Memory of political repression in post-Soviet Russia: the example of the Gulag

Introduction

Presenting a panorama of the memory of mass violence in Russia today involves posing the question of the traces left by the Soviet concentration-camp system and their uses, and, more broadly, the question of the social consequences of political repression carried out by the Soviet authorities between 1917 and 1989, the diversity, timeline and magnitude of which have been documented elsewhere by the OEMV.

In the post-Soviet context, the issue of the legacy of this violence must, however, be seen in the light of three issues. The first is societal, and arises from the need to find consensual terms (especially linguistic) for expressing a collective traumatic experience. The second is political, and requires us to ponder the full consequences of state responsibility in the perpetration of violence. The third is symbolic or religious, as the absence of the bodies of deceased victims (the Soviet state did not return them to families) still represents a sustainable obstacle to the development of private as well as public memory of such violence.

In addition, the legacy of mass violence in Russia must be seen within a complex framework marked by long-standing use of secrecy, legislative pusillanimity and a lack of commemorative public policy. The extended use of practices aimed at keeping the Gulag silent has left a very deep mark on commemorative practices and rationales.

An extensive culture of secrecy

During the Soviet period, the immediate memory of mass violence emerged in a geographical, social and linguistic space structurally characterised by an expanded use of secrecy. Various practices, including language based on metonymic or metaphorical forms of designation, sought to hide the existence and scars of the concentration-camp system. As a secretive institution par excellence, being placed until 1956 under the direct authority of the state security organs, the Soviet concentration-camp system did not even have a name: the term GULag (Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerej, Chief Directorate of Camps) refers only to the central overseeing administration, which enjoyed autonomous existence from 1930 to 1956.

The role played by the geography of secrecy, with camps dotted across inaccessible or prohibited areas, should not be underestimated. Until the advent of perestroika, it was hard to place areas of internment and concentration camps. The sites had no address other than post-office boxes (Rossi, 1997: 14), and prisoners who had not been denied the right to correspondence were forbidden to make any explicit reference to the area in which they were held in their letters. This clandestine topography helped perpetuate the impossibility of gaining access to material traces of violence, and also contributed locally to the emergence of veritable territorial taboos resulting in the long-term prohibition of access to former Gulag sites, frequently transformed into prison colonies. The secret geography of the Gulag (Brunet, 1981) was accompanied by a lack of information on the activities (farming, mining, industry) associated with the use of internment areas, as well as on the staff of the concentration-camp system (Ivanova, 2000).

This culture of secrecy has had a lasting impact on the construction of collective memory in relation to mass violence, because the structural deficit of knowledge about the concentration-camp universe has consolidated a particularly troubled relationship to the collective consciousness with respect of this very universe.
Longstanding legislative pusillanimity

Moreover, while Russian lawmakers finally acknowledged the implication of the Soviet state in the perpetration of mass violence in 1991, this acknowledgement was already implicit in the use of the term “totalitarian state”, albeit without any lines of accountability ever having been drawn (Roginsky, 2009). Recognition of the state’s responsibility was not accompanied by reflection on individual responsibility. As such, no prosecution has ever been brought against the people who designed or administrated the Soviet concentration-camp system, even at the local level. There have never been any trials, nor any attempts to establish transitional justice. No commission was ever tasked with chronicling the decades of institutionalised political violence, determining individual or collective responsibility or establishing an anamnesis.

Another aspect of the problem posed by the legislative framework in which memory of violence develops is the way in which the status as victim of former prisoners of the Gulag was acknowledged. Initially, starting with the Khrushchev period, some prisoners were able to obtain the administrative annulment of their condemnation and regain their civil rights (Elie, 2010). But it was not until 1991, and the introduction of new legislation (Marie, 2009), that former Gulag prisoners were able to have their convictions overturned and their status as victims of political repression recognised. As such, they still qualify for financial compensation for damages because of their conviction (compensation provided under the 1991 law was capped at 25,000 roubles, which represents less than 600 euros in 2011). But the possibility of claiming financial compensation in respect of pain and suffering, which was enshrined in the original law of 1991, was removed in an amendment, originally intended to update the compensation amounts, passed by the Russian Duma in 2007. All that remains is the possibility of having property damage recognised and receiving compensation in that respect.

The main effect of the amendment abolishing the principle of damages for pain and suffering was not so much financial (the sums involved were of the same order of magnitude as property damage – limited to a few hundred euros) as symbolic. The change effectively eliminated – legally speaking – an entire category of victims: those who only experienced moral anguish. As such, it denies tens of millions of people the possibility of having the prejudice represented by the premature death of a parent, an entire childhood spent in NKVD orphanages and the concomitant loss of legal identity, not to mention a long period of social stigma as a relation of an “enemy of the people”, officially acknowledged. The faint-heartedness of the laws in this regard directly impacts commemorative practices, by undermining the legitimacy of certain players.

Absence of public commemoration policy

To conclude, it is important to emphasise the effects of the absence of federal public policy targeting the legacy of mass violence, in cultural, educational and national heritage areas. Thus, and despite the fact that memorials and cenotaphs represent alternatives to cemeteries for families without a point of focus for their grieving, there is a lack of sustainable government intervention, be it federal, regional or local, in the field of national heritage, aimed at preserving the emblematic sites of the Gulag. The only sites to have undergone conservation work are the main site of the Perm-37 camp and the fortress on the Solovetsky Islands, the first under the impetus of an NGO and the second under the joint leadership of a museum, located on the site, and the Orthodox Church, which is also once again present on the location in question. The practice of reusing camps effectively helped erase the past. Those that were not reused, from the most prominent (including Dalstroj, Belamorkanal and Volgolag) to the most commonplace, were simply abandoned, gradually to be destroyed by the weather and the passing of time (Panikarov, 2009). In addition, the countless burial sites resulting from the Gulag (cemeteries and mass graves) have never undergone a systematic, or even a summary inventory by the authorities.

Moreover, no public policy has ever been initiated in the cultural field at federal level. As such, the Russian Federation today has no national museum devoted to the concentration-camp system. There are just a few private museums set up by NGOs or individuals, conserving material traces of the
existence and functioning of some concentration camps locally (Anstett & Jurgenson, 2009).

Lastly, the federal government has not initiated any policy in the field of education to promote the recognition of the traumatic collective past, and the treatment of the concentration-camp issue in authorised school textbooks remains extremely ambiguous: the glorified role of Stalin and his status as the victor of the Second World War eclipses the period of terror and political violence perpetrated until 1953, and those of the latter part of the Soviet period are still swept under the carpet. As such, the lasting absence of any public policy in the areas of national heritage, culture and education can be interpreted as a political use of neglect. The result is that commemorative practices are determined predominantly in the light of local issues and that there is a very large measure of variety in respect of form and content, all of which effectively fosters silence, denial and oblivion. The long-standing links between the state security organs (which presided over the establishment and development of the concentration-camp system during the Soviet period) and the executive and legislative branches of the Russian Federation no doubt encourage a measure of caution in the implementation of public policy.

Established facts

History of memory

In addition to geography, memories of mass violence also have a history, in that the possibility of including commemorative practices in the public space varied considerably during the different periods of the Soviet regime. Here too, the production of collective memory of mass violence has largely obeyed domestic policy concerns that led to such a clear focus by the Soviet state on writing its history.

Until the mid-1950s, political discourse and some propaganda literature (Gorki, 1952) offered an initial view – an official version – of the memory of Soviet camps, crediting their existence but not showing their extent and or the scope of the extermination they result in. It was not until the thaw and the process of de-Stalinisation undertaken by Khrushchev that a mutilated memory (Ferretti, 1993) - that of a collective experience of mass violence in the first half of the 20th century - and especially the period of the Great Purge, was first expressed publicly in political discourse and literature. However, the Brezhnev period slowed the momentum of freedom of expression initiated by Khrushchev at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956. Social memory of violence was forced to resume, for more than two decades, a structurally clandestine form reflected largely in the activity of samizdat journal Pamjat’ (literally, “Memory”) from 1976 to 1982 (Pamjat’: Heller, 1982). But these decades also represent a time when society was saturated by “grey memory” forged and nurtured in private (Brossat, Combe, Potel, Szurek, 1990).

It was accordingly only after Gorbachev came to power that the USSR experienced a true memorial catharsis. From the dawn of the policy of glasnost, all segments of Russian society, and not simply the intelligentsia, were able to take part, over a period of several years, in recalling the collective experience of political violence. Theatre, film and literature, newspapers, magazines, television: no media or form of expression escaped the veritable commemorative frenzy that took hold of Russia between 1986 and 1989 – to the extent that some historians have spoken of a “collective psychodrama” (Ferretti, 1995). This collective anamnesis also resulted in the institutionalisation of associations (especially Memorial, a society officially founded in 1987) that had initially taken shape in a clandestine manner as forms of inherently peaceful political opposition focused on the advocacy of fundamental individual rights and the recognition of the harm suffered by society as a whole.

Since the demise of the USSR, there has been a decline in anti-Stalinism, accompanied by a questioning (sometimes quite radical) of the achievements of the Gorbachev period. In Russia, the memory of the mass violence of the Soviet period has had to compete, since the early 2000s, and the shift of the Russian state into the production of nationalist rhetoric, with the sacred memory of the Second World War, in which the role played by Stalin is given an extremely positive gloss, to the extent that the representatives of Memorial have not hesitated to speak (in an appeal made in March 2008, see the French translation: http://associationdesamisdememorialenfrance.hautetfort.com/list/textes-fondateurs/appels.html) of...
“wars of memory” and artificially induced competition between the different categories of the Soviet state’s victims.

Places of memory

The inventory of commemorative buildings put together by Memorial lists 50 erected between the late 1980s and today (http://memo.ru/memory/martirol/index.htm) across the former USSR. This number is small compared with the extent of the territory covered by the Gulag (for detailed mapping, see the Gulagmap project, http://www.gulagmaps.org, undertaken by the Department of Geography at the University of Oxford). From regional capitals to small provincial communities, these memorials are extremely varied and were generally created at the initiative of associations or groups of citizens, sometimes together with local authorities (municipal councils, rajon, oblast’). But it is important to highlight both the critical nature of local issues linked to community visibility, often built on narrow territorial foundations, in the use of public spaces for commemorative purposes, and the proportion represented by the expression of regionally circumscribed identities based on specific historical experiences.

As such, the types of public spaces (urbanised or rural, specifically dedicated to the memory of mass violence or not, used on a permanent basis or just for a short time) set aside for commemoration are extremely variable. Some memorials are directly linked to execution sites, burial sites, internment sites or forced-labour camps (such as the Vorkutlag memorial in Vorkuta, Siberia, or those of the Boutovo site on the outskirts of Moscow, for instance). Their presence on the site of the events they commemorate is intended to reinforce the legitimation of the memorial principle itself, by placing it in a topography strongly connected to the places where the violence occurred (Rousselet, 2007).

Other places of memory can be completely relocated and only connected in a symbolic and indirect manner to the concentration camp in question (such as rocks from the Solovetsky Islands brought back to Moscow by representatives of former deportees and placed in Lubyanka Square under the windows of premises occupied by the security services, or the virtual museum of the Gulag opened by the St Petersburg branch of Memorial in the late 2000s: http://www.gulagmuseum.org). The formation of such sites is aimed at using a visible public area in order to raise the profile of the commemorative practices, by dint of their evocative or provocative nature.

But the variety and abundance of memorial buildings masks the absence of a lasting memorial of national scope, created at the initiative of the state, providing a syncretic link to a multitude of local memories by truly representing collective consciousness in respect of violence. A site of this nature will need to exist before people can move from the memory of places of violence to the memory of the advent of violence, and from geographical memory to genuinely historical memory. At a press conference in June 2008, Mikhail Gorbachev advocated the need to build such a monument in Russia. His call, which received international media coverage, has not yet found a significant echo in Russia, beyond the realm of a few NGOs directly involved in the issue of political violence.

Players of memory

The investment of prominent political figures such as Mikhail Gorbachev remains an exception. In Russia, the construction of memory in respect of mass violence has long remained in the hands of various representatives of civil society (scientists, teachers, artists, writers), much more than elected officials or politicians. These players include several iconic spokespeople from the generation of the shestidesiatniki (such as Sakharov, Daniel and Kovalev), who contributed to the birth of the main NGOs working for the recognition of political violence (such as Memorial and the Sakharov Foundation), as well as committed local activists, often unknown to the general public, representing the descendants of victims (Smith, 1996).

While the commitment of the latter has received wide media coverage, both nationally and internationally, and has certainly led to real achievements, especially in legal terms, it is the latter that represent, on a day-to-day basis, the yeast and cement of collective memory in Russia, by drawing up and publishing lists of victims (literally entitled “memory books”, Knigi Pamiati), by providing legal support in rehabilitation procedures, by contributing locally to the erection of
memorials and by fighting for the safeguarding of the memory of places of internment (Merridale, 2000).

While the popularity they enjoyed during the perestroika years has largely faded, commemorative practices continue to mobilise diverse groups of various sizes (from a few dozen to several thousand, depending on the location), comprising activists involved in building a civil society in different capacities (Loutsenko & Fainberg, 2002), scholars and representatives of academia, as well as, on occasion, groups of families and descendants of deportees. However, their involvement in commemorative practices is not always a manifestation of “committed” memory, in that it also reflects an alternative investment, a direct consequence of the absence of victims’ bodies and identified burial sites. In Russia, the public space and collective commemorative sites make up for the absence of private and individual burial sites.

It is also on the basis of this vacuum and the absence of burial sites that the Orthodox Church has belatedly and gradually forged its legitimacy as a force in collective memory (Dorman, 2010), building numerous permanent signs of devotion (crosses, shrines and chapels) and by providing families with spaces, in the absence of burial sites, or at the very least ritualised areas for the production of collective memory (Rousselet, 2007).

Reference works

Literature and testimonies

Literature was first to provide material for a collective recognition of the mass violence of the Soviet era (Heller, 1974). Beyond their documentary scope, the testimonies of writers and poets who were themselves deported and sentenced to forced labour, sometimes dying during their sentence, is indeed an invaluable source for understanding how the memory of this violence was formed (Jurgenson, 2003).

By the end of the Stalin era, great writers had contributed, with works of fiction and poetry (Mandelstam, 1998; Shalamov, 2003; Guinzburg, 1967), as well as through autobiographical works, to fostering acute awareness of a collective trauma. The Khrushchev Thaw, through its public criticism of Stalinism and the wide dissemination of symbolic literary works (such as Solzhenitsyn’s One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich) compounded the impact of this early stage. This second period also saw the consolidation of the aesthetic matrix of canonical testimonial production. Literary and poetic texts were also an enduring vector of dissemination of the language of the camps, a pool of collective memory not only of events but also of linguistic and semantic traits (Marquess & Galler, 1972; Baldaev, 1997). The period of stagnation that followed the thaw favoured, for its part, the clandestine dissemination of testimonies of writers, notably through the work of the samizdat, which contributed to the transmission of the linguistic memory of the camps. Then perestroika triggered a veritable boom in testimonial literature, through the countless autobiographical publications (including in the press) that expanded, by means of a shared as opposed to academic narrative, the collective appropriation of a deeply traumatic experience (Smith, 1996).

Literature in this way offered its first form of legitimacy to the memory of mass violence by allowing the subject to be spoken about. But literary texts have offered an essentially qualitative (semantic and emotional) approach to the Gulag; only a few contributions (Solzhenitsyn 1973; Barton, 1959) have allowed a more systematic study of the history and running of the Soviet concentration-camp system.

Archives and documentary sources

The archives of the concentration-camp system (as much as the private archives compiled by some scholars) have represented a key source for the construction of knowledge of the camps, but also a valuable resource for the development of collective memory of mass violence. Published piecemeal in the 1970s in a series of clandestine journals, these resources helped promote self-identification and awareness among people who had been the targets of violence. These resource materials have functioned as vectors of symbolic legitimacy, in that they have in various ways allowed people to
claim victim status.

The last two decades have been marked by a series of publications of facsimiles of documents, or extracts from archives. This is the theme of works dealing with specific aspects of the concentration-camp system, such as the roster of its managers (Petrov & Skorkin, 1999) or the list of camps (Ohotin & Roginsky, 1998). In addition, six volumes of archives (as well as a volume listing all the archives of the Gulag) were published in late 2004 by ROSSPEN, in Moscow, under the title Istorija Stalinskogo Gulaga (History of the Stalinist Gulag). Each volume contains more than 600 pages of documents, analysing a particular aspect of the Soviet concentration-camp system. The first volume, prepared by N. Werth and S. Mironenko, is devoted to the archives of mass repression in the USSR. The second volume of documentary extracts, prepared by N. Petrov, looks at the rationale of the system of repression, its administrative structures and staff. The third volume of archives, prepared by O. Khlevniuk, is devoted to the economy of the Gulag. The fourth volume, edited by A. Bezborodov and V. Khustalev, documents the questions of the number of prisoners and prison conditions. The fifth documentary volume, edited by T. Carevskaja-Djakina, looks at the sensitive issue of displaced people in the USSR. The sixth and final volume of documents, prepared by V. Kozlov, is devoted to insurrections, riots and strikes by prisoners.

This extensive effort by the academic world to bring the archives of the Soviet concentration-camp system to the attention of the public is understandable in view of the upheavals in the history of the collective memory of the Gulag, and reflects the desire to provide as much help as possible in overcoming the impenetrability of the Gulag. This effort is also reflected locally in the publication of a number of contributions documenting the history of individual concentration-camp sites, occasionally involving the publication of private archives.

**Academic work and secondary sources**

Academic sources are the poor relation of literature on the memorial question, given the veritable mass of documentary sources represented by autobiographical literature and private or institutional archives. The disciplines represented show a clear predominance of historical approaches (social history, oral history, micro-history) in relation to other social sciences, such as political science, sociology or anthropology (Anstett, 2007). As such, the work of historians working under an Anglo-Saxon approach of the memorial theme were quick to address the question of the political relationship to history (Black, 1956; Whittier Herr, 1971), and later the question of the construction of civil society in view of the challenges posed by the memory of mass violence (Smith, 1996). Russian contributions, for their part, adopted the micro-history and oral history approach in vogue in Western Europe (Sherbakova, 1992), resulting in a body of work most often published at the regional level, and which can be difficult for Western readers to access. Political scientists, and only in the West, attempted to take a summary and comparative look at how the memorial issue was addressed in the East (Brossat, 1990; Bartosek, 1998; Maier, 2002), and also sought to shed documentary light on the specifically political issues relating to commemorative practices in post-Soviet Russia (Smith, 2002).

**Conclusion**

We now know that in cases of mass violence, pacified collective memory cannot exist without institutional recognition of the damage suffered by the victims (Campbell, Starman & Wastell 2010), it being true that forgetting the past tends to lead more easily to denial and revisionism than to reconciliation. Completing the identification of the victims of violence of the Soviet era is as such a preliminary step – and a challenge not only to the academic world but also to Russian society as a whole. It took 20 years for Memorial to establish an initial list of more than 2.5 million names (Račinskij & Roginski, 2007). If work continues at this pace, and if we stick to the estimate on which most historians now agree (Werth, 2009), it will take more than a century to identify all of the 15 million people convicted under special legislation and deported during the Soviet period.

Offering a genuine grave to the more than a million dead who have yet to be located is a totally different challenge. Most of the victims who died in the Gulag have still, for the moment, just
“disappeared”, bearing in mind that many mass graves re-appear during earth works and due to the effects of erosion. Mapping the cemeteries of the Gulag, making an inventory of burial sites following the Bosnian example, or engaging in the systematic identification of human remains using the model of DNA databanks established in South America could well represent the remaining challenges to be met by contemporary Russian society. The political stakes involved in locating and identifying burial sites are nevertheless very high – to the point of jeopardising the implementation of this type of process.

The May 2009 creation of a “Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests” was intended to impose a regulatory framework for access to state archives. This framework was explicitly designed to prevent a challenge to a certain vision of national history from which strong nationalist dynamics derive. Indeed, open access to sensitive documents (the very ones that are necessary for the identification of victims and the location of mass graves) could in particular lead to questions on the roles played by former Soviet leaders in respect of mass crimes committed during the 20th century; that said, political and military leaders are key figures in the construction of the collective contemporary identity. The creation of the abovementioned commission against historical falsifications, which marked the Russian state’s first foray into the production of memory of mass violence of the Soviet period, serves to remind us that the issue of the memory of the Gulag is still unresolved at the political level in Russia.

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