



## **Treading Difficult Ground: The Effort to Establish Russia's First National Gulag Museum**

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### **Abstract**

This essay focuses on two emerging Russian institutions – Perm-36 Gulag Museum, Perm, and the Gulag History Museum, Moscow – to consider challenging questions about how, and why, the murder of around 15 million people through the Gulag system might be remembered in Russia. This topic represents a new and courageous intervention into the Russian landscape of public memory. During my professional contact at both institutions, conversation often turns to what I can share about comparable sites of this kind – particularly European Holocaust memorials that lie on authentic sites of genocide. Although the Gulag predated – and far-outlasted – the Holocaust, these European sites are the primary Russian reference point for this kind of national commemoration.

This paper is structured around three important issues that make a contemporary Russian politics of recognition problematic, *vis-à-vis* Holocaust memorials. First, it was socialist government-sanctioned designers and sculptors who, eager to expose these sites as evidence of Fascist atrocity, created the early (and sometimes defining) features of Holocaust memorials. The issue of how – or whether – to avoid this ideologically-driven formal design vocabulary is pressing. Second, beyond Germany, most European nations have managed to frame the Holocaust as a foreign perpetration of atrocity. These Russian memorial museums be unprecedented public attempts at historical self-incrimination. In discussion, an often-raised question is whether Russians are “ready for this topic.” This prompts another question: whether disturbing national histories are histories presented too soon, or whether they defy some impenetrable sense of national selfhood? Third, national memorials that document disturbing pasts can be geared towards both political reconciliation and social reawakening. While the political excavation of Perm-36 and the Gulag Museum at this point appear geared towards the former, might there be unexpected social passion around the result, where evidence and stories retrieved from the forced labour camps flow into other public dissatisfactions in the contemporary era. Addressing these three questions, my paper will describe my professional fieldwork at Perm-36 in comparison to my work at European Holocaust memorials, and, using my findings from my Memorial Museums research, I suggest ways forward for this Russian case.

The remote industrial city of Perm sits at the edge of the Ural Mountains, nearly 1,200 km east of Moscow. From Perm, another three hours drive through barren countryside brings you to an unexpected outpost: a camp gate, behind which lie the remains of wooden barracks, administrative buildings, and security features of a Gulag (forced labour) camp designated Perm-36. **(Fig 1)** These buildings, mostly hastily constructed by prisoners from the surrounding forest in 1946 and emptied of prisoners only in 1988, are the best-preserved physical remains of the Gulag phenomenon. Tours lead handfuls of visitors – more in summer, virtually none in winter – through the harsh, minimal, mostly empty timber buildings, signposted and differentiated according to their functions and security features. Guides use scattered remnants from the site – shovels, bunks, latrines, propaganda poster stands – as staging points to describe the punishing routines of daily life for the several thousand prisoners typically held there at any one time.



**Fig. 1: Perm-36 exterior.** Image copyright author.

Back in Moscow, on the upscale, boutique-lined Ulitsa Petrovka, sits the incongruously unglamorous Gulag History Museum. The courtyard features a reconstructed watchtower and barbed wire fence and twelve large photographs of prominent political prisoners who died in the Gulag, such as theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold and Comintern chief Nikolai Bukharin. **(Fig. 2)**. Upon entry, visitors are greeted by guides dressed in period Gulag guard's uniforms, who direct visitors through the museum. This includes a mock-up of a Gulag barrack and camp office with costumed mannequins, and several modest galleries with objects and documents in glass display cases. **(Fig. 3)** The exhibitions are an incongruous mixture of scenic make-believe

and hard evidence, set within crumbling hallways that speak of the institution's paltry budget. Like Perm-36, its visitors often number only a handful at any one time.

In this essay I will explore how this pair of institutions present different opportunities and limitations for the retelling of this difficult subject in Russia's recent past. Before proceeding, I first want to establish some bare facts, so that the gravity of the Gulag (Gulag is a Russian-language acronym for the state agency that oversaw it) can be appreciated: approximately 18 million people were admitted to Russian labor camps and another 6 million were exiled to camps beyond the borders of the USSR between 1930 and 1960. (Appelbaum 2002: 579-586). This involves only the era of the Gulag system, officially speaking; the system was reduced in size following Stalin's death in 1953 and officially dissolved in 1960. However, forced labor continued at select camps, such as Perm 36, for additional significant numbers of political prisoners right through to 1988.



Fig. 2: Moscow Gulag Museum exterior. Image copyright author.

The total population of the camps in any one year varied from 179,000 in 1929 to 2.9 million in 1953 distributed between at least 476 separate labour colonies over these decades (Ivanova, Flath & Raleigh 2000, 188). Each colony had a collection of many smaller camps, more manageable in size. According to a 1993 study of archival Soviet data, a total of 1.6 million people died in the Gulag between 1929 and 1953 (Rosefielde 2009, 67). These estimates exclude the deaths due to (non-reported) mistreatment, which happened frequently, and would bring the total somewhere between two and three million. Historian's estimates range anywhere from 4 to 10 million. We will probably never know the exact number.





Fig. 3: Recreated scene of interview with KGB officer. Image copyright author.

In its core 1929-1953 period, most Gulag inmates were not political prisoners, although significant numbers of political prisoners could be found in the camps at any one time. A person could be imprisoned for such misdemeanours as petty theft, absences or lateness from work, jokes about the Soviet government or its officials, interest in *bourgeois* books or music, having lived or travelled abroad, or, having been a prisoner of war during World War Two, (as this meant not sacrificing one's life for the nation) – these were punishable by imprisonment of several years. About half of the political prisoners in the Gulag camps were imprisoned without trial (Ellman 2002, 1151-1172).

During the Stalin era, leaders of the Communist Party considered repression through imprisonment as a tool for securing the normal functioning of the state system, as well as preserving and strengthening the positions of their social base – the working class – in society. It was an institution intended to isolate class-alien, socially dangerous, disruptive, suspicious, and other disloyal persons (real and imaginary) whose deeds and thoughts were not perceived as contributing to the strengthening of the Marx-inspired “dictatorship of the proletariat.” In terms of ideological justification, the Gulag arrangement was deemed superior to the capitalist prison systems, since the ideological emphasis was on re-educating “criminals” through labour to become rehabilitated citizens of the workers’ state. In reality, however, labour far outweighed re-education in prisoners’ experiences.

After having appeared as an instrument and place for isolating counterrevolutionary and criminal elements, the Gulag, because of its principle of “correction by forced labour”, quickly became an independent branch of the national economy that profited from the cheap labour force provided by the prisoners. At its height in the early 1950s, one in twenty Russians laboured in the Gulag. It was also part of a forced eastern population redistribution policy that used very cheap labor, under the extreme conditions of the east and north, to extract natural assets through logging, mining, canal, and railroad construction, and the Soviet atomic project. As Anne Applebaum has written, prisoners worked in industries ranging from logging, mining, construction, factory work, and armaments, and lived in “a country within a country, almost a separate civilization”(Appelbaum, 2003: 26). The Gulag had both punitive and economic functions. Although it appeared as an instrument and physical place for isolating counterrevolutionary and criminal elements, because of its principle of “correction by forced labour,” it quickly became an independent branch of *the national economy secured on the cheap labour force presented by prisoners* (this is a repetition of above).

Leaving aside this overview, I want to focus now on the new opportunities for interpreting and displaying this history for the Russian public, and the increasing numbers of foreign visitors who tour the country. For Western visitors interested in twentieth century Russian history, the current lack of monuments to the victims of the Gulag is striking, when considered alongside other nations that have created memorials to atrocities in their own country, including cases as diverse as Holocaust memorials in Germany, genocide memorials in Rwanda, or memorials to the *desaparecidos* in Argentina and Chile. There are a few scattered monuments – perhaps half a dozen abstract concrete sculptures in parks and public squares in as many cities – but no national monument, well-recognized place of mourning, or interpretive complex. The types of public spaces (urbanized 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-labor camps - such as the Vorkutlag memorial in Vorkuta, Siberia, or those of the Boutovo site on the outskirts of Moscow, for instance (Anstett, 2005). No truly high-profile museum has been attempted to date. While this indeed reflects the political flammability associated with exhuming this particular topic, it should also be noted that Russia does not otherwise boast many other museums or heritage sites dedicated to modern social history. For various reasons, both political and cultural, it is not a country – unlike others of the former communist bloc in central and

Eastern Europe – that has instigated new heritage projects documenting the trials and triumphs of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

Both Perm-36 and the Moscow Gulag Museum are now looking to professionalize their permanent exhibitions and expand their institutions' stature with a view towards becoming primary sites of memory for this globally under-recognized and materially underrepresented historical event. Since their creation, Perm-36 (which opened to the public in 1996) and Moscow's Gulag Museum (which opened in 2001) have been low-key, bare bones, mostly volunteer-run institutions that remain little-known among Russians. Both now hope to quickly evolve into major national institutions. Perm-36 is looking to secure funding to develop within its buildings full, media-rich exhibition environments that will bring to life and add context to its original barracks. With a light-touch approach to the existing architecture - films, audio-visual projections, and multimedia digital environments are planned. This, it hopes, will bring many more bus tours from Perm, and establish Perm-36 as a site of pilgrimage similar to Europe's Holocaust concentration camps memorials. In 2011 Moscow's Gulag Museum received notice that it can shift premises into a much larger repurposed building with 3,000 square meters of exhibition space, in which it seeks to tell a comprehensive national story of the entire Gulag system. Both museums seek emotionally compelling exhibitions that will be brought up to the highest international standards, along with storage for collections, space for public and education programs, functional facilities, signage and branding, and other institutional amenities.

Coming from a museum planning and interpretation perspective, I am interested in what these contrasting opportunities can offer; how these quite distinct institutional models can explain this national story in a manner that is historically comprehensive, politically savvy, and appealing to Russians. In the remainder of this essay I will gauge the prospects for these projects through the consideration of three conditions. These are: first, location, geography and authenticity; second, the available content or "story," and its likely social and political support; and third, genre likeness – that is, how these institutions might fulfil the form and functions of other established international memorial museum models that have created a sizable and increasing audience for what has been called "dark tourism" (Williams, 2007; Lennon & Foley, 2000; Sharpley, Stone et al., 2009).

First, let us turn to the issue of geographic location and its relation to visitorship, the Gulag, and the wider issue of historical authenticity. I begin from the premise that physical location has particular ramifications in terms of the imaginary geo-historical placement of the Gulag. It is a topic popularly conceived in terms of physical separation and alienation. This presents an issue for the Moscow Gulag Museum, which is set to become a more visible heritage option among the other art and history museums in its increasingly tourist-friendly inner city. Both the current and future sites of the Moscow Gulag Museum have no site-specific relation to the historical phenomenon. For foreign visitors, the site does not feel "foreign," nor physically emblematic. It may well have considerable appeal for international tourists, who are typically fascinated by the appallingly evocative drama of the topic. Yet, for Muscovites in this urban atmosphere, the Gulag may feel distant, like an unreliable concern. Its displays may feel exhibitioner, in the sense of representing an abstracted topic, rather than embodying it. While in reality the greater Moscow region had the greatest cluster of gulags, and contributed the largest number of inmates, the theme of *isolation* is primary in the Russian mind, allowing the past to feel like, to use David

Lowenthal's phrase, "a foreign country" – both temporally and geographically (Lowenthal, 1999). Puncturing this myth will be a primary challenge for this museum.

Due to its remote location, Perm-36 will necessarily involve a pilgrimage of sorts: the city of Perm has few other attractions (although, at the time of writing, its modern art scene is burgeoning), and the road from there – a three hour journey arriving by car or bus – only adds to the feeling of alienation. It reasonably understands itself as sharing a position and appeal akin to Eastern European Holocaust memorials – many of which require a similar trek or pilgrimage into difficult places. The powerful notion of ostracism has spatial and geographic connotations, and may have added appeal for those who visit Perm as a kind of extreme or dark tourism. Yet Russians themselves, many of whom will find this terrain mundane, may be less interested. Given that comparatively lowly-paid Russians may be unlikely to spend hard-earned vacation money on such a trip, there is a risk that Perm-36 will be regarded as a sort of "Gulag theme park" for foreigners. Connecting with ordinary Russians will also be the challenge faced by this museum. If the Moscow Museum has an issue with authenticity among locals and tourists alike, Perm-36 has a different problem; tourist-draw for locals.

To move to the second topic that's important in this discussion: the different stances that these institutions hold in terms of the cultural and political viability of their narratives. The new site marked for the Moscow Gulag Museum is being touted as the home for the Russian Federation's first National Gulag Museum, and has the support of the Ministry of Culture, Moscow's mayoral office, and the Federal Archive Agency.

Perm-36, by contrast, was founded through community activism. In the late 1980s, during the period of Gorbachev's glasnost, a group of former Perm residents, along with Russians from across the country, decided to found a local chapter of *Memorial*, a national organization that advocates for human rights and preserves the memory of the past with a view towards fighting the recurrence of tyranny in the present. Many of its original members were camp survivors. The camp's timber sawmill was put back into use, and this group rebuilt the parts of the camp that had fallen into disrepair – or had been destroyed after closing by KGB agents and interior ministry police (Appelbaum, 2003: 28). Since its opening, Perm-36 has been largely reliant on funding support from global NGOs and foundations, and American non-profits in particular. Perm-36 is a key member of the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience, a New York-based organization, and is affiliated with other sites such as the District Six Museum in Cape Town, the Liberation War Museum, Bangladesh, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site, Atlanta.

It is anticipated that the Moscow museum will be limited to the official Stalinist era. The continuation of the system after 1953 is off limits. The post-Stalin Gulag history is the principal story of Perm-36, which was repurposed to hold the Soviet Union's most important intellectual dissidents from the early 1970s until the late 1980s, including Sergei Kovalev, Natan Sharansky, Vladimir Bukovsky, and Anatoly Marchenko. The museum impinges more directly on Russians' recent memory. Many of its survivors are both living and well-known, and play an active role in the human rights, literature, and theatre scenes in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Israel. Additionally, many of these people are critical of the repressions and political imprisonments of the current Putin era.

Without forcing too distinct a division, we can summarize that one institution hopes to be a truly Russian institution working within a state-sanctioned interpretation of this history, and will be held responsible for meeting citizens' expectations. Its aim may be the communication of the idea: *it's our history to own, for better or worse*. By contrast, Perm-36 understands the Gulag as an example of a politically unnatural institution, foreign to a universal culture of human rights. Aiming to host wider programs and workshops concerning current state repression and political imprisonment, it communicates an idea that might be resumed as: *it's an alien history to be condemned, for the global good*.

Third, we might consider the relation of Gulag museums to other genocides and crimes against humanity. Central to this way of thinking is a comparative sense of the numbers of victims and repressive motives of the Gulag. My Russian colleagues on these projects are especially interested in what I can tell them about Central and Eastern European Holocaust memorials. Although the Gulag predated and far-outlasted the Holocaust, these European sites are the primary reference point for this kind of national commemoration.

In terms of museological display, one key point of comparison is iconic artefacts – the “stuff” of the Gulag. To what extent are original remnants required for a topic that has no unique and evidentiary object base beyond either remote sites, or the testimony of prisoners? The issue is not veracity and denial – most Russians accept that Gulags existed. However, there is increasing popular doubt about attempts to frame the Gulag as an absolute evil. To many Russian minds, many inmates were common criminals, and most – at least three quarters – returned home. For older generations, they are additional depressing reminders of a broader phenomenon: surveillance, hunger, soulless work and propaganda weren't limited to the Gulags. If the aim of a Gulag museum is to whallop current-day Russians through a clear emotional strike, then perhaps wooden barracks, an assortment of tools, on-site propaganda films, and an assortment of diary entries or testimonies may not provide this. This set of signifiers, in other words, was not unique in the twentieth century Russian experience.

Comparisons with international historical memorials to atrocities – and the Holocaust in particular – is also acute in terms of design approach: the early and sometimes defining features of Holocaust memorials were carried out by Socialist government-sanctioned designers and sculptors, eager to expose these sites as evidence of fascist crimes. The design language is one now well-recognized: typically, remnant objects are elevated to semi-sacred status – any authentic remainders are imbued with the ability to embody the event. To communicate the multitude and repetition of the phenomenon, piles are favoured – glasses, suitcases, hair, for the Holocaust, perhaps matched by shovels, shirts, and propaganda posters for the Gulag. Also, the landscape itself has its own poetics of absence, communicated through the contrast between the bleak machine-like utility of its functions, and its current abandonment and silence. In conversations with Russian architectural and exhibition designers, the issue of how – or whether – to avoid this Holocaust-inspired formal design vocabulary is pressing.

There's another problem with the Holocaust comparison: outside Germany (and many admirable attempts among occupied nations to show complicity), other European nations have managed to frame the Holocaust as a perpetration of atrocity from a foreign nation. The Gulag Museum and Perm-36 Museum will be one of the first public attempts at historical self-incrimination in Russia's modern era. In discussion with stakeholders of both institutions, I am



quite often asked how to gauge whether the Russian public is *ready for this topic*. I'm never sure how to answer. Would eventual readiness mean that these museums haven't fulfilled their goals as slightly shocking appeals to conscience? Is being at least a little *before-ready* in fact the key to an exhibition that can force public discussion, shifting it into a realm of controversy, and perhaps following, activism? Indeed, we might ask: are nationally "disturbing histories" just factual histories presented too soon, or histories that defy some deeper entrenched sense of national selfhood?

Further reflecting on this question of "readiness," we need to consider the current state of Russian popular memory towards the gulag. 25 years after glasnost and 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there have been no trials, no truth and reconciliation commissions, no government inquiries into what happened in the past, and only small, endangered sites featuring lectures and public debate. The reasons for this are not hard to fathom. Life is genuinely difficult in Russia today, and most Russians, who spend all of their time trying to cope, do not want to discuss the past. They feel that the Stalinist era was a long time ago, and a great deal has happened since. The memory of the camps is also confused in Russia by the presence of so many other atrocities: horrific war, famine, collectivization, and on-going repression. Why should camp survivors – some of whom (many people may suspect) deserved it – get special consideration?

In an all-pervading system that lasted decades, the lines of perpetrator and victim are unclear. As Anatoly Khazanov puts it:

The majority of Russians consider themselves, and rather gladly, not accomplices but innocent victims. They were always the victims; the perpetrators were the others, although there is no consensus on who exactly these perpetrators were. The culprits were Stalin and his henchmen, communists, fascists, imperialists, Jews and other non-Russians. A certain homogenisation of victimhood through the construction of an 'us–they' opposition is taking place. 'Us' has become an undifferentiated category, and 'they' an abstract evil. (Khazanov, 2008: 302).

This discussion is further confused by the link made between the discussion of the past that took place in the *glasnost* era of the 1980s and the total collapse of the economy and the dramatic worsening of living standards during Yeltsin's brief era of democratic and media freedom of the 1990s. *What was the point of talking about reviewing the past and talking about all of that*, several people have said to me: *It didn't get us anywhere*.

There is an additional question of pride. Many older Russians experienced the collapse of the Soviet Union as a kind of personal and national defeat. While the old system was heavily flawed, the USSR was at least powerful. And now that they are less powerful, they do not want to hear that it was also stricken by some kind of mass political deformity. It is perhaps for this reason that polls since the 1990s have routinely suggested that Russians view Stalin's era as largely positive (Gorlizki & Vital'evich, 2006: xxiii).

It is additionally possible to explain this absence of popular feeling about the tragedy of European communism in the West as the logical result of a particular set of circumstances. The passage of time is a significant factor: Communist regimes did, in truth, grow less reprehensible as the years went by. Leonid Brezhnev's administration is now viewed as benign, even if he was responsible for a great deal of destruction. Archives were closed, as they continue to be. Public access to Gulag campsites and even entire cities – such as Perm and Vladivostok – was forbidden. No television cameras ever filmed the Soviet camps or their victims, as they had done

in Germany at the end of the Second World War. No images, in turn, meant that the subject, in our image-driven culture, doesn't really exist for most Russians in a fully embellished manner. These content and media issues, combined with the prevailing ambivalent social attitude that most Russians hold towards this subject, mean that both Perm-36 and the Moscow Gulag Museum face a considerable battle to alter the gulag heritage landscape.

In conclusion, national memorials that document disturbing pasts can be geared towards both political reconciliation and social reawakening. While for both Perm-36 and the Moscow Gulag Museum the political excavation of this topic is primarily geared towards the former, unexpected social passion might result from it, as evidence and stories retrieved from the forced labour camps might flow into the expression of other public dissatisfactions. The failure to fully absorb the lessons of the past has consequences for ordinary Russians too. The popular Russian failure to delve properly into the past may mean that the echoes of the Gulag system, and Soviet repression more broadly, are not widely apprehended in current social and political life. These issues include the Russian insensitivity to the slow growth of censorship, the continued, heavy presence of the secret police, and apprehension and fear over public activism. As well as documenting the past, then, these museums have an important intervention to make into helping Russians understand how they arrived at the present.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the Museum of Genocide Victims, Vilnius, Lithuania, The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance, Sighet, Romania, Terrorháza ('House of Terror'), Budapest, Hungary, The Stasi Museum, Berlin, Germany, and the Museum of Occupations, Tallinn, Estonia.

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