration of the indigenous people into the Tsarist realm was carried out by means of assigning a particular status, or a label, to the people. In the Muscovite set of laws they were designated as *iasak people*, where *iasak* meant natural tribute. In the case of Siberia, *iasak* was brought into the tsar's treasury by sables, beavers, foxes, bears, and other furs, and sometimes cattle. By the mid-1630s most of the indigenous people that lived on the closest to Mangazeya rivers such as Tax and Turukhan and on the more distanced ones such as Yenisey were pushed into allegiance by the Russian Empire[40]. This brings to fore the scale and speed of imperial expansion.

[37] Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World,* 523–524
[38] Kivelson, "Claiming Siberia: Colonial Possession and Property Holding in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries", 27
[39] Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small People of the North,* 38–39.
[40] Nikitin, *Osvoenie Sibiri v XVII veke,* 26

On the one hand, the assignment of the common label of *iasak* people to different indigenous groups—Dolgan, Nenets, Nganasan, Evenk, Enets peoples as in the case of Taimyr—integrated them into the general web of subjection to the tsar, but on the other hand, as Kivelson notes, it was fundamentally important for the empire to preserve their distinctiveness. She notices, "Muscovite political imagination required the presence of religiously distinct *inovertsy* (people of different faith), linguistically distinct *inoiazychnye* (people of different tongues), and geographically distinct *inozemtsy* (people of different lands) in order to create a meaningful empire that would provide plausible, convincing testimony to the might of the tsar"[41]. This observation exposes the dependence of the empire and its imagination of itself on the Others, who must be preserved in their distinctiveness, but at the same time be subordinate to the general laws of subjection.

Tool 2 – Settler Colonialism and Russification

If we turn to numerous documents, journalistic notes, public speeches of the nineteenth century prominent political and cultural figures, we will notice that the feeling of anxiety when it comes to the imperial space and belongings. This anxiety stems from the fact or rather imagination that *something is not Russia*, something that belongs to the state, is located within the established political boundaries, but is not completely Russian in its nature[42]. It is in this discrepancy—something belongs, but

[41] Kivelson, "Claiming Siberia: Colonial Possession and Property Holding in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries", 36

[42] Remnev, "Sdelat' Sibir' i Dal'nii Vostok russkimi. K voprosu o politicheskoi motivatsii kolonizatsionnykh protsessov XIX – nachala XX vek"; Remnev, "Vdvinut' Rossiiu v Sibir'. Imperiya i Russkaya Kolonizatsiya vtoroi poloviny XIX – nachalo XX veka"; Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small People of the North;* Morrison, "Russian Settler Colonialism"

still contains a portion of alienness, that the numerous threats nest. The fears of the Invasion of a foreign state, the collapse and reduction of the territory of the empire, the weakening of the state, its influence haunted the minds. Therefore, it was necessary to properly appropriate *(rus: osvoit')* the annexed territories into Russia[43].

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the key way to master (rus: *osvoit'*) the country's gigantic territories and cope with the fragility of this ownership was settler colonialism, whose ideology and practice were developed by political and cultural elites[44]. Up to this time, this kind of colonization happened but mostly in a sporadic way and was not large-scale and purposeful. In the most revealing way, the ideology that supported *osvoenie* can be seen in the ideas that guided the Russian political and cultural elites. The words of the famous imperial publicist Fyodor Umanets could be the slogan of the ideologists and inspirers of settler colonialism. Once he said: "Following the military occupation of the country, there should follow a cultural-ethnographic occupation. The Russian plow and harrow must follow the Russian flags <...>"[45]. It is important to note here that in the imperial matrix, all Slavs in general, and Ukrainians, Belarusians in particular were considered as Russians. However, there were degrees of Russianness: Ukrainians and Belarusians were regarded as the younger brothers of the Russians. Anyway, all Slavic peasants were suitable and desirable for the role of settlers on the distant territories.

[43] Remnev, "Sdelat' Sibir' i Dal'nii Vostok russkimi. K voprosu o politicheskoi motivatsii kolonizatsionnykh protsessov XIX – nachala XX vek"
[44] Morrison, "Russian Settler Colonialism"
[45] Remnev, "Vdvinut' Rossiiu v Sibir'. Imperiya i Russkaya Kolonizatsiya vtoroi poloviny XIX – nachalo XX veka", 33

However, not only agrarian peasant labor could make distant lands Russian. Anatoly Remnev cites Pyotr Stolypin, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Russian Empire, where he speaks about the importance of *Russian labor* already in the context of the construction of the Amur Mainline, a railway passing through Eastern Siberia and the Far East. In his opinion, it should be built by the Russian people, who will not only build this road and settle along it, they will do even more—"they will move into the region and, at the same time, move Russia into it"[46].

Thus, it was hoped that along with the body, labor and plow of Russians the cultural and life practices would move along. The latter was no less important than the former, because, as the ideologues of resettlement believed, the peasants would bring with them a civilization that was so lacking in distant lands inhabited by uncivilized and savage people[47]. Thus, the presence of peasants from the central part of the country was supposed to modify the indigenous peoples, whose existence still prevented these territories from becoming Russia. This attitude towards indigenous peoples, who were often non-sedentary, was picked up from the Enlightenment, where it was believed that "nomads were seen as fundamentally uncivilized and therefore having little importance or value and were expected eventually either to conform to the march of human progress by settling or at least to get out of its way"[48].

The cultural and at the same time genocidal mission of resettlement was to re-educate Others, to make them more Russian, more their own. As Robert Geraci notes, 19th-century intellectuals, in analyzing the past of the Russian empire, viewed cultural

[46] Ibid, 127
[47] Breyfogle, Schrader, and Sunderland, "Russian Colonizations: an Introduction", 9–10
[48] Geraci, "Genocidal Impulses and Fantasies in Imperial Russia", 353

assimilation as a central aspect of its consolidation and growth, as well as its advantage over Western empires[49]. They believed that cultural cross-borrowing made the empire and its growth natural and more human than other empires. During this crossing of cultures, Russian culture naturally won and occupied a dominant position in the originally non-Russian regions, while the indigenous population was subjected to assimilation which meant russification. This russification, in turn, "was seen as the manifestation of the strength of Russian culture"[50]. Thus, the erasure and elimination of foreign cultures, on the one hand, was seen as evidence of their weakness, and on the other hand, was a satisfactory outcome of the intersection of Russian and non-Russian populations. The destruction of what was alien made the empire truly Russian.

Tool 3 – Reclaiming the Nature

The industrialization of the country in the 1920s required large-scale infrastructural changes: in addition to the construction of the mining enterprises themselves, it was necessary to lay transport routes and communications, dig canals, and build cities. All this was supposed to take place mainly in hard-to-reach and, as a rule, climatically harsh places—in the Far North, in Siberia and the Far East[51]. The common phrase, to master (*osvoit'*) the north, implies, for example, the construction of a metal mining complex and roads there. This is not an easy task, given the frozen soils, eddies, polar

[49] Ibid, 361–362
[50] Ibid, 363
[51] Bolotova, "Colonization of Nature in the Soviet Union. State Ideology, Public Discourse, and the Experience of Geologists", 108–109

night and cold. This whole complex of parameters of the natural world was designated as nature, then it means that to master (*osvoit'*) the North means to conquer nature.

Andy Bruno argues that in the USSR there was a dualistic understanding of nature—"one hostile and one holistic"[52]. On the one hand, nature was understood as obstacles and a battlefield with these obstacles. On the other hand, it was perceived as something friendly, which, if used correctly, could benefit humanity and nature itself. Bruno rightly emphasizes that both of these ideas were not a unique invention of the Soviet era but on the contrary, they absorbed "a variety of imperial, militaristic, modernist, and socialist worldviews at different historical moments"[53].

The development and dissemination of a certain image of nature can be considered as a tool of *osvoenie*. Exploring the moment of the emergence of the hegemonic discourse about nature in the Soviet era, Alla Bolotova says that newspapers and literature became the key organs of agitation[54]. She highlights key interpretations of nature: a Senseless Emptiness, a Treasure-house, and a Warden of Treasures. In what follows I will be referring to her insightful elaborations.

Nature as Senseless Emptiness means that nature by itself, without human intervention, has no meaning - only a person can give it meaning through rational development and the use of meaningless matter. It is logical that within this framework, indigenous peoples who live in close connection with nature also do not have rationality, because they use nature differently than a civilized and enlightened Soviet

[52] Bruno, *The Nature of Soviet Power: An Arctic Environmental History,* 12
[53] Ibid
[54] Bolotova, "Colonization of Nature in the Soviet Union. State Ideology, Public Discourse, and the Experience of Geologists", 109

person does. “The Soviet man is a creator, the Lord of the land, he changes space to his convenience and therewith animates it, awakes sleeping, passive nature, creates variety, brings light”[55]. To describe the meaninglessness of nature, the epithets “undifferentiated, dark, and senseless” are often used[56].

Nature as a Treasure-House is a very common trope that describes how much wealth is around—natural resources that are waiting to be extracted and exploited. However, nature, with its wildness, hides its treasures from the state, from the people, from geologists who bring life and meaning to supposedly wild and uninhabited locations. Bolotova gives an interesting quote about the geologists—the main characters in the discourse about *osvoenie*: “They go in their life on untrod paths, through the intrepid taiga and impassable deserts. There where they pass, life starts; earth gives its treasures to people”[57]. That is, it is implied that nature is not life, but real life begins only from the moment when civilization comes.

And the last trope is Nature as a Warden of Treasures. This is perhaps the most aggressive trope because it shows nature as (suddenly) endowed with agency and rationality, but this agency and rationality is hostile to the interests of man (or even humanity!), since it lies in the fact that nature hides and guards its treasures. The one who must face it in a frontal attack is a geologist who wants to know where these treasures are, and how to get them. Emotionally loaded images were actively used to depict the nature and tone of the meeting of a man, a male geologist, and nature, feminine, stubborn, and wayward. It is important to say that nature in Russian has a

[55] Ibid, 112
[56] Ibid
[57] Ibid, 113

feminine gender. For example, here is one of the descriptions of the collision between nature and man that Bolotova cites: “The earth setting its teeth kept its secrets. He, tall and bearded, with his bright eyes and lustrous, he cried to the calm and stately river: 'You, tell me, where the treasure is buried? But the Ob' river kept its silence”[58]. The apotheosis of masculinity manifest itself in a sexually charged proposition “Nature only hides or guards, while a Soviet man invades, conquers and builds”[59]. All these tropes were supposed to form certain images of nature that would in turn form a particular attitude towards nature. The education of such a perception of nature pursues the goal of educating the desire for *osvoenie* and its conceptual nourishment.

Tool 4 – Geology and Forced Labor

Closely related to the previously mentioned tool of *osvoenie*, there are two other means—geology and forced labor. The need to realize “the untapped economic potential of the Arctic”[60] pushed the Soviet state’s move into these lands. Given the fact that “the most basic information about the region was outdated or lacking altogether”[61] the state urgently needed scientific exploration. Geological exploration of the lands was a priority because it allowed them to find the deposits of the most needed resources. Thousands of geologists were sent to search for deposits. Often in places where geological expeditions took place, landings of scientists and workers sent from the center collided with the local population. According to Yuri Slezkin, these meetings were tense and often turned into confrontation between the local population

[58] Ibid, 114
[59] Ibid
[60] McCannon, *Red Arctic: Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union, 1932-1939*, 22
[61] Ibid

and the newcomers. The source of these tensions was that the arriving scouting groups robbed the local population, killed deer, and exploited the labor of the indigenous population. For example, not far from Norilsk, “local Dolgan, Nenets, Evenk and Nganasan were forced to transport numerous state officials as well as commercial cargo”[62]. And often, this activity grew from occasional to permanent because of which, the local population was forced to abandon the traditional reindeer trade and engage, for example, only in the business of transportation. Slezkin cites the following statistics: “From 1930 to 1932, the number of men involved in transportation grew from 41 to 71 percent. In the same period, the number of reindeer dropped by about 46percent”[63]. On the whole, the explorers' attitude towards the indigenous population reflected the duality of the attitude of the Soviet state towards the latter. On the one hand, they were considered and talked about as the younger brothers of a civilized Soviet person, who were supposed to be patronized by the Soviets, and on the other hand, they were viewed in a utilitarian way— as “first as economic assets, later as obstacles to industrial and commercial progress in the North”[64].

Where geological expeditions discovered mineral deposits, the Ministry of Industry, together with the NKVD, launched the construction of roads, settlements, and, of course, industrial enterprises that could finally “unleash the economic potential” of the Arctic. There was an established practice of assigning the Gulag large-scale and long-term projects in remote, mainly northern, and eastern, and underdeveloped areas of the USSR, which were of strategic importance for the country due to the presence of

[62] Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small People of the North*, 267
[63] Ibid
[64] McCannon, *Red Arctic: Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union, 1932-1939*, 22

significant mineral reserves there[65]. The Gulag thus have to be regarded as an active participant of *osvoenie.* Indeed, the assignment of the construction and maintenance of a large industrial facility to the Gulag was not a novelty for the 1930s, the White Sea Canal had already been built by the Gulag prisoners and the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline was underway. Norillag, which I describe in detail in the next chapter, was one of dozens of labor camps, tools for *osvoenie* of hard-to-reach lands.

Tool 5 – Corporation

We should not be fooled by the fact that the rhetoric of the *osvoenie* of places and the conquest of nature in the modern Russian context is read as a retro intonation referring to the bygone (great) times. Although it is not customary to say about Norilsk Nickel that it is involved in *osvoenie* of the Arctic or the North, I propose to consider it as a means of osvoenie. Being the reincarnation of the Soviet Norilsk Metallurgical Combine in capitalist realities, inheriting the movable and immovable assets of its Soviet predecessor, Norilsk Nickel inherits the task of "realizing the untapped economic potential of the Arctic". However, now this potential is no longer untapped. We can consider Norilsk Nickel as a state-friendly henchman who is responsible for the intensification of development within the framework of the neopatrimonial system, which in turn protects the interests of the corporation, for example by refusing to ratify environmental protection conventions and applying "norms (limits) on emissions and waste for functioning plants"[66]. What is argued by Cara Daggett about fossil fuel capital seems to be also fair for the capital dependent on ferrous and non-ferrous extractive

[65] Ertz, "Building Norilsk", 133
[66] Bronder, "Environmental Challenges in the Arctic – Norilsk Nickel: The Soviet Legacy of Industrial Pollution", 58

metallurgy, the Norilsk Nickel specialization: “Fossil capital requires an unending, cheap flow of fossil fuels for the concentration of wealth at the expense of other people and things, and this necessitates authoritarian tactics in certain sites and moments <…>”[67].

Conclusion

The tools of *osvoenie* reviewed in the inventory mode show the undeniable connectivity of all these tools as well as their structural complexity—all of them unfolding in different planes and passing through different trajectories, permeate and constitute the places that are desired to be mastered. As we might see, these tools are not as simple as building a road. Simplified understanding of the tools of *osvoenie* conceals the violence that it brings along. Being grounded in, and in fact inseparable from its tools, osvoenie must be understood as complex entanglements of events, (infra)structures, ideas and ideologies that help to establish dominance over the places. Only by layering on top of each other, as if continuing in each other through time and thus reinforcing each other—cumulative effect, these tools make the moment of the present possible. Norilsk Nickel would not exist if the Gulag did not exist, the Gulag would not exist if there were not the early Imperial conquests which annexed the land that appeared to be rich in ore deposits. We can and should constantly draw lines of continuity between these and other tools of *osvoenie* not mentioned here in order to understand how and why we came to where we are now. It is appropriate to ask, but what prevents us from drawing lines of continuity, and using the concept of *osvoenie* as a lens for radical thinking, and not as a euphemistic tool for concealment

[67] Daggett, “Petro-Masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire”, 30

of cruelty? I would argue that *osvoenie* as a euphemism would not be possible without the persistent images of the past that provide this notion with realness and ground as I will show in the next chapter. It is exactly these images that secure euphemistic usage of the notion of *osvoenie*.

Chapter 3. The Museum and Its Labor of Maintaining the Dominance

Introduction

In search of an answer to the question of what narratives and images of the past the modern Russian state needs in order to legitimize and prolong its colonialism, imperialism and extractivism, I appeal to the Norilsk Museum, which is a municipal museum of local lore. Why do I say that the museum is a place where we can find the images we are looking for? First, the central exhibition of the museum, titled *Territory* exhibition, is dedicated to the milestones of *osvoenie* of these lands. As I demonstrated in the second chapter, the concept of osvoenie merges goals and means together, making the latter invisible: if there is a stable goal to “make territories one’s own”, there are a number of means or tools. It can be argued that *osvoenie* as a notion and as a practice unites imperialism, extractivism and colonialism in the Russian context. As I will show in this chapter, the *Territory* exhibition conveys a narrative that is full of pride for *osvoenie,* it is this tonality that suggests that the images of the past that are presented there legitimize Russian colonialism, imperialism and extractivism. How exactly they do it and what kind of images of the past are constructed by the exhibition is the subject of analysis in this chapter. And second, the museum has another permanent exhibition titled *Not Subject to Revision*, and it is dedicated to the memory of the victims of Stalin's repressions and the memory of the prisoners of Norillag. This exhibition appeared in the museum relatively late, in 2012, and the initiators of its creation were not museum workers, but city activists. Whereas *Territory* exhibition can be conceptualized as a manifestation of the official memory politics, the Gulag

exhibition can be understood as a product of the grassroots memory politics. This conceptualization allows us to see the limits of tolerable memory and the contours of an acceptable image of the past associated with the Gulag, in a city where Norilsk Nickel controls both the economic and public sphere.

However, it would be naive on my part to treat exhibitions only as representations of certain images. In order not to lose sight of the agency of the museum, I analyze the connection between the museum and *osvoenie*, and insist that the museum can be understood as its tool. And finally, I outline preliminary contours of resistance to *osvoenie* that consists of unlearning both images of the past needed by the state and the gaze educated by *osvoenie* itself.

In order to implement all what I have outlined above, I analyze exhibitions using the methodology of exhibition analysis proposed by Stephanie Moser[68]. Also I juxtapose exhibitions' narratives to analytical and historical accounts that touch upon the issues of early modern Russian imperialism, settler-colonialism, extractivism, and Soviet forced labor system.

The Museum

In the Norilsk Museum, as in many other local history museums there is a combination of permanent and temporary expositions. On the ground floor there is a permanent *Territory* exhibition which shows the milestones of colonization and exploration of the

[68] Moser, *The Devil Is in the Detail: Museum Displays and the Creation of Knowledge*

region, its flora and fauna as well as ethnographical materials about the indigenous peoples of Taimyr. Temporary exhibitions are held in the balcony gallery that is situated above, visitors usually can see paintings, photography, and applied art—that is, something that can please the eye or educate the viewer on certain topics. On the second floor there is another permanent exhibition titled *Not Subject to Revision*, it is dedicated to the memory of the Gulag prisoners who were inmates of Norilsk labor camp and shows archival documents and artifacts. Between the two floors there is a hall where temporary exhibitions and art gatherings take place. For the purpose of my thesis, I focus only on two permanent expositions *Territory* and *Not Subject to Revision* because they are dedicated to the place, Norilsk and Taimyr Peninsula, it is there that we can find out how does the museum narrates the history of the extractive frontier, how does it negotiate the issues like colonization, exploration, forced labor, and what images of the past it creates.

The *Territory* Exhibition

According to the description, the *Territory* exhibition narrates the stories about "the flora, fauna, unique natural objects of the Taimyr peninsula, the distinctive culture of the indigenous peoples of the Far North. In the center of the hall there are showcases that introduce important milestones in the history of the *osvoenie* of the North". Indeed, when a visitor enters the hall situated on the first floor, she sees an exhibition that consists of three thematically different but closely intertwined sections, intertwined in the sense that they seek to present a complex narrative about the Taimyr Peninsula and Norilsk itself.

The first thing that naturally catches one's attention is a large phallic showcase of an intricate configuration (Figure 1). It is erected in the center of the hall and brightly illuminated, its base and top resemble a multi-pointed white star or crown. Mini-models of polar aircrafts and stuffed seagulls seem to hover around the showcase, hanging from the ceiling. It is exactly this showcase with a lot of sections that narrates about "the milestones in the history of the *osvoenie* of the North". The showcase is divided into four thematic compartments: the penetration of Russian conquerors to the North, the Taimyr peninsula and the foundation of the colonial outpost, city of Mangazeya (17th century); The Great Northern Expedition that marked the first scientific study of the place as well as ethnographic study of the indigenous population living there (18th century); polar aviation and its role in the development of the North in Soviet times (20th century); and the history of ore geology in the region since the 19th century. Almost in each of these compartments we can see photographs of male travelers, scientists, merchants, geologists, inventors, polar pilots, each of them is signed, each has a first and a last name. The photographs of brave explorers are complemented with eloquent artifacts: models of sailboats and airplanes, navigation maps and maps of deposits, lamps, liturgical books and icons, telescopes, navigation rulers and coins (Figure 2).

The phallic showcase is surrounded by dioramas situated along the perimeter of the hall—half of them is allocated to Taimyr flora and fauna, paleontological findings, and another half to the culture and everyday life of Nganasan, Dolgan and Nenets peoples. In the showcases dedicated to flora and fauna, there are stuffed animals and birds that are shown against the backdrop of landscapes common for of the Taimyr Peninsula; watercolors by the Nganasan artist Motyumyaku Turdagin; remains of mammoths and

other ancient animals that once inhabited the area where metallurgical plants and resource bases are now located. Next to them there are ethnographic showcases with neatly hung clothes of Nganasan, Dolgan and Nenets peoples (Figure 3). Next to each set of clothes there are household items—funeral and festive reindeer harnesses, sleds, bows and arrows, shamanic tambourines for interaction with the spirits. If one dares to believe museum representation indigenous peoples, unlike Russians, have no one to remember, there are no heroes who deserve a separate photo and signature. Only literally faceless and gutted clothes can tell the viewer something about Dolgan and Nenets, presenting them in their remarkable distinctiveness as objects of ethnographic exposition. However, gutted, and empty as if the bodies have left them, these clothes have a very ghostly presence. Above the showcases, also along the perimeter of the hall, there are historical photographs depicting nameless indigenous peoples with airplanes in the background.

Mangazeya: Explore and Exploit

For the readers to make more sense of the exhibition I will describe one section from the phallic showcase against the backdrop of historical and analytical accounts of Russian history and its imperialism and settler colonialism. So, I am focusing here on the section dedicated to the Russians' advance to the North in the 17th century and establishing a colonial outpost, Mangazeya. I am focusing on it because this episode must be considered is foundational for *osvoenie* of this land.

The reason for Mangazeya being foundational for the whole story of the *osvoenie* of this land is that it is a story about initial conquest—taking up the land that used to be

indigenous one. And, as powerfully noted by Patrick Wolfe, “Land is life—or, at least, land is necessary for life. Thus, contests for land can be— indeed, often are—contests for life”[69]. Yermak’s Siberian campaign (1581–1585) and the victory over the Tatar khanate of Sibir opened the opportunity for the advance of the Russian troops and the gradual conquest of Siberia[70]. Being populated by different fur animals—brown bear, wolf, ermine, sable—Siberia promised an endless supply of precious furs which were needed for the growing export, as well as for internal Tsar’s affairs[71]. Importantly, as observed by John F. Richards “Devoid of domestic gold- or silver-producing mines, and lacking in much exportable agricultural and industrial production, the early modern Russian monarchy relied on the sale of furs to obtain coined and uncoined precious metals for its treasury”[72].

In thinking about Siberia, as well as about other frontiers, we can follow Anna Tsing’s conceptualization, “It is a space of desire: it calls; it appears to create its own demands; once glimpsed, one cannot but explore and exploit it”.[73] *Explore and exploit* motto describes with precision what was happening after Muscovites annexed part of Siberia and took control over numerous indigenous peoples rendering them into the subjects of the “Big White Tsar”[74] and imposing on them an obligation to pay *iasak*, a tribute in fur. The imposition of a new status that rendered *indigenous people* into *iasak people,* marked a drastic rupture of their life practices: being resourcified by the state, many were forced to redraw their usual way of life in order to comply with the cycles of tribute collection and collect the required amount of furs by the right time. Moreover, the very

[69] Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native”, 387
[70] Forsyth, *A History of the Peoples of Siberia: Russia’s North Asian Colony, 1581–1990,* 32–33.
[71] Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World*, 523
[72] Ibid, 530
[73] Tsing, “Natural Resources and Capitalist Frontiers”, 5102
[74] Kosintsev, Lobanova, Vizgalov, “Istoriko-ekologitcheskie issledovaniya v Mangazee”, 36–39.

hunting of certain animals was contrary to the beliefs of people. For example, for many native Siberians, a brown bear possessed a sacred meaning, it was a totemic animal, "who was known as the "master of the forest" and only occasionally killed and eaten. When this occurred, special rituals designed to propitiate the bear's spirit were performed before and during the village feast"[75]. Paraphrasing the observation of Afanasy Shchapov, a Siberian dissident, Madina Tlostanova claims, all these "meant a parallel annihilation of fur-providing animals and the indigenous people who were forced to hunt those animals, under pain of death"[76]. The pain of death was pretty real, the attribution of the *iasak* people status moved natives into an intermediate zone between the laws—the written laws of the state and the unwritten laws of the frontier. So, on the one hand, being seen and recognized by the state, indigenous people received some rights and protection, for example, the right to use land. Also there were issued numerous "decrees and regulations" that recommended to the frontier servicemen to treat *iasak* people "tenderly", and protect them[77]. On the other hand, indigenous peoples found themselves fully exposed to the willfulness of these service people, fur traders, hunters with whom they were in immediate contact. So, for example, frontier workers often kidnapped and took hostage someone from the clan to force the family to pay tribute; enslaved women so that they would serve their sexual and domestic needs; burned yurts to intimidate those who did not want to obey, and alike. Of course, it is impossible to name all the stories of frontier violence because violence was constitutive for the frontier. As Patrick Wolfe argues, even though government officials express regret that lawlessness and uncontrolled cruelty are

[75] Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World*, 524
[76] Tlostanova, *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet? Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire,* 7
[77] Kivelson, "Claiming Siberia: Colonial Possession and Property Holding in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries", 27

happening on the frontier, or, as in the case of Siberia, prescribe to their service people to treat locals tenderly, "the murderous activities of the frontier rabble constitute its [settler-colonial state] principal means of expansion"[78].

The scattered network of colonial outposts demarcated the dynamic line of frontier. It has been observed that town-building was one of the salient features of Russian colonization during the Tsarist, Imperial, and Soviet times[79]. Founded in 1601, Mangazeya was one of the first Russian settlements in Siberia and served as an administrative center whose main purpose was in gathering *iasak* and trading furs, and as a stronghold for Muscovite advancement in the depth of Siberia. Therefore, we can call Mangazeya a node in which imperial, colonial and extractivist ambitions were tightly intertwined and mutually ensured each other's existence.

Geographically, Mangazeya was located on the Taimyr Peninsula, 400 km from modern Norilsk. Despite the remoteness, both temporal and spatial, of the colonial outpost from the industrial city, the narrative that Norilsk is a *descendant* or even a *successor* of Mangazeya is quite common. Thus, for example Nikolay Urvantsev, a geologist who discovered the Norilsk richest deposit of copper-nickel ores with a high platinum content in 1921—the discovery that greatly influenced the decision to build the Norilsk Industrial Complex—wrote a paper titled *Norilsk is a descendant of Mangazeya*[80]. There he claims that during the time of Mangazeya, ore for smelting was brought to its foundries from the area that is now known as Norilsk. This emphasis on geological continuity, reinforced by the narrative about the relationship of the two

[78] Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native", 392
[79] Brayfogle, Schrader and Sunderland, "Russian Colonizations: an Introduction", 10
[80] Urvantsev, "Norilsk–potomok Mangazey", 6

cities on the principle of their grandeur and significance, is repeated in the Norilsk newspaper *Zapolyarny Vestnik*, in an article where several local historians and museum staff discuss the origins of Norilsk[81]. Also, in the *Territory* exhibition itself, Mangazeya is described as a city whose glory passed to Norilsk.

Performance of Objectivity[82]

Having looked at the historical and analytical accounts, we can switch to the showcase and museum's narrative about Mangazeya. How does the museum narrate the history of the ancient colonial outpost? What kind of image of the past it seeks to create when it touches upon such a troublesome history of Mangazeya? By what means? And how is the credibility of this image of the past created? I will first describe the objects, and then quote the text about Mangazeya from the description plate. And as I will show this narrative works as a linking and interpretative device for the heterogeneous objects assembled in the compartments dedicated to Mangazeya, while the objects provide it with validity, or authenticity. Together, the objects and the description are involved in the performance of objectivity that assists in creating a glorious image of the past made possible by the anesthesia of settler-colonial histories[83].

The central exhibition compartment looks like an educational installation that wants visitors to memorize what is intended to be read as the main symbols associated with the history of Mangazeya (Figure 4). Against the background of a poster with an old map of the area and drawings of the city fortification wall, there is a *mini-model of the*

[81] Vachaeva, Istoria I territoria
[82] I am thankful to Eszter for suggesting such great wording.
[83] Goeman, "From Place to Territories and Back Again: Centering Storied Land in the Discussion of Indigenous Nation-Building", 24

ship of the Russian conquerors, a *piece of fur*, a *pot* and a *gun*. A power-toolkit for a young conqueror. The central compartment is surrounded by the two smaller ones that operate in modus of classical archaeological exposition that features the objects found during the excavations of the ancient city: birch bark floats, fragments of a pot, plates, a jar, a wooden crutch and a comb. In their fragmented presentation and isolation from the contexts from which they belonged, these objects are surrounded by chasms, and it is these chasms that leave a huge space for filling it with a story that would connect and contextualize them. What is the story then?

The description plate says: “Mangazeya is a 17th century Russian city (1601–1672) in Western Siberia, a trade and craft center with a population of up to 2000 people. The emergence and development of the world’s first polar city is a wonderful example of the entrepreneurial spirit of the Russian people who mastered the north of Siberia and its seashore during the formation of the Russian state. The trade turnover of the “golden-boiling patrimony” was huge—Mangazeya was the main supplier of “soft gold” (furs) to the sovereign's treasury. <...> Many of the Mangazeya service people and industrialists mastered (a.d.: the original version says: “they did osvoenie”) the Taimyr, went further north and east “towards the sun”, discovering new lands, expanding the borders of Russia.”

I have decided to quote the description in almost a full length because its language and rhetoric are very intense and eloquent in their seeking to impose a particular interpretation of the past. What is this description plate if not the wishful thinking and arbitrary memory of the settler-conquerors and their self-proclaimed heirs? Its depiction of the glorious past is produced by means of distorted translation. Indeed, if

we engage in a procedure of a reverse translation, what do we see? *Russian city* turns out to be a colonial outpost on the annexed lands; *the entrepreneurial spirit of the Russian people* turns out to be a violent settler colonial enterprise initiated by the Tsarist administration out of concerns about the imperial growth and treasury enrichment; *the main supplier of "soft gold"* turns out to be the main killer of fur-bearing animals and the main collector of tribute from the natives. What shines through the apparent smoothness of the museum description based on the distorted translation of the events, is what Eve Tuck and C. Ree call the triad of settler colonial relations: "a) the Indigenous inhabitant, present only because of her erasure; b) the chattel slave, whose body is property and murderable; and c) the inventive settler, whose memory becomes history, and whose ideology becomes reason"[84]. For the Russian context we just need to modify the second component of the triad, and instead of a slave think about *iasak* person.

The knowledge that the museum transfers pretend to be truths—neutral, objective and scientific. And objects presented in the exhibition are conscripted to "authenticate scientific claims."[85] While addressing this issue of scientific and political certainty of exhibitionary representations, Sharon Macdonald quotes Timothy Mitchell, "Exhibitions, museums and other spectacles were not just reflections of this [scientific and political] certainty, however, but the means of its production, by their technique of rendering history, progress, culture and empire in 'objective' form. They were occasions for making sure of such objective truths <…>"[86]. She concludes that

[84] Tuck and Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting", 642
[85] Teslow, "Reifying Race: Science and Art in Races of Mankind at the Field Museum of Natural History", 48
[86] cited in Macdonald, "Exhibitions of Power and Powers of Exhibition: an Introduction to the Politics of Display", 9

"museums and exhibitions were perhaps particularly effective in that they not only provided a 'picture' but also objects and other tangible 'evidences'"[87]. Indeed, being taken as "tangible evidences" the objects appear to be the servants of the narrative that seeks to acquire its power in presumably disembodied objectivity which has been justly criticized and unmasked by feminist scholars[88]. Nevertheless, these objects do strengthen the exhibitionary narratives, and make their claims sound and look like objective truths. That is, in the case of the Norilsk Museum, the heroism and dedication of the Russian people, the value of expanding the Russian state and mastering the Arctic lands, the incredible benefits of geology for the development of the region, and so on are presented as indisputable truths. Such discourse definitely creates the ground for justification of extraction that started from the moment when Muscovites stepped to this land and initiated tribute paying, and further intensified the extraction by discovering deposits of natural resources. It is not hard to guess that the indirect and, in a way, hidden beneficiaries of the objectivity produced by the *Territory* exhibition are Norilsk Nickel and neopatrimonial state, this assemblage of actors responsible for the extractive activities that are taking place in Norilsk and surrounding areas.

Territory exhibition contains many more peculiar details that of course are worth attending if one is interested in deciphering the messages it conveys but being limited by the space of the thesis and the number of questions, I have to cover I will switch from the detailed descriptions of the showcase about Mangazeya to some concluding

[87] Macdonald, "Exhibitions of Power and Powers of Exhibition: an Introduction to the Politics of Display", 9–10

[88] See for example Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*; Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective"; Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism"

remarks about the *Territory* exhibition as a whole. There are several heterogeneous indicators that point us to the fact that the narrative presented comes from the standpoint of those who somehow identify themselves with Russian settlers-conquerors, explorers and those who participated in different ways in the intensification of extraction and *osvoenie*. When we look at the spatial organization of the display, we see the following: the central showcase dedicated to military, scientific and technical advances of Russians is surrounded by passive and timeless "nature" along with indigenous people metonymically standing behind the clothes. Behind the implicit colonial message that associates conquerors with Progress and History, while nature and native peoples are referred to as ahistorical timelessness and namelessness, we can notice that whole narrative about the territory of Taimyr Peninsula is structured around the tension between Russian conquerors and their constitutive others—Nganasans, deers, polar nature, and bears, that a presented in a one row.

The final thing I would like to address and thus jump to the next section, is the blind spots in the chronology of *osvoenie* presented in the exhibition. As we have seen, the events chosen to be highlighted are the ones that participated in the place-making, or as the exhibition insists, on territory-making: conquest, mapping, exploration, building, exploitation, putting to productive use. In a certain sense, there is an ambition to narrate the history of a place through the chronological sequence of events that can be indicated as progress in mastering the remote and harsh territory. However, if you look at the chronology, everything ends with polar aviation—there are documents from the 1940s—1950s, for some reason an important piece falls out, which is chronologically located between 1930s and 1950s, and thematically would fit the

exhibition, since it built the mining infrastructure that is still in use. I am referring here to the Gulag, or to be more precise—about Norillag, a forced labor camp that was responsible for building the Norilsk Industrial Complex as well as Norilsk itself. This strange forgetfulness signals some uneasiness of the attitude to this past and unwillingness to recognize the Gulag as an event that influenced the place-making. But also, there is a peculiar coincidence that connects the exhibition forgetfulness and the one of Norilsk Nickel. If we look at the official webpage with the history of the corporation, we will not see the Gulag there[89]. Although as I will show further it was the Gulag that must be credited for the building of a huge amount of Norilsk Nickel infrastructure. Of course, in the museum's exhibition and in the corporation's website this blind spot serves different purposes, however, it must be conceived as a constitutive element for the images and narratives of the past.

Norillag and Inherited Infrastructure

Early Soviet times brought a new stage of *osvoenie* of Taimyr Peninsula. It begins with the expeditions of Nikolay Urvantsev in 1919–1926, which confirmed the presence of rich deposits of coal and polymetallic ores in the Putorana mountain range[90]. In 1930, a large expedition of the Main Directorate of Non-Ferrous Metals Industry and Gold Platinum Industry went to these lands and came to the conclusion that a metallurgical plant should be built on the site of the deposits[91]. For the Soviet industry, the main interest here was the nickel contained in local ores, mainly used for smelting high-

[89] Hohmann and Laruelle, "Biography of a Polar City: Population Flows and Urban Identity in Norilsk", 319
[90] Urvantsev, *Otkrytie Norilska*
[91] Ertz, "Building Norilsk", 132

quality stainless steel, including armor which was especially needed by the military industry. The stage connected to the plant construction was studied in detail by Simon Ertz, so in what follows I will rely on his research to talk about the functioning of the Gulag in Norilsk.

In 1935, the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR issued a decree “About Norilsk Nickel Industrial Complex Construction”[92]. The Gulag was put in charge of building the industrial complex, providing it with a 135 km long railway connecting the various facilities of the plant, and, most importantly, creating a special camp for these purposes. According to Ertz, the whole project of Norilsk Nickel Industrial Complex construction corresponds to the established practice of assigning the Gulag, large-scale and long-term projects in remote, mainly northern, and eastern, and underdeveloped areas of the USSR, which were of strategic importance for the country, for example, due to the presence of significant mineral reserves there[93].

Thus, in 1935, the Norilsk Correctional Labor Camp, generally referred to as Norillag, appeared and operated until 1956[94]. Analyzing the first years of Norillag's existence and functioning, Ertz finds a report on the difficulties of the first year written by the plant managers. Explaining why the camp did not fulfill the production goals set in the first year of its functioning, they describe the working conditions of the prisoners. This excerpt lets us imagine and feel the conditions under which prisoners were supposed to work most of the time:

[92] Ibid, 129
[93] Ibid, 133
[94] Ibid, 128

"In 1935 an advance group of workers was sent to undeveloped tundra without necessary materials to prepare for expanding construction in 1936. This contingent had to do difficult and time-consuming preparatory work under permafrost conditions, under the most severe snowstorms, which dissipated their energy and mental state. Only a person who had experienced it himself knows what it means to preserve the necessary vitality and working energy after months of constant winds with a force from 18 up to 37 meters per second that blow continuous clouds of snow, so that visibility is about 2 meters. Stray workers were lost due to loss of orientation. They had to work in temperatures reaching 53 degrees below zero"[95].

At the cost of incredible efforts, by 1939 production was launched, and the industrial complex was augmented with new facilities. In the same year, when the first hundreds of tons of nickel were smelted, Norilsk was awarded the status of a working settlement[96]. During the Second World War, Norillag prisoners and civilian workers who were also employed in the complex but in much smaller numbers not only continued the active construction but also significantly intensified production volumes in order to produce enough nickel, which was used for tank armor[97]. All this certainly points to the colossal role of the camp system for industrial modernization and the economy of the USSR. Also, in her research dedicated to the role of the Gulag for the Soviet economy, Galina Ivanova points out that by 1940, the camp economy contributed to production in 20 branches of the national economy, with a leading role in non-ferrous metallurgical production[98]. After Norillag's liquidation in 1957, Norilsk

[95] Ibid, 128
[96] The City of Norilsk, "About the City"
[97] Galaov, Pelipenko, and Koletchko, "Istoria osvoenia i perspectivi razvitia mineral'no-sir'evoi basi GMK Nornickel", 9
[98] Ivanova, "GULAG v sisteme totalitarnogo gosudarstva", 165

Nickel Industrial Complex continued its operation and started to be reliant only on the civilian labor force.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Norilsk Nickel Industrial Complex "was transformed by presidential decree into a joint stock company, RAO Norilsk Nickel, in 1993 and in 1994 the company was part-privatized, with shares being distributed to its employees and sold in auction"[99]. The state's controlling stake in the company was put up for collateral auction in 1995. According to its results, ONEXIM Bank, a financial and industrial group became the nominal holder of this controlling stake[100]. Later, in 1998, the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation published many facts testifying to the illegal privatization of state property[101]. However, in June 2000, the Accounts Chamber of Russian Federation submitted a new report, which was in fact aimed at some "rehabilitation" of the new owners of Norilsk Nickel, headed by Vladimir Potanin and Mikhail Prokhorov[102]. Important to mention here that both Potanin and Prokhorov are stable names in the *Forbes Rating* of the wealthiest people in Russia, Potanin ranks 2nd still owing Norilsk Nickel, and Prokhorov is 14th, having sold off his Norilsk Nickel shares in 2018[103]. Now, Norilsk Nickel is "the political and financial backbone of the city", as argued by Sophie Hohmann and Marlene Laruelle[104]. According to their evaluations it employs around 45% of the Norilsk working population.

[99] Humphreys, "Challenges of Transformation: The Case of Norilsk Nickel", 142–143
[100] Rozhkova, "ONEXIM prihodit kak khozyain"; Humphreys, "Challenges of Transformation: The Case of Norilsk Nickel", 142–143
[101] Urozhaeva "Privatizatsia gradoobrazuyuschikh predpriyatii Krasnoyarskogo kraya v 1990 – natchale 2000", 198
[102] Accounts Chamber of Russian Federation, "Proverka privatizatsii federal'nogo paketa aktsii RAO Norilskii Nickel"
[103] Forbes, "200 bogateischikh biznesmenov Rossii – 2021"
[104] Hohmann and Laruelle, "Biography of a Polar City: Population Flows and Urban Identity in Norilsk", 315

Not Subject to Revision Exhibition

Although the forced labor camp is not inscribed in the *Territory*, it is not completely missing in the Norilsk Museum. The story of the Gulag is presented outside the story about the place as if cautiously encapsulated on the separate second floor. *Not subject to revision,* a permanent exhibition dedicated to the Gulag and repressions was opened in 2012. Since then, the exhibition has been repeatedly updated and supplemented. However, the memorial activity of the museum related to the restoration of the history of Norillag began in 1988, and the first temporary exhibition titled *Restoring the Truth* opened in 1989[105]. It is important to note that the work to perpetuate the memory of the Gulag was initiated by the local branch of the Memorial, a memorial association where former prisoners and their descendants were the main activists[106]. That is the reason why I suggest thinking about this exhibition as a manifestation of the grassroots memory politics embedded within the municipal museum. I would argue that it is exactly this embeddedness and intersection of the wills, official and local, that allows us to see the contours of the permitted images of the Gulag-related past. And these images themselves, as I will show in this chapter, reliably isolate the Gulag from today's extractivist operations of the Norilsk Nickel.

The exhibition consists mainly of numerous documents, letters, photographs, testimonies of prisoners and their relatives. Along the two long sidewalls of the hall, there are about twenty identical black stands on which these documents are fixed

[105] The Museum of Norilsk, "History of the Museum"
[106] Hohmann and Laruelle, "Biography of a Polar City: Population Flows and Urban Identity in Norilsk", 318

(Figure 5). They merge into a single pattern and set the visual rhythm of the hall. Perhaps only a very meticulous and thorough viewer will be able to master the entire volume of the materials presented. Usually, people just walk along these walls, heading to the more diverse and attention-grabbing third wall along which three installations are built: the room of the camp's political department, wooden stands with objects and documents belonging to prisoners, and a living room in which things made by prisoners are collected. The room of the political department looks strict and gloomy, there is a table on which we can see a lamp, a telephone, and documents (Figure 6). The living room, in which there are objects manufactured by prisoners, refers to an ordinary Soviet apartment filled with unusual, and in a way uncanny objects (Figure 7). Unlike the political department, it looks cozy— there is a dining table covered with a tablecloth against the wall, embroidery with a beautiful landscape, and postcards hanging above the table. There is a bookcase behind the table. All these items were made by prisoners at different times. In addition, there are jewelry and dresses in the room that belonged to the former prisoner, she wore them before being sentenced and sent to Norillag. In front of this group of installations, there is a construction wheelbarrow containing a prisoner's jacket, shovels, a pickaxe, and other tools that were used in Norillag. This part of the exhibition, with installations and objects, certainly attracts greater attention of visitors than the stands with documents because it is far more spectacular and allows the emotional connection to the history of prisoners, their everyday life, and overall brutal condition. As it was observed by Sofia Gavrilova, such curatorial solutions—with the display of authentic objects and/or

a theatrically recreated barrack setting, for example —are a frequent technique in the museums dedicated to repressions and the Gulag[107].

However, before we move on, I will describe the contents of one of the stands so that it is clear how they are organized and what they tell the audience about. Documents and photos are fixed against a black background. One of the photos shows Stepan Novitsky-Mikhalev, an electrical engineer who served time in Norillag from 1938 to 1946. There is a certificate hanging next to it, which says that he submitted a number of rationalization decisions during the construction of the plant, 10 of which were implemented, for which he was officially thanked. Also on this stand, there are photos of other prisoners, certificates of their rehabilitation, letters, autobiography, and certificates issued by Norillag for hard work.

I was struck by the fact that this exhibition is not accompanied by a curatorial text that would give general information about the Gulag being a larger system within which Norillag existed, its structure, its role in the context of Soviet industry development, which would immerse the viewer in a broad political and economic context. In our interview, Katya, a former employee of the museum, confirmed that the curatorial text is missing and also noted that without a guide, the viewer can understand not that much in the museum's expositions (not only in the exhibition about the Gulag), because the objects in them are presented as references to the narrative that is usually told by a guide. Of course, if the viewer knows something herself, then she will be able to understand the exhibition and it will tell her a lot of interesting information, however,

[107] Gavrilova, “Regional Memories of the Great Terror: Representation of the Gulag in Russian *Kraevedcheskii* Museums”, 5–6

it might be difficult for an unprepared visitor to catch the history in its entirety. I would argue, although the *Not subject to revision* exhibition carries out an important work of memory uncovering the archives, collecting new data about prisoners of Norillag, and integrating it into the exhibition narrative, as well as trying to connect the viewer emotionally to the history of Norillag, unfortunately, it misses a point of larger contextualization of the Norillag within the Soviet economy and, in particular, Soviet project of industrialization that was addressed extensively by a number of scholars[108]. Without an explicit and easily accessible message, written in the form of curatorial text, for example, the viewer is unlikely to get an understanding of the Gulag was the result of not only the political atrocities of the Stalinist epoch that pushed people to the correctional camps but also the persistent economic needs of the state whose economy that was largely reliant on forced labor.

However, what is the most intriguing of this exhibition as well as many others dedicated to repressions, at least how we could make sense of them from the existing literature, is that they do not show the further fate of the objects built within the Gulag system focusing instead on the fate of people within the camps and afterward[109]. I would argue that although the focus on repressions and violence is a remarkable achievement if compared to the decades of the official silence, it is not enough to build the proper basis for the possible acknowledgment of the Soviet labor camp economy and its social, political, and economic outcomes. I would insist that focus on on the fate of people within the camps can be or already is easily co-opted by the current political

[108] See for example Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*; Ivanova, "GULAG v sisteme totalitarnogo gosudarstva", Applebaum, *GULAG, a History*; Khlevniuk, *History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror,* Ertz, "Building Norilsk"

[109] See for example Klimenko, "Politically Useful Tragedies: The Soviet Atrocities in the Historical Park(s) 'Russia — My History'"; Dubina and Zavadski. "Eclipsing Stalin: The GULAG History Museum in Moscow as a Manifestation of Russia's Official Memory of Soviet Repression"

regime for the purpose of isolating a nationwide tragedy and leaving it to the past, which is in fact far away from being hermetically isolated from the current regime that is often conceptualized as neopatrimonial. Vladimir Gel'man traces the origins of Russian patrimonial "crony-capitalism" and insists that "after the collapse of the USSR, the domination of neo-patrimonial political institutions was established in Russia and a number of other countries" which were largely purposely and deliberately created in the interests of the ruling groups and designed to consolidate their political and economic dominance[110]. Indeed, as Ilya Matveev points out about the moment right before the collapse of the USSR, "The contradictions of the planned economy, as well as ideological erosion, the loss of the party's 'combat mission' led to the growth of informal relations of the patrimonial type within the Soviet economic system and the parallel growth of the shadow economy in the late USSR. Gorbachev's reforms launched the dominant project of the post-Soviet elites—the project of extraction of state resources"[111]. As a result, those who established control over the resources of the state in the 1990s turned out to be the new post-Soviet elite, the oligarchs, who still own the largest assets that were privatized during the transition from a planned to a market economy. It is not difficult to assume that the most considerable tangible assets that were owned by the Soviet state were industrial facilities and the infrastructure adjacent to them, a huge proportion of which was built in the Gulag system. Thus, I would argue the Soviet version of the prison-industrial complex, which operated in the context of a planned economy and set the dynamics and pragmatics of massive repressions, has a deferred effect extending to the post-Soviet period—namely, the emergence of a new economic and political elite. It is for this reason that

[110] Gel'man, "'Porotchnii krug' postsovetskogo neopatrimonialisma", 36
[111] Matveev, "Gibridnaya neoliberalizatsia: gosudarstvo, legitimnost' i neoliberalism v putinskoi Rossii", 27

I insist that a focus on the representation of repressions is not enough, it is necessary to pay more attention to facilities and material infrastructure as well as to the 1990s that do not allow us to isolate so easily the Gulag from the present moment, presenting it in a time capsule limited to the dates of Stalin's reign.

Nevertheless, we cannot turn a blind eye to the risks and difficulties associated with the public display of the stories that haunt the troubled period of the 1990s when privatization of the large industrial facilities happened. Indeed, when I asked my interviewee, ex-worker of the Norilsk Museum if the museum has ever done the exhibitions dedicated to the 1990s or said anything about Norilsk Nickel in respect to this time frame, the answer was negative. She explained that telling the story of Norilsk Nickel is like telling the story of those who cannot be named. "You can't talk about them out loud," she said. It reminds me of the quotation from the film about Norilsk, *A Moon of Nickel and Ice*, where "Nornickel is referenced as a monolith, as the autocrat of Norilsk, where nothing would ever go against the company's will"[112]. The events that happened during the 1990s are something that everyone knows, but something that cannot be addressed publicly, in a museum, for example. The fears and self-censorship, the feeling of control over the public sphere has been haunting the cultural sphere for many years. Since the protests of 2012, and even more, since 2014, when the annexation of Crimea was carried out by the Russian Federation, the cultural and intellectual fields have faced a gradual tightening of the screws through repressive laws that appear constantly.

[112] Dahlin, "The Continental Archipelago of Norilsk. Karib – Nordic Journal for Caribbean Studies", 5

Thus, the exhibition initiated by the activists of the *Memorial* does the important work of preservation of the memory of the prisoners of Norillag. Showing their personal belongings, documents, and reconstructing the fragments of the camp setting, the exhibition creates an emotionally appealing narrative about the Gulag, which encourages sympathy. However, the Gulag presented this way appears to be cut off from its essence—exploitation of forced labor for the purposes of industrialization. Along with that, without the explicit connection to the 1990s that manifests itself in the privatization of the industrial facilities built within Gulag, it appears to be encapsulated in the past. Anyway these omissions point to the contours of the permitted image of the Gulag-related past. This is what kind of narrative about the Gulag is possible in the current political conditions and, most importantly, in the context of a neo-patrimonial state built on close ties between the state and big business, such as Norilsk Nickel, which controls the city both politically and economically. Tearing apart the Gulag and Norilsk Nickel, the exhibition mirrors and reinforces a blind spot in the version of the corporation's history presented on its website while “the Gulag archipelago still hangs over Norilsk, to paraphrase Solzhenitsyn. The archipelago is often invisible, but all too tangible at times when the dark past resurfaces”[113].

Museum, *Osvoenie*, Unlearning

In this final part of the chapter, I would like to specify the connection between the museum and *osvoeniem* more explicitly in order to outline possibilities of resistance to it. I would argue we need to unlearn what *osvoenie* seeks to teach us. As I said in the

[113] Ibid, 7

beginning of this chapter, it would be naive to understand the museum only as an organ of representation. The *Territory* exhibition, and with it the museum itself, claims to simply tell the stories about the flora and fauna, the indigenous peoples of Taimyr, and milestones of *osvoenie*. However, I insist that along with the geology of the early Soviet period, the taxation of the indigenous population in the 17th century, and the functioning of Norilsk Nickel now, the museum should be considered as a tool of *osvoenie* in the sense that the museum have a direct impact on the way the place is imagined, thought of, and gazed. I would argue that the museum cements dominance over the place by creating ways of imagining the place from the standpoint of conquerors. The museum thus shows the gaze educated by *osvoenie* and its tools, and therefore shows how to see what or whom these tools have touched.

Indeed, if we look simultaneously at how nature was understood and constructed in Soviet times (Chapter 2, Tool 3) and how the museum shows it, we will see that the museum, the *Territory* exhibition do not repeat them, but proceed from them, as if having assimilated their essence. While the metaphors developed by Soviet newspapers and literature were supposed to encourage *osvoenie*, then the exhibition shows the result of *osvoenie* or the result desired by it.

A stuffed polar bear, spectacularly stopped at one of the moments of his life, supposedly embodies the cruelty and wildness of nature (Figure 8). Yet, metonymically existing in the form of a stuffed animal, the animal itself is neutralized and tamed, exposed to the audience. It is a trophy. These are the defeated wildness and harshness of nature

Nature, imagined as a mysterious treasure-house that hides its riches from people, ceases to be such as soon as the inquisitive mind of a geologist, mineralogist, naturalist begins to dissect it. The mysteries vanish as soon as the butterflies and stones are classified and explained. This is the defeated complexity of the natural world.

Nature, as a warden of treasures, ceases to exist as soon as mines are dug, natural resources are processed, and polar aviation is developed. This is the defeated resistance of a senseless matter.

The museum exhibition seems to show a gaze educated by the tropes of Soviet literature. And at the same time, it shows the result of the work of these tropes—what should be seen when these tropes are learned. What I mean is that the museum shows the already mastered natural world, divided into flora and fauna, useful and useless, categorized, immobilized, neutralized by the human mind, made available both to the eye and to the extraction. Ultimately, the museum literally demonstrates how to look at nature in order to see it as a resource.

In a similar vein, the dioramas where the clothes and household items of the Nganasan, Dolgan and Nenets people are displayed, convey the message that these are trophies, trophies of imperial conquest. However, in addition to this, this ethnographic exhibition with a variety of objects and people represented through them literally mirrors the early imperial policy of preserving the diversity of indigenous people, the diversity on which the self-perception of the empire as an empire and its fortune depended (Chapter 2, Tool 1).

Through the clothes, stuffed animals, tambourines, bags, the exhibition shows: all those who are metonymically standing behind these objects are captured, mastered and resourced (sometimes Russified). This is reminiscent of how Ariella Aïsha Azoulay described one episode: “In various photographs of African Americans from the nineteenth century (including after abolition), they are referred to as “slaves,” regardless of their status…. The persistence of the label “slave” that accompanies the photographed persons is an effect of the archival technology. Now as then, it interpellates us to view them from the point of view of those who coerced them to this category”[114]. “Now as then, it interpellates us to view them from the point of view of those who coerced them to this category”—it is exactly what the Norilsk Museum does, we are interpellated to view people standing behind the clothes as *iasak people*, *conquered people*, from the point of view of those who coerced them to this category. We are interpellated to view sable as fur, mountain as an ore deposit. All these are workings of the museum as a tool of *osvoenie*.

However, as we have learnt from Doreen Massey, that the place “is always in the process of being made”[115] it is possible to argue that there is a chance to sabotage the workings of *osvoenie*. As I mentioned in the Chapter 2, it is never possible to complete *osvoenie* and victoriously claim that one has appropriated a place by virtue of its modification, because it is impossible to finally modify something that is in a constant process of making. Thus, the completed project of *osvoenie* is in a way doomed not to reach its final implementation. Although we must admit that osvoenie

[114] Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, 556–557
[115] Massey, *For space*, 9

leaves a trace in the form of systems of economic, political, and symbolic oppression. As we cannot immediately dismantle them, we can start from modest but still crucial steps. To reverse *osvoenie*, it is necessary to unlearn the gaze educated by it. Maybe while we are looking at the exhibited animals and the clothes of the natives, adopting the gaze educated by *osvoenie*, ghosts are looking at us. “They are ghosts birthed from empire’s original violence, the ghosts hidden inside law’s creation myth (Benjamin, 1986 p. 287), and the new ghosts on the way as our ruins refresh and mutate. They are specters that collapse time, rendering empire’s foundational past impossible to erase from the national present. They are a source of persistent unease”[116]. If we follow these ghosts and try “to perceive the lost subjects of history”[117], then we have a chance to unlearn *osvoenie* and acquire the ground for producing counter-narratives, counter-images, and counter-histories.

[116] Tuck and Ree, “A Glossary of Haunting”, 654
[117] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters. Haunting and the Sociological Imagination,* 195

Conclusion

For my thesis, I set the task of finding an answer to the question of what images and narratives about the past the Russian state needs to legitimize and prolong extraction, coloniality and imperialism. To answer it, I turned to the museum of local history, which is located in a place permeated with imperial, colonial and extractivist forces since the foot of the conqueror from Muscovy set foot on it. Studying how the museum talks about the nature of Taimyr, indigenous peoples, and *osvoenie* of this place, I managed to find the images I was looking for. The wording settled images of an unsettling past captures their meaning most accurately.

Looking at the museum narratives through the lenses of the theories that deal with imperialism, settler colonialism, frontiers of extraction, neopatrimonialism, as well as against the backdrop of multiple historical sources, I managed to see, and I hope to demonstrate, the distance between settled images and unsettling past. This gap or even the abyss between them made one wonder how it is overcome, in other words, what the image shows so that the disturbing elements of the past are neutralized and anesthetized.

In the case of the *Territory* exhibition, we see a rich variety of techniques. The exhibition makes central and literally phallic the narrative about Russian *osvoenie* of these lands. This narrative supersedes all other processes that could occur in this place in parallel with *osvoenie*. In other words, it is only osvoenie that counts as history worth remembering. However, even though forced labor in the Gulag system is certainly an important milestone in the context of *osvoenie*—it was by the labor

prisoners that the North was industrialized—the exhibition narrative does not mention it. This signals some uneasiness about acknowledging the intimate connection of the place to the Gulag. What is worthy of memory is initial conquest, exploitation of the riches, and exploration. It is presented as the heroic work of Russian navigators, industrialists, explorers, geologists, pilots on distant and harsh lands. But in order to be able to extol the heroism of the Russians, it is necessary to eliminate the indigenous people of Taimyr from the narrative and from the history. In exhibition this elimination occurs due to the reduction of people to their ethnographic significance—the culture and life of indigenous peoples turned into exhibits of an ethnographic exhibition become trophies and confirmation of the domination of those who once came to conquer these lands. Layout of the exhibition makes no difference between indigenous people and the natural world. These dioramas merge into each other, merging people with animals and insects, dehumanizing the former. The latter are presented as evidence of the taming of nature by the forces of *osvoenie*—without seeing the process of taming, we see its result, which anesthetizes the image.

The exhibition dedicated to the Gulag recognizes that the past was unsettling, speaking openly about the fact that there were repressions and their victims, telling the viewers who and how got into the camps, showing material evidence in the form of documents and personal belongings of the prisoners. But what falls out of this picture of the past is the political and economic meaning of these repressions. Forced labor, which has created the city itself and its main metallurgical enterprise, remains in shadows. The invisibility of labor entails the invisibility of its results. Norilsk Nickel has nothing to do with the Gulag, and the Gulag has nothing to do with Norilsk Nickel.

Thus, the settled image is produced by decontextualizing repression and isolating the past from the present.

Developed through the lenses of feminist geography, the concept of *osvoenie* suggests that all these settled images can be thought of as tools of *osvoenie*. In turn this means that they are the active associates of the Russian state interested in establishing and maintaining dominance over the place. This understanding opens up space for resistance—the struggle with the settled image of the unsettling past by means of unraveling their mechanics, challenging their content, and creating unsettling images. This dimension of resistance is very important, since *osvoenie* often operates with harsh, large-scale tools, such as a corporation with political and economic power. It is the struggle with the help of counter-images and counter-narratives that remains one of the few available ways to resist the state, which is addicted to imperialism, colonialism, and extraction.

Appendix

Figure 1. Phallic showcase about Russians, conquest and *osvoenie.*

Figure 2. Russian explorers and their attributes

Figure 3. Dolgan clothes and belongings

Figure 4. Symbols of the Muscovite presence

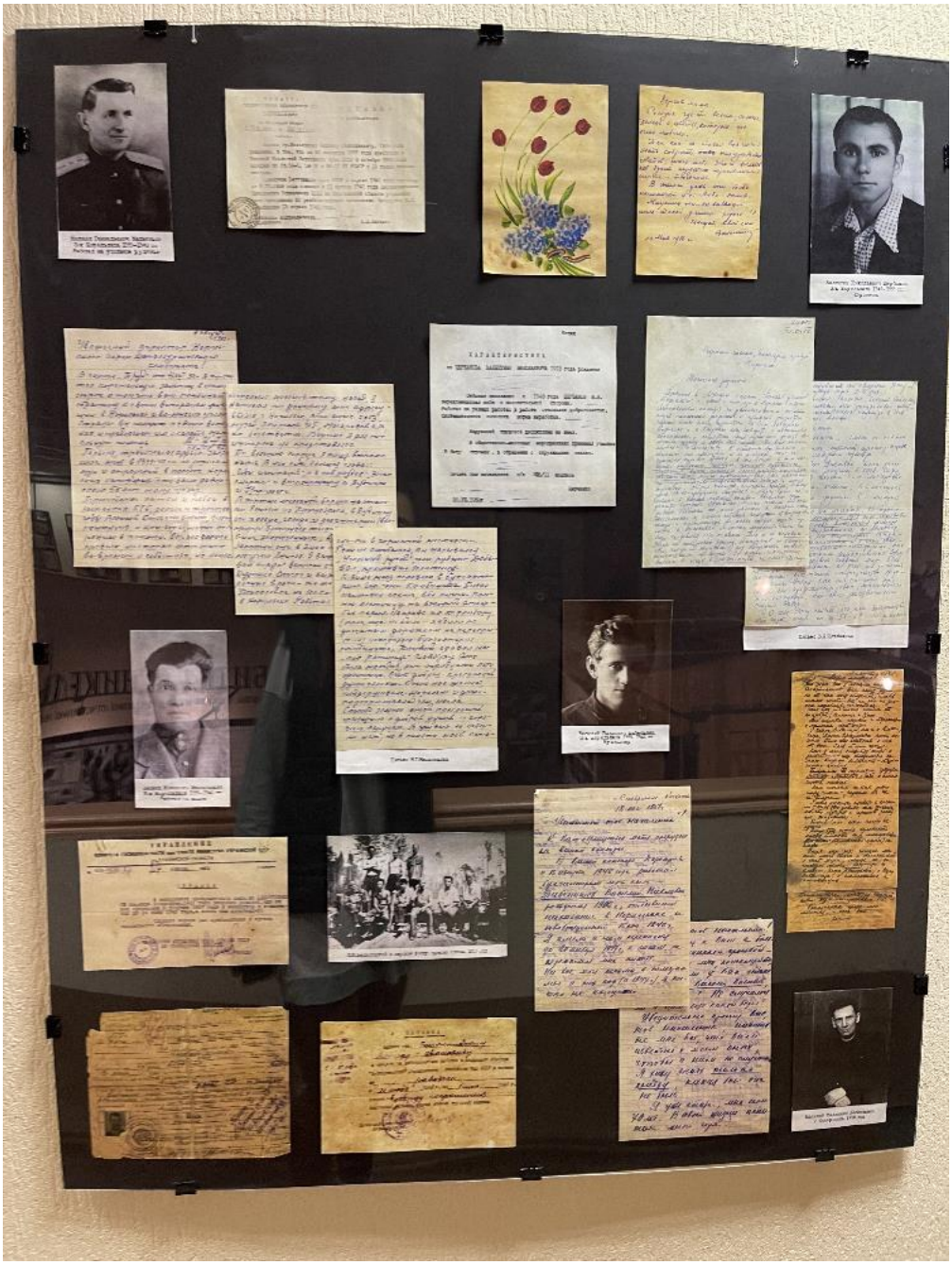

Figure 5. One of the black stands with documents of Norillag prisoners

Figure 6. Norillag political department

Figure 7. Installation with personal belongings of the prisoners

Figure 8. As if tamed nature

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