

MEMORIALISING RUSSIA'S SOVIET PAST Inspiration for Indonesia and Timor-Leste

Pat Walsh, July 2018

Contemporary Russia has chosen to remember past human violations committed by the Soviet/USSR regime. Following are some specific memorials that I was able to visit, photograph or learn about during a visit to Russia in May 2018.

Some reflections

Due to language difficulties and lack of time, I was not able to investigate current Russian memorialisation deeply. However, I formed the following superficial conclusions:

1. The initiative and leadership of victims/survivors and civil society has been critical;
2. Care for victims/survivors is a striking part of the work of the Gulag History State Museum and the Memorial NGO.
3. Though the words are politically sensitive, the language used in Russian memorialisation is straight forward, clear and explicit e.g. grief, victims, repression, totalitarianism, gulag.
4. The physical memorials are built to last. They are largely made of granite rocks and bronze, use bronze plaques with readable-sized text and are well maintained.
5. Memorialisation is not just physical or about place. It takes many forms including poetry, music, painting, theatre and books.
6. Connecting the past to the present, politically and pedagogically, is an on-going challenge. For example, as mentioned below, the Gulag History State Museum asks visitors what they can do so to ensure that what they have seen is not repeated in Russia. This is a good start but a good museum of this kind must do more than ask the question. It also needs to develop creative pedagogies to help young people in particular think through and discuss this challenge and what it means practically in their lives.. I got the impression that as a State-sponsored institution, the Museum sticks to history and is careful about linking the past with the present. Maintaining the independence of a State-sponsored institution can be difficult and challenging.

SEVEN EXAMPLES OF RUSSIAN MEMORIALISATION OF THE SOVIET PERIOD

1. Gulag History State Museum

As this museum resembles Timor-Leste's new Centro Nacional Chega! in a number of ways, more detail is offered on it than other memorials.



The museum on the Soviet gulag labour camps was established in Moscow in 2001 by a survivor of one of the camps, Anton Antonov-Ovseenko, a historian. It has since been taken over and funded by the State and moved to a larger new location. The Museum now occupies a 5-storey brick building in an inner Moscow suburb.

The museum is exceptionally informative, well-equipped and staffed and will soon be extended. It has a Board of Trustees, a Memory Fund and some 50 staff (mainly professionals) including 4 guides, caretakers and a guard. It also has many partners, including other museums, NGOs and media partners. With other organisations, it has established a national coordinating body called the Russian Museums of Memory Association, and is internationally active. In 2016, for example, it participated in a Russian visit to Germany as part of a 'Lessons of the Past and Reconciliation' program.

At the end of its exhibition, the Museum asks departing visitors, in Russian and English: *'What should we do today in order to prevent the return of the past tomorrow?'*



The museum includes the following:

- Staffed reception desk to collect entrance fees (US\$5.00, students free), provide a leaflet and map of the museum and exhibition, answer questions, and direct visitors (who can use headphones, take a guide or find their own way).

The Museum is open to the public 11 am – 6 pm Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, noon-8 pm on Thursdays.



- Exhibition (clearly sign-posted and creatively lit) that includes maps to pinpoint and show the extent of the gulag system (479), extracts from official documents, videos, lists of names, inmate belongings, interviews with survivors, photos of officials and perpetrators.



Display cases holding personal belongings of gulag victims.

- Message book for visitors to record their impressions and suggestions.
- Archive and documentation centre which houses a database (*My Gulag*) and collections of personal papers, photos, diaries and letters of gulag prisoners. The centre was opened in February 2018, to help descendants discover the fate of family members among the millions who suffered in Joseph Stalin's vast network of forced labour camps. The centre continues to collect stories and interviews from survivors and others.
- Research department (headed by a history professor from the Russian Academy of Science)
- Social volunteer centre. The Centre coordinates 400 volunteers in a care program especially for elderly victim/survivors (housework, cleaning, social get-togethers, assistance with medical, legal and counselling appointments, excursions).

- Memory Garden where visitors can rest, reflect or discuss the exhibition. It includes trees, plants, rocks and so on from places across Russia where human rights violations occurred. It also includes a pavilion for temporary exhibitions, a greenhouse for young plants and a small stage for performances. The garden is also open to local residents.



Compact shelving that holds a vast volume of documentation but takes up little space

- Schools program, that includes running youth master classes in which young people are trained to develop their own cultural projects, reconstruct the life of a persecuted relative and so on.
- Mobile exhibitions in other parts of Russia (20 in 16 cities in 2016, relating to events in those centres).



Map showing locations of gulag labour camps in Russia

- Events such as films, talks, discussions, seminars on human rights, poetry readings, conferences for young historians
- Donations program which encourages survivors, relatives and others to donate items, books and so on.
- Library * Bookshop * Coffee shop



The Museum coffee shop

- Computer room for visitor use.
 - Small cinema
 - Collection of art exhibits relevant to its mission.
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2. Anna Akhmatova's statue and poetry

Akhmatova was one of Russia's leading poets during the Soviet period. Her most famous poem, *Requiem*, expresses her feelings about the impact of Stalin's Great Terror on her son Lev, who was imprisoned in St Petersburg.



The statue shows her standing, helpless in grief but dignified and unbowed, on one side of St Petersburg's Neva River gazing across it towards the huge prison where Lev was detained. Her husband and many colleagues were also shot or imprisoned. The statue was installed in 2006. It is 3 metres high and made of bronze. Akhmatova's house-museum in St Petersburg is also preserved and open to the public.

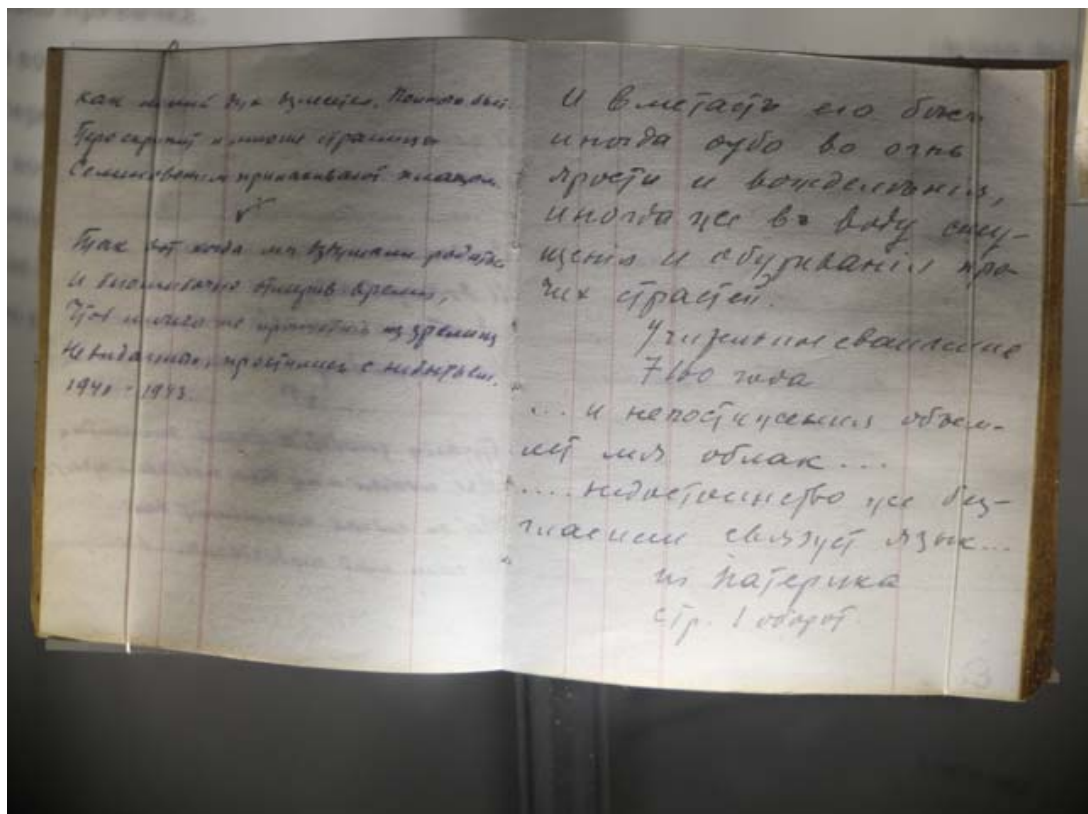


The Russian text reads: 'Anna Akhmatova Museum / Fontana (Fountain) House'.

The apartment is part of an old noble home on a river embankment in central St Petersburg.



Visitors are encouraged to write excerpts from Akhmatova's poetry on the garden wall that leads to her house-museum.



Original manuscript in Akhmatova's writing

3. Solovetsky Stone

The Solovetsky Stone is a monument in Moscow to victims of the Soviet gulag system inscribed *Memorial to Victims of Totalitarianism*. It was erected on 30 October 1990 to commemorate a 1974 initiative by political prisoners to establish a Day of Political Prisoners in the USSR.



The memorial consists of a huge rock brought from the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea, the location of Solovki gulag prison camp. The memorial is located in central Moscow across from the feared Lubyanka KGB Secret Police headquarters and interrogation cells, close to Red Square and the Kremlin.

A second Solovetsky Stone was installed in St Petersburg in 2002, called *Memorial to the Victims of Political Repressions in Petrograd-Leningrad* (the former names of St Petersburg).

It comprises a 10 tonne boulder taken from near the site of mass executions of prisoners in the Solovki prison camp.). The inscription on the base of the monument reads: *To prisoners of Gulag, to Victims of Communist Terror, to Freedom Fighters*. It includes a line from Akhmatova's poem *Requiem*: 'I wish to call all of them by name, but....'

4. 30 October: Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repressions

Officially established in 1991, the day was first initiated by former political prisoners in 1974 and has been broadened to remember all those repressed during the entire Soviet period (i.e. those arrested, exiled, sent to the camps or shot during the collectivisation of agriculture (1927-1933), in the forced-labour camps of the Gulag, and shot in their tens of thousands during the Great Terror of 1937-1938). It is a public holiday.

The day is a particular focal point for ceremonies at former mass execution sites. These include the Butovo Firing Range south of Moscow where more than 20,000 political prisoners were executed by Stalin's secret police 1937-38, and the Krazny Bor Forest killing field on the border with Finland in northwestern Russia. Under Putin, Russian civil society is not entirely happy with official appropriation of the day.



Images of victims shot by the secret police at the Butovsky Firing Range on the edge of Moscow. An apple orchard was grown on the site to cover it up until its discovery in 1995.

5. The Wall of Grief (Stena Skorbi)

Located on Sakharov Avenue in Moscow, The Wall of Grief is a new monument to victims of political repression.

Sakharov Avenue is named after Andrei Sakharov (1921-1989), the father of the Soviet hydrogen bomb who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975 for his peace and human rights activities. The Wall is on the corner of a busy intersection, is made of grey concrete several metres high and depicts faceless victims.



The Wall of Grief monument to victims of political repression, Moscow, opened in 2017. Part of the Wall, with openings symbolising the missing, is visible to the left. I am pointing to the word 'Remember' which is repeated in many languages.

The design was chosen from an open design competition won by a Russian sculptor. The concept, the name of the memorial and the gaps in its structure to represent 'the missing', are striking. But its bleak 'Soviet'-like bulk and impersonality are, in my view, off-putting. Its inauguration on 30 October 2017 by President Putin and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, was boycotted by activists because of Putin's repression of opposition in Russia.

6. Memorial



Memorial is the name of a Russian historical and civil rights organisation, based in Moscow, that operates in a number of post-Soviet states. Founded in 1989, it focuses on recording and publicising the USSR's totalitarian past but also monitors human rights in contemporary Russia and other post-Soviet states. According to its charter, Memorial aims:

- To promote mature civil society and democracy based on the rule of law and thus to prevent a return to totalitarianism.
- To assist the formation public consciousness based on the values of democracy and law, to get rid of totalitarian patterns, and to establish human rights firmly in practical politics and public life.
- To promote the revelation of the truth about the historical past and perpetuate the memory of the victims of political repression by totalitarian regimes. This is done by keeping an electronic database of victims of political terror in the former USSR and by organising legal and financial assistance for victims of the gulag. It also undertakes research, exhibitions, and publishing.

Memorial has been the driving force behind several of the initiatives listed above. It has received a number of international awards but is also persecuted by the authorities within Russia. This is probably because it is seen to be critical of President Putin, was active in defence of human rights in Chechnya and is lauded by the West. Calls for it to be liquidated have been made and it has been officially declared 'a foreign agent'.

7. Boris Pasternak's house-museum

Boris Pasternak (1890-1960) was a Russian poet and novelist, who lived through the entire spectrum of the massive upheaval in Russia, an experience he documented in his famous novel *Dr Zhivago*. The novel shows that he initially supported the 'new dawn' of the Russian Revolution but then became disillusioned by the violence it perpetrated on his beloved Russia and its people.



Dr Zhivago is anti-Soviet but not anti-Russian. It was celebrated in the West, and made into a famous movie, but regarded by the Soviet authorities as a betrayal. Pasternak survived the Great Terror but was blocked from accepting the Nobel Prize for literature in 1958 and his loved ones were persecuted in his place. Today, the writer's retreat in Peredelkino on the outskirts of Moscow where he wrote *Dr Zhivago* is a State-supported memorial to his creativity, independence and truth-telling.



Boris Pasternak's study in his house-museum at Peredelkino where he wrote Dr Zhivago.

Background note

The Soviet Union (USSR), now Russia, was established in 1922 following the overthrow of the Tsar and Communist victory led by Lenin then Stalin. It functioned as a highly centralised, one-party State, led by Lenin till 1924 then Stalin till 1953. During this period the Soviet Union was responsible for extensive and brutal human rights violations costing millions of lives. This violence included the liquidation of so-called enemies of the people (by contrast, Soeharto purged the Left in Indonesia), internal exile to labour camps (also a feature of Soeharto's regime), and famine.

The Tsars used forced labour camps and exile to Siberia for at least 100 years and Lenin continued the practice. Stalin took the brutal practice to a new and more monstrous level. Over the 24 year period 1929-1953, an estimated 25,000,000 people suffered imprisonment in the gulags or similar places, many at Stalin's paranoid whim; deaths numbered somewhere between 1.6 and 10,000,000. Detainees were criminals, political prisoners, peasants who resisted collectivisation, intelligentsia and church people.

The USSR was dissolved in 1991 in the face of dissident movements and 12 of its former member republics became independent. It is now known as the Russian Federation. As the Soviet Union, it collaborated with the West to defeat fascist Germany in World War II, helped form the UN and became a Permanent Member of the Security Council. It also engaged in ideological and economic Cold War with the West, became a nuclear power, and engaged in proxy War particularly in the Third World.

Timor-Leste was a victim of this conflict between communist and capitalist ideologies and systems. The USSR supported decolonisation and voted for Timor-Leste in the UN Security Council and General Assembly. It did nothing else in support of the Timorese cause, but Soeharto still used fictitious claims of Soviet support for revolution in Timor-Leste to justify and win Western support for his invasion.

The 1989 collapse of the Wall that separated East from West Berlin dramatically symbolised the breakup of the Soviet Empire. The historic event was used to great effect by Jose Ramos-Horta and others to demonstrate that nothing was irreversible, including the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste, and that Timor-Leste's struggle was not about communism or ideology, a point reinforced by Pope John Paul II's visit to Timor-Leste in 1989.

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