Creating the City
Identity, Memory and Participation
Conference proceedings

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(Re)constructing identity through the past: the memories of Stalinist purges in Moscow

Identity construction on the verge of memory and heritage

The use of heritage in the construction of politically engaged collective memories in Russia traditionally follows some turning points of country’s political history, such as the flourishing Russian Revival style in the late 19th century which became a golden age for historical museums; museums as didactic tools during the Soviet period; the relative freedom in the 1990s alongside with the search for new concepts in the dissected post-Soviet space; the increasing of State’s involvement in the late 2000s and the introduction of the National Cultural Policy project in 2014.

The most prominent museum projects affected by the political agenda were established in Moscow – the second ‘ancient’ capital of the Russian Empire and the new ‘red’ capital of the Communist Soviets. In the 19th century it was the Boyar Romanov’s memorial Chambers (restored in 1856-1859 and turned into the museum of the first tsar in Romanov dynasty) and the Imperial Historical Museum, opened for public in 1883. The Vladimir Lenin’s Museum (1924-1993) and the Museum of the Revolution (planned already in 1917, opened for public in 1922, it became the Museum of the Contemporary History of Russia in 1998) have picked up the banner of historical (re)construction of the past. In the contemporary Russia Moscow continues its efforts to dictate historical narratives to the rest of the country: the historical exhibitions at the Moscow Manege “Romanovs” (2013), “Rurik dynasty” (2014), “From the Great Upheaval to the Great Victory. 1914-1945” (2015) and “Russia – my (hi)story. 1945-2016” (2016) were turned into the vast entertainment centre (so-called ‘historical park’) “Russia – my (hi)story” in Moscow and the chain of such centres is growing
rapidly nationwide: the second one was opened in June 2017, and for today there are already 15 such enterprises all over Russia, from Makhachkala to Sakhalin.

The exhibitions and the centres are promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church and widely supported by the State authorities: the Russian Ministry of Science and Education has recommended the ‘historical park’ in Moscow as a source for teaching history at the universities and for the retraining of school history teachers. Hence, alongside the National Cultural Policy, the official historical narrative approved by the State is being fixed in the public conscience and will be reproduced not only by the traditional media but with all the power of the cultural institutions.

What Russian people are experiencing today is a conflict of memories of the shared past. The polarization within the society has risen to the extent that the critical approach to the past becomes an insult: in 2013 there was even a legislative initiative in Russian Parliament to criminalize “insulting patriotic feelings”. The problem of “misinterpretation of history” is used in political rhetoric on such level as “history as a science should serve the national interests of Russia”, while the perpetual emphasizing on the ‘great’ and ‘heroic’ past of the nation makes it possible to imply such discourses as “GULAG system made some positive impact” or “convicts’ labour was reasonable”. At the same time, the polar discourses are also emerging (as for example the case of Denis Karagodin from Tomsk, who has investigated the death of his repressed great grandfather and applied for justice). The Russian sociologists Yudin and Khlevnyuk argue that we are witnessing the establishment of the ‘second memory’ or the ‘counter-memory’ in Foucauldian term, rooted in the civic society and distanced from the official propagandist model. This concept can be complemented by Jan and Aleida Assmann’s ‘communicative memory’ (in comparison to cultural memory which consists of the official mythologized discourse). By applying these notions to the contemporary Russian memory practices, it is possible to notice the State’s efforts to turn the ‘social time’ of 3-4 interacting generations or the communicative memory’s ground into the ‘absolute past’ of cultural memory. However, as Yudin and Khlevnyuk state in their analytical study on Russian
memory cultures, there is no clash between two types of memories rather than a deepening gap. In the following I aim to draw on both types of memory, institutionalised in museums and exhibitions as well as practiced by civic society’s movements.

The 20th century in Russian history has provided more than enough painful twists, however, the one I am going to discuss is the memorialisation of political repressions in the Soviet Union, which culminated in Josef Stalin’s Great Purge or Great Terror (1937-1938). Through this historical period goes the deepest gap in the modern Russian memory culture, where an individual became either the follower of the official interpretation approved by the State or turns into the ‘liberal insurgent’ who is trying to destroy the State from the inside by insulting the patriotic discourse. As the national history is mostly being constructed on the history of Central and North-West regions, the role of the Moscow as the capital city as well as the axis and the epicentre of regime’s atrocities is crucial. During the recent years, the city has developed an amount of local memorial initiatives, some of which are becoming known at the national level. The place of the Soviet State’s repressions is yet to be positioned in the national historical discourse, however, it already has its own established commemorative practices. Three projects in my case study are working with this same theme very differently.

**Institutionalised memory: museums and exhibitions**

The exhibition “From the Great Upheavals to the Great Victory. 1917-1945” at the historical park “Russia – my (hi)story” is constructed after the official mythology with all its pantheon of heroes, villains, and innocent victims. Since the conservative discourse assumes any revolutionary change in society as dangerous and maleficent, the main ‘blame’ for the turbulent and tragic changes in Russia is put upon the Bolsheviks communistic party, Vladimir Lenin and his associates. The considerable amount of the exhibition space depicts the terrors of the Civil War and especially the persecutions against the Orthodox clergymen in 1920s – 1930s, while the Stalin’s Great Purge and the history of GULAG system are represented in a rather small alcove alongside with the “great achievements of the Soviet industrialisation” hall. The exhibition design implies the
‘great upheavals’ of the revolutionary years have shifted to the strong and independent State under Josef Stalin’s rule. The colours of the walls, stands and posters back up the emotional context of the exhibition: if the 1917 revolution and Civil War halls, as well as the gallery of the New Martyrs and Confessors of Russian Orthodox Church (repressed clergymen), are designed in reddish hues, and even Lenin’s market-oriented New Economic Policy is painted with the same palette, the period of Stalin’s rule has both serene blue and alarming red in the halls’ design, moreover the blue-painted quotations can contain, for example, terrifying descriptions of famine and misery that devastated the country during ‘forced industrialisation’. The ‘heroic past’ culminates with Victory in the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) and includes video of the commemorative march “The Immortal Regiment” on 9th of May 2016.19 The specific feature of the exhibition is the lack of any authentic material object: all narrative is constructed via the multimedia and banners, which is strikingly resembling the early Soviet museum practices e.g. in the first exhibitions of the Museum of the Revolution. Being basically a big multimedia publication, the exhibition essentialises official historical narrative. As in the classical national museums of the 19th century, in ‘Russia – my (hi)story’ centres “nation itself gets staged or is narrated in nationalism’s favourite genre, the epic”.20

If the “Russia – my (hi)story” park can be perceived as an ideation of ‘cultural memory’ propagated by the State, the GULAG History Museum presents another perspective. Being one of the contributors to the Great Purge ‘alcove’ in the aforementioned exhibition, it consists of the museum objects as well as open archive data in the subject field. The new museum exhibition, reopened in 2015, is based on the former prisoners’ archives, collections, and artworks. It strives to cover the Soviet repressions as a whole but concentrates mainly on the Great Purge period. The history of Terror metaphorically starts with an ‘Eclipse’ – the 1930s policies aimed against the “Enemies of the People” and the “Traitors to the Motherland” and ends with the Khrushchev Thaw’s ‘rehabilitation’. Consequently, museum’s narrative encapsulates the trauma into a relatively short period of time, while the repressions apparatus continued to exist under and after the Khrushchev’s rule. The ending sequence of the
exhibition shows contemporary Russian officials talking about social cohesion and reconciliation. The museum was praised by the media, however, it has also received critique for underrepresenting ethnic minorities and the persecutions of so-called “Family Members of the Traitors to the Motherland” – wives and children of the GULAG’s victims.

The museum narrative of GULAG’s memories also shows a structural flaw in this kind of memory (re)constructions. The political repressions are tended to be shown as a natural disaster, the blind terror which was guided by a few villains (whether Stalin and NKVD high officials, or Lenin and red commissars) or driven by a generalized entity. In the “Russia – my (hi)story” exhibition it is even being voiced in one of the videos that “we [Russian people] ourselves are to blame for all the disasters”. The stories of the GULAG prisoners in the public historical narratives are mostly limited to the biographies of the well-known scientists, poets, artists, writers and military men, whereas the majority of victims are represented by the rough figures. The museum is trying to get out from this pattern, but it is still compelled to represent the ‘full story’ – however, it is being augmented by the temporary exhibitions and the databases incorporated into museum’s narrative.

The advantage of the museum exhibition is its ability to present individual stories with the means of material objects. The objects have their own agency and can affect the construction of social. The objects of the contemporary history, however, have an additional dimension of impact: they contain not only emotional but also nostalgic affection. As Avishai Margalit points out, the vulnerability of nostalgic positioning lies in the moral sentiment and idealization of nostalgia’s object. The nostalgic collective memory can turn into the ‘vicarious memory’ that might engender conflicts if it contradicts with the memory of other groups. It concerns not only memory but also imagination: thus, among the critical reviews on the museum some mention that the “jail doors” and “the exhibition cases reminding coffins” will make “young visitors to hate their country’s past”.
Grassroots memories: on- and offline

A personalized history is supported by the variety of Internet-based commemorative projects as well as databases and archives of the International Memorial, a nongovernmental organization dedicated to preserving the memory of Stalin’s repressions. One of the important projects that work both on- and offline is an International Memorial’s interactive map “Moscow. The topography of Terror” (inspired by the Berlin history museum and documentation centre with the same name). Recently the project was renamed into “It is right here.” There are guided tours in Moscow based on this map and database of memorial places, labour camps, penitentiaries and firing grounds of the Great Terror times.

A tangible embodiment of such projects is a civic-driven initiative called “The Last Address”, a “history embedded in the urban landscape of the city”. Designed after the German Stolperstein (Stumbling Stone) project, “The Last Address” addresses the ‘second memory’ and is ‘countermemorial’ as Cecily Harris describes its German prototype. The Russian project supposes that anyone can apply for the installation of a memorial plaque with the person’s name, profession, dates of birth, arrest, death, and rehabilitation on the wall of the house or apartment building where the person last lived before their final arrest. Applications and following administrative efforts are usually made by local history activists or relatives of the repressed victims, which are taking the part of ‘memory actors’. The only condition to set up a plaque is a consent of the building owner and inhabitants, which sometimes can provoke a tension with local authorities. For example, in the small city of Kotovsk (Tambov oblast in Central Russia) after the long correspondence between activists and municipality the “tenants committee” decided that instead of setting up a memorial sign on the building “it is necessary instead to gather information about every repressed citizen and publish a memorial book” which was supported by local administration. This very recent attempt to substitute individual, personal commemoration by the generalised depersonalised discourse reflects the State policy in this direction. For example, in 2015 the Conception of the State Policy for Commemorating the Victims of Political Repression was introduced, but
at the same time while condemning the atrocities of Communism then-president Dmitry Medvedev has merged the Bolsheviks Red Terror during the Civil War and Stalinist purges of the 1930s. On October the 30th 2017, a monumental Wall of Grief was opened in Moscow to commemorate the victims of Stalinist repression, with the president Vladimir Putin opening the inauguration ceremony and speaking of the remembrance and reconciliation. However, a lot of questions was raised concerning the location of this monument which is neither central nor peripheral, being basically in the middle of a ‘mundane’ cityscape off the popular tourist tracks. Furthermore, the design of the monument depersonalises the memory of individual persons and appeals to the unthinkable scope of the Great Terror. These ambiguous signals from the State officials deepen the gap between different types of memory in Russian society.

The motto of “The Last Address” movement is “One name. One life. One sign” and after the first 18 plaques installed in December 2014 in Moscow, the movement grew nationwide (almost 600 plaques have been installed in 38 Russian cities and rural communities and the project has ca 2000 applications so far). The similar projects have started in Ukraine and the Czech Republic and are planned to start in Georgia, Moldova, and Romania.

The simply designed, hand-sized plaques on the Moscow buildings sometimes are almost vanishing among the monumental signs of the Soviet era: “In this building the great... the heroic... well-known... has lived”. The contrast is especially striking on the wall of the so-called ‘House on the Embankment’, the Government Building in the city centre which was a residence for the Soviet elite – and some of the inhabitants of which were persecuted during the Great Purge together with all the family members. Six modest metal plaques are put on the wall beside the huge granite panel with the name and portrait of Yakov Peters, one of the founders and chiefs of the Soviet secret police from 1918, arrested and executed in 1938 and rehabilitated in 1956. The urban landscape of Moscow is full of such controversies.

The projects like “The Last Address” are becoming an instrument for publicly remembering and memorializing a “past that cannot be glorified”. This instrument can help processing the trauma and
develop new forms of sustainable and critical citizenship. The installation of memorial signs is financed by charitable funds and applicants themselves. The movement organizers claim that it’s important to have a part of the material responsibility for the application, so the applicants can perceive the plaques as part of ‘their’ own legacy.

By using participatory techniques and establishing similar practices in the cultural institutions, it is possible to redefine the national identity patterns imposed by the State and close the gaps between the ‘first’ and the ‘second’ memories. Ironically, the denationalization of commemorative practices could be one of the prerequisites for national reconciliation and cohesion which are emphasized by the downwards directions of the authorities. The “heritage from below” is often being literally grounded in the landscape and linked to the places which have a particular significance for the community. Therefore there is a public demand for the memorial movement incorporated into the urban landscape – such as “The Last Address” project.

In the modern multicultural world, the preservation and dialogue of different identities and public memories is a highly significant question. The theme for the International Museum Day in 2017, “Museums and contested histories: Saying the unspeakable in museums”, as well as multiple conferences and publications on ‘difficult’, ‘contested’ and ‘traumatic’ heritage provide the framework for the further development. Despite the controversies in contemporary cultural narratives of Russia and the deliberate cultural insulation as a national policy, this framework makes it possible to contribute to developing a new language for museums to encompass both global and local identities.
Notes

1. Olga Zabalueva, MA in Museology from Russian State University for the Humanities, MA in Applied Cultural Analysis from Lund University, currently a PhD student in the Department for Studies of Social Change and Culture (Tema Q), Linköping University. Olga has worked at different museums in Moscow and continues her work as a cultural researcher in Sweden. Her research interests include museums and the (re)construction of national identities; norm critique and museum’s social agency and responsibility; representations of the recent past in Russian and Swedish cultural institutions.

2. The concept of the national history and national museum at this age goes in line with the European paradigm. See for example Zabelin, Ivan, Опыты изучения русских древностей и истории [The Essays on the Russian Antiquities and History Research], Moscow 1873.


6. I am using this spelling for the reason that the Russian word ‘история’ means ‘story’ as well as ‘history’.


8. Podosenov, Sergey, “Оскорбление патриотических чувств хотят

9. Medinsky, Vladimir, Проблемы объективности в освещении российской истории второй половины XV – XVII веков [The credibility problems of the Russian history’s reviews in the second half of 15th – 17th centuries], Moscow, 2011, p. 3.

10. Maksimov, Jurij, “Музей ГУЛАГа – инструмент десоветизации” [The GULAG Museum as an instrument of desovietisation], in Nikolai Starikov’s blog, 2016. https://nstarikov.ru/blog/65570 (Accessed 2017-10-22). Even though the quotation’s origin is a populist blog, the significance of such ideas being disseminated in social media as well as in real life (e.g. public protests against 'desovietisation' outside the GULAG Museum in Moscow) shouldn’t be underestimated.

11. “Выяснилось, что в одной семье и жертвы, и палачи” Денис Карагодин нашел имена тех, кто расстрелял его прадеда (“We’ve learned that there were both victims and executioners in the same family”: Denis Karagodin has found the names of his great grandfather’s executioners) in Meduza on 21/11/2016. https://meduza.io/feature/2016/11/21/vyyasnilos-ctho-v-odnoy-semie-i-zhertvy-i-palachi (Accessed 2017-10-22).


15. The Free Historical Society cites the results of the sociological survey made in March 2016, according to which 71% of respondents was agreeing that “no matter what mistakes or vices Josef Stalin is alleged of, the most important is that under his rule the Soviet people won the Great Patriotic War in 1945” (“Какое прошлое нужно будущему России?” [Which kind of Past does the Future of Russia need?]). The Free Historical Society 2017, p. 17.

18. There is no commonly accepted figure for the total number of people who were persecuted as a result of Stalin's policies or during the all Soviet regime, nevertheless it is possible to measure in generalized figures from the open databases (e.g. Memorial Society or The Virtual Museum of the GULAG). There were around 2 million of victims of the Civil War (1917-1922) from which around 140 thousand are estimated to be executed by the extrajudicial authorities. The estimated number of convicts from 1922 to 1953 is around 4 million of people of which around 800 thousand were executed. From 6 to 6.5 million ethnic minorities were deported. During the Stalin's Great Purge in 1937-1938, the 1.5 million of people were arrested and more than 600 thousand executed.
37. Yudin & Khlevnyuk 2017, p. 3.

39. For example, a Moscow citizen Aleksey Nesterenko is weekly picketing the “executions house” in Moscow where his father was death sentenced and later rehabilitated, see *Novaya Gazeta*’s video: https://www.facebook.com/novgaz/videos/1798012463574766/ on 2/11/2017

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