



Gulag memories: the rediscovery and commemoration of Russia's repressive past

by Zuzanna Bogumił, New York & Oxford, Berghahn, 2018, 238 pp., ISBN: 978 1 78533 927 1 (Hardback) from \$90, eISBN 978-1-78533-928-8 (eBook) from \$26.21, September 2018

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BOOK REVIEW

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Gulag Memories: The Rediscovery and Commemoration of Russia's Repressive Past is an enriched and updated version of *Pamięć Gulagu*, a book published in 2012 by sociologist and cultural anthropologist Zuzanna Bogumił (Universitas, Krakow). Translated from Polish by Philip Palmer, the book focuses on the Gulag, a system of forced labor camps operating in the USSR from the 1920s to the 1960s. In particular, it deals with the initial memorialization of the Gulag, to "unconventional histories" and "interpretations of history" as applied to monuments, cemeteries, museums, camps, and other markers. The book discusses the formative period of Gulag memory, from the collapse of the USSR, which initiated a time when the state no longer made memory of the repression a taboo topic and several actors became engaged in memory shaping, to about 2015, when the central government became actively involved in the memory shaping of repressive times, attempting to officialize a more patriotic narrative.

The study of the Gulag memory formation, and in particular of the memories of those implicated in the Gulag especially at the end of the 1980s, is fascinating. While the perestroika of the mid-1980s was a time of cautious memory, limited to evoking Stalinist repression, the late 1980s was a time of "universal awakening and truth seeking", a time which Bogumił names, after Mikhail Bakhtin, "the carnival of memory" (Bakhtin 1984). It was during this period that monuments, museums, exhibitions and many new discursive statements emerged, and started to shape Gulag memory. At the same time, many actors are involved in this process, from memorial activists, museums' staff, the Russian Orthodox Church, local historians, Gulag survivors and their families.

In the introduction chapter, Zuzanna Bogumił presents various concepts related to the study of memory formation. It is a clear and interesting chapter, yet too brief. The work of Maurice Halbwachs is highlighted, especially his argument that memory operates within a socially created framework and is influenced by culture and space. Jan Assman and Aleida Assman are also brought into the discussion, the former to introduce ideas related to the process of memory transmission and the formation of the cultural memory, and the latter to reflect upon social memory and the actions of marginalized groups in memory making. Michel Foucault's conceptualization of discourses is reviewed, as well as his ideas on counter-history, the history of Others. For Foucault, Bogumił argues, counter-history is not about continuity but has a genealogy that emphasizes rupture, misfortune, exile and slavery, and it focuses on the history of the oppressed. These ideas are resumed in the book's conclusion. Perhaps a full chapter on social and cultural issues related to processes of incarceration, prison systems, labor camps, repression processes, and so on, in various political and geographical contexts, and in particular the USSR system, could have contributed in important ways to frame the empirical discussion that follows.

Research for the book was based on an impressive, detailed, and extensive field research on various locations in Russia. On page 16, a basic map representing the locations where the author completed fieldwork suggests the wide geographical scope of situations in the discussion. Apart from interesting photographs of the many sites examined throughout the book, no other maps or spatial representations that could provide the reader a better understanding of the contexts in the study are presented. Zuzanna Bogumił acknowledges from the very start that the majority of the fieldwork was conducted over 10 years ago, and updated information on many of the places in the analysis was gained at a distance, from online materials.

The introduction and a brief methodology is followed by four empirical chapters of varied length, each one focusing on four islands of the Gulag archipelago. Chapter one, on the Solovetsky Islands or Solovki, extends for 71 pages and makes one third of the book. The White Sea islands have a unique place on the Gulag memory geography, and the chapter starts by discussing how this camp originally functioned as a testing ground for the efficiency of the whole camp system. The chapter aims at understanding the first memory projects and their contemporary meaning, and makes interesting analyses of the collection processes undertaken by the Solovetsky Museum staff to organize and create an exhibition. It does also look in detail at the role of key actors such as Memorial Society, an organization created during *Perestroika*, and the Orthodox Church. Zuzanna Bogumił puts forward numerous fascinating stories. One relates to the tension between the archipelago's religious past and the power of the history of Russian Orthodoxy, and the Gulag memory. Another one tells about the process of building and unveiling a memorial in St. Petersburg, for which a boulder had to be transported from the islands, a story that ends up in a journey through the meanings and possible dialogues between different monuments in the city.

Chapter two focuses on the Komi Republic, and it is 45 pages in length. It starts with a captivating review of the first acts of Gulag commemoration, and how spontaneous shrines were perceived as temporary markers of future gigantic memorials. After an initial frantic "carnival of memory", interest in the memorialization process faded, to a large extent because basic life needs were not met at the time. This was followed by a period when memory markers started to be erected throughout the Republic, and the chapter examines various local history museums (in Ukhta, Inta, and Vorkuta), and other monuments, discussing how people were attempting to understand and interpret the repression past in their present lives and communities.

Chapter three focuses on Perm Krai, and it is 23 pages in length. According to Bogumił, here was "one of the Gulag's 'cradles' as well as its last bastion". The chapter analyses the different paths taken by the Perm-36 Museum and Memorial Society regarding memory projects. The former ceased to exist in 2014, being replaced by an autonomous state cultural institution named Memorial Complex of Political Repressions. This change was the result of a conflict sponsored by various actors, such as patriotic pro-Kremlin groups, nationalist and communist organizations, all condemning Perm-36 Museum and its exhibitions for distorting history and endorsing Ukrainian dissidents, fascists and terrorists as heroes. Unsurprisingly, the armed conflict just starting in the east of Ukraine was key to this preoccupation towards the control of the history being told at Perm-36 Museum. This fact alone indicates how "memory about the political repressions in Russia is not a closed topic" (p.163).

Chapter four examines Gulag memory in the region of Kolyma, and with 21 pages it is the shortest of the four empirical chapters. It starts with the statement that Magadan, Kolyma's main city, is known not only in the West but also within the Russian Federation, as the "Soviet Auschwitz". While the history of the exploitation of the region has parallels

with that of the Komi Republic and Perm Krai, here, large distances make the visit to some camps almost impossible. At the same time, in Kolyma, the debate on the memorialization of the Gulag runs parallel to the discussion over the monuments that should be erected in the city and is deeply involved with the construction of Kolyma's identity. The chapter analyses the controversy created by Ernst Neizvestny *Mask of Sorrow Memorial Complex* (used on the book's cover). The monument's artistic form and symbolism promoted lively discussions, and many questioned for whom it was built. While the monument was the focus of criticism on various fronts – for being in the wrong place, for being offensive to the church, for being too expensive and for its aesthetic nature – by the time it was unveiled it had already become an identity marker for Kolyma's inhabitants.

The book's concluding chapter is very stimulating. On the one hand, it attempts to find common patterns among the empirical richness of the previous chapters, and, on the other hand, it seeks to analyze the initiatives of the only two institutions that Suzanne Bogumił considers to have produced counter-history discourses: Memorial Society and the Russian Orthodox Church. In different ways, they have both contributed to the erosion of the dominant state version of history and lessened the persistence of a discourse of glory and victory. The conclusion ends with a small but interesting postscript, reporting to the 2017 President Vladimir Putin unveiling of the Wall of Sorrow in Moscow, on the national Day of Remembrance for Victims of Political Repression. In Suzanne Bogumił's view, this act opens up a new chapter, characterized by a top-down framing of memory policy guidelines and the strengthening of state-sponsored memory discourses. Unescapably, a new way of understanding the Stalinist past in post-Soviet Russia is on the making.

Overall, this is a captivating interdisciplinary book that analyzes the complex reawakening history of Gulag memory in the Russian Federation. It is key to all those interested in understanding the complexity of memory formation, and its political, social, and cultural nature.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Reference

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