

Displacing the “inconvenient past”: the memory of repressions and genocides of the Soviet period in current Russia

Dr Aleksey Kamenskikh

The Centre for East-European Studies, University of Bremen

Association “Perm Memorial – Europe e. V.”

✉ kamen.septem@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-5666-731X

The paper provides a review of the shifts occurring in politics of memory regarding the political repressions of the Soviet period within post-Soviet Russia, spanning from the early 1990s to the present day. Drawing on methodology of memorial politics studies offered by Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard, and Aleida Assmann’s concepts of “canon” and “archive” of cultural memory, the author examines the dynamics of changes in this segment of Russia’s “memorial landscape” under the influence of political shifts associated with the aggressive actions of the Russian leadership in 2014 and 2022, regarding the displacement of memory about political crimes of the state from the public sphere as a form of the struggle of political elites against the opposite “counter-memory”. Particular attention is paid to the changes taking place in the politics of remembrance of Soviet political repression since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Keywords: Soviet political repressions, politics of memory, mnemonic actors, The Memorial Society.

Over the past two decades, the memory of political repressions during the Soviet era has constituted one of the foremost expressions of “unofficial counter-memory” (Gegengedächtnis)¹ in Russia. This counter-memory stands in opposition to the official historical narrative that has been reinforced throughout these decades under the Putin regime, glorifying state power and intending to present as legitimate all actions of the Russian government, in both the present and the past.²

This paper is an attempt to outline the main stages of memory politics around one of the segments of the “memorial landscape” of modern Russia, namely the memory of the Soviet-era political repressions. We will try to identify the main groups of the “mnemonic actors” and the strategies followed by these actors at each of the stages. This will: 1) note the forms of interaction between different groups of actors, 2) outline the main forms of commemoration of victims of political repression characteristic of each of the stages, and 3) ask the question about the relationship between the policy of remembrance of political repression in the USSR and the general political changes in the country.

The changes in the politics of memory that are most significant for this review are those that have occurred since the Russian authorities liquidated the two central organisations of the Memorial Society in the winter of 2021/22, and the subsequent full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Regrettably, as of now, we do not possess a comprehensive database that, upon analysis, would enable us to provide a quantitative assessment of the development of specific trends in commemorative practices over the past two with a half years. In light of this limitation, the delineation of trends and the acknowledgment of significant facts represent an unavoidable research strategy. The conceptual framework proposed for the study of memory politics in post-socialist Europe by a team of researchers led by Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard,³ as well as studies on the dynamics of social memory and forgetting (especially in the context of memory politics), play a special role in this study. Among these are included the concepts of “canon” and “archive” of social memory, developed by Aleida Assmann.⁴

¹ Aleida Assmann, *Formen des Vergessens*, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2016, p. 96.

² On the “retrospective dimension” of the modern Russian statism as a new form of dominant political ideology in Russia, see the research of the Free Historical Society: “What kind of past Russia’s future needs”, Moskva: Komitet grazhdanskikh iniciativ, 2017. See also: Maria Snegovaya, Michael Kimmage, Jade McGlynn, “The Ideology of Putinism: Is It Sustainable?”, in: *CSIS*, 27-09-2023, <https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-09/230927_Snegovaya_Ideology_Putinism.pdf?VersionId=S1qYNbXnswIMssRTm9vZC86e0f.AYIbQ>, [2024-11-12].

³ Michael Bernhard, Jan Kubik (eds.), *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁴ Aleida Assmann, ‘Canon and Archive’, in: Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008, pp. 97-107. On the mechanisms of the displacements and social forgetting see also: Paul Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

In this concise paper, I will refrain from delving into the discussion of categorising specific forms of Soviet repressions, predominantly those from the Stalinist era, as either genocide or sociocide. I will not engage in the examination of the events of local famines in 1922 and 1945–1947 in the Urals,⁵ which have been largely marginalised in public historical recollection. Additionally, I will not touch upon the question of whether the famine of 1932–1933 in Ukraine,⁶ Kazakhstan, the Middle and Lower Volga, and the North Caucasus should be considered genocide. Nor will I address the debate surrounding whether the deportations of Germans from the Volga region in 1941 and the forced displacement of Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Ingush, Bulgars and Kalmyks in 1944 can be classified as genocides.⁷ The discussion will not extend to determining whether the so-called Polish Operation conducted by the NKVD in 1937–1938, which resulted in the victimisation of approximately 111,000 individuals out of an estimated 600,000 Poles residing in the USSR at the time⁸, exhibited features of genocide. The objective is to analyse the dynamics of changes in the forms of commemorating these tragedies for last decades.

I would like to begin with a reminder: in her 2020 article on memory, identity and emotions, Aleida Assmann formulates a thesis which she previously articulated in some of her works. Faced with an “inconvenient” past, which conceals mass crimes and traumas, contemporary cultures of national memory typically recognise only three sanctioned roles: 1) the victor who has overcome evil, 2) the fighter of resistance and martyr who struggled against evil, and 3) the victim who passively endured evil. Anything

⁵ On the mass famine of 1922 in the Urals see: Igor Narskij, *Zhizn' v katastrofe: Budni naselenija Urala v 1917–1922 gg.*, Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2001.

⁶ From the extensive bibliography dedicated to the mass famine of 1932–1933 in Ukraine and especially the polemics surrounding the classification of this tragedy, I will confine my reference to the work of a brilliant Ukrainian historian Georgij Kasianov: Georgij Kasianov, *Danse macabre: golod 1932–1933 rokiv u politici, masovij svidomosti ta istoriografii (1980-ti – pochatok 2000-h)*, Kyiv: Institut istorii Ukrainy, 2010.

⁷ It is imperative to observe, however, that even current Russian legislation categorises these deportations as genocides. The Law of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic dated 26 April 1991, No 1107-I, “On the Rehabilitation of Repressed Peoples” (with amendments and additions as of July 1, 1993), Article 2 stipulates: “Repressed peoples are acknowledged as those (nations, nationalities, or ethnic groups, and other historically established cultural-ethnic communities of people, for example, the Cossacks), in relation to whom, based on signs of national or other affiliation, a state-level policy of defamation and *genocide* was conducted, accompanied by their forced resettlement, abolition of national-state formations, redrawing of national-territorial borders, and the establishment of a regime of terror and violence in places of special settlement”. See: Zakon RSFSR ot 26 aprelya 1991 g. № 1107-I “O reabilitacii repressirovannyh narodov” (s izmenenijami i dopolnenijami), in: <<https://base.garant.ru/10200365/>>, [2024-01-10]. Italic in the quotation is mine – AK.

⁸ It is essential to note that not all those repressed in the context of the Polish Operation were ethnically Poles; among the victims were Ukrainians, Jews, Russians, Lithuanians and, in some regions of the USSR, nearly half of the victims were ethnically Belarusian. See more on the subject: Bogdan Musial, “The ‘Polish Operation’ of the NKVD: The Climax of the Terror Against the Polish Minority in the Soviet Union”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 48 (2), 2012, pp. 98–124; Nikita Petrov, Arsenij Roginskij, “Polskaja operacija NKVD 1937–1938 gg.”, in: Guryanov, A. E. (ed.), *Repressii protiv polyakov i polskih grazhdan*, t. 1, Moskva: Zvenja, 1997, s. 22–43; Aleksey Kamenskikh, “Polskie perebezhchiki” iz Zapadnoj Belarussiji v “Polskoj operacii 1937–1938 godov v Permi”, *Perm University Herald – History*, 2020, 50 (3), s. 76–88.

beyond these positions and perspectives either cannot become the subject of an accepted narrative or is only reluctantly integrated, thus being “forgotten” at the official level.⁹ Among the most challenging aspects to perceive and maintain in contemporary social memory is the recollection of the perpetrators of violence and injustice for those modern groups (political, social, ethnic) whose identity is constructed as continuous in relation to groups responsible for past acts of violence and injustice.¹⁰ Certainly, this does not imply the impossibility of the existence of a narrative of historical responsibility (as exemplified by the concept of “constitutional patriotism” in modern Germany).¹¹ However, all else being equal, constructing an identity by commemoratively aligning with victors in the struggle against evil or with victims of injustice is immeasurably “easier” than cultivating an awareness of responsibility for crimes committed in the past by members of the group to which a person belongs.

This thesis by Aleida Assmann comes to mind each time someone endeavours to explain the history of Russia’s memorial culture over the past thirty-seven years. The famous Historikerstreit (“historians’ dispute”) unfolded in Germany, and culminated in establishing the tragedy of the Holocaust as a main event of modern German history and the historical responsibility of the German people for the crimes of National Socialism. These are seen as central elements of the contemporary “mnemonic regime” (to use the term of Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik¹²) in Germany. In the late USSR, amid the so-called Perestroika and Glasnost, there emerged a public engagement and wide discussion of the painful topic of Stalinist repressions and Soviet political terror in general. The culmination of the last process was the establishment of the “Memorial Society” (1987–1989), with dozens of regional branches across the USSR and tens of thousands of members. Also, the dismantling of the monument to Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Soviet political police, on Lubyanka Square in Moscow (on 23 August 1991, amid the confrontation with the revanchist coup attempt by the State Committee on the State of Emergency). A somewhat non-trivial commonality between the concept of “constitutional patriotism” in Germany and the national consensus that formed regarding Stalinist repressions in the late USSR and post-Soviet Russia of the 1990s is an ethical “turn” (metanoia) in historical memory that occurred without external pressure. This

⁹ Aleida Assmann, “Erinnerung, Identität, Emotionen: Die Nation neu denken”, *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, 2020, Vol. 3, s. 79–80.

¹⁰ On the “memorial aspect” of social groups’ identity, see: Kathrin Bachleitner, “Collective memory and the social creation of identities: linking the past with the present and future”, in: Shane M. O’Mara (ed.), *Collective Memory*, Dublin: The University of Dublin, 2022, pp. 167–176.

¹¹ See, among others: Ciaran Cronin, “Democracy and Collective Identity: In Defense of Constitutional Patriotism”, in: *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2003, 11(1), pp. 1–28.

¹² On the notion of “mnemonic regime”, see: Michael Bernhard, Jan Kubik (eds), *Twenty Years after Communism*, New York: Oxford Academic, 2014, pp. 4–34.

turn is expressed in the willingness to assume responsibility for the crimes committed by a person's own country in the past – with the aim of rendering them impossible in the future.

This consensus, established during the Perestroika period and generally maintained until 2014, involved viewing Stalinist repressions as a series of crimes committed by the state against its own citizens, as well as those who were not its own (such as Polish prisoners of war executed in Katyn and Mednoye¹³). Unconditional condemnation of these repressions found expression, notably in the creation of the Katyn Memorial Complex (1998), as a symbol of Russian–Polish national reconciliation. It also manifested in the transfer of documents to the Polish side, providing evidence of the crimes committed by the Soviet leadership that orchestrated the execution of Polish prisoners of war in 1940.¹⁴ Additionally, legislative measures were taken, including the enactment of laws “On the Rehabilitation of Repressed Peoples” (April 1991, July 1993) and “On the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repressions” (October 1991) – albeit incomplete and containing internal contradictions.¹⁵ Sections on the history of repression were incorporated into school textbooks on the modern history of Russia; numerous special textbooks on teaching the history of Soviet political repression at school have been published.¹⁶ The following can also be added: the transfer of (part of) the KGB archival collections to the Central and Regional State Archives of Socio-Political History (1991–1992); the designation of 30 October as a Day of Remembrance for Victims of Political Repressions among nationwide commemorative dates (1991); the adoption of the State Policy Concept for Commemorating the Victims of Political Repressions (2015); and the establishment of regional commissions tasked with implementing this concept (which operated until spring 2022).

The pivotal role in preserving and perpetuating the memory of Soviet repressions was played by the activities of the Memorial society engaged in research and educational

¹³ See: Alexandr Gurianov, Anna Dzenkevitch, Sergei Zenkov (eds), *Ubity v Kalinine, zahoroneny v Mednom: Kniga pamiyati polskih voennoplennykh – uznikov Ostashkovskogo lagerja NKVD SSSR, rasstreljannykh po resheniju Politburo VKP(b) ot 5 marta 1940 goda*, t. 1–3, Moskva: Memorial, 2019.

¹⁴ See, among others: “Chaika: peredacha Polshe materialov katynskogo dela pochtii zavershena”, in: *RIA Novosti*, 19-05-2011, <<http://ria.ru/society/20110519/376748675.html>>, [2024-11-12].

¹⁵ The critical analysis of the law “On the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repressions” is presented, for example, in Roman Lazukov, “Kvadratnyi metr GULAGA: Kak deystvuet Zakon ‘O reabilitacii zhertv politicheskikh repressii’ I dozhitv li do ego ispolnenija postradavshie”, in: *Novaya Gazeta*, 10-12-2020, <<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/12/10/88308-kvadratnyy-metr-gulaga>>, [2024-11-12].

¹⁶ See, among others: Nikolai Ivnitckij, *Kollektivizatsija I raskulachivanie (nachalo 30-h godov): Uchebnoe posobie dlja vuzov i shkol*, Moskva: Magistr, 1996; Yuri Kachanovskij, *Diktatura Stalina. Uroki I vyvody: Uchebnoe posobie*, Khabarovsk, 2002; Viktor Kirillov, *Istorija repressij I pravozashchitnoje dvizhenije v Rossiji: Uchebnoe posobie*, Ekaterinburg: Uralskij pedagogicheskij institut, 1999; Anfisa Kukushkina, *Stanovlenije sovetsoj totalitamoj sistemy (20–30-e gody XX veka): Uchebnoe posobie*, Karaganda, 2002; Andrej Suslov, Maria Cheremnykh, *Izuchenije v shkole istoriji stalinskikh repressij: Metodicheskoe posobie*, Perm: Centr grazhdanskogo obrazovaniya I prav cheloveka, 2016.

work, and publishing hundreds of volumes of the *Books of Memory*.¹⁷ Since 1999, the International Memorial and regional branches of the Memorial Society in Russia have organised an annual competition for research papers by school students titled “Human in History. Russia – XX Century”. Over twenty years, thousands of high school students participated, dedicating their research to topics such as “The Cost of Victory”, “Family History”, “A Person and Power”, “A Person and Homeland” and “Ours – Others”.¹⁸

One of the key forms of the “memory infrastructure” concerning Soviet repressions since the early 1990s has been the proliferation of numerous monuments dedicated to their victims. Several categories of such monuments can be discerned. Primarily, these are memorials to the victims of genocides (almost exclusively referring to the peoples who experienced mass deportations in the 1940s and 1950s). Examples are: the monument to the Kalmyks – victims of the Ulsy operation (Elista, 1992), a grassroots memorial made from tombstones in memory of the victims of the deportation of Chechens (Grozny, 1992);¹⁹ a monument to the deported Ingush people (known as the “Nine Towers”, Nazran, 1997); a monument to the victims of the deportation of Germans from the Volga region (Engels, 2011), and so forth.

Another category comprises numerous monuments to victims of political repression beyond the borders of national republics. For instance, the “12 Kilometre” site on the Moscow tract near Yekaterinburg, where in 1937–1938, thousands of residents of the vast then-Sverdlovsk region, executed by the NKVD, were buried in trenches. This memorial was established in 1996, and in 2017 the monumental bronzes “Masks of Sorrow” by Ernst Neizvestny were installed there. Another example is the monument to victims of political repressions at the Yegoshikha cemetery in Perm, installed in 1996 with the funds of local residents.²⁰ Notably, with few exceptions (such as the “Wall of Grief” in Moscow, finished

¹⁷ From the mid-2010s the data of these regionally published *Books of Memory* were generalised by the International Memorial into the digital bases *Victims of the repressions*, in: <<https://www.memo.ru/ru-ru/history-of-repressions-and-protest/victims/obshie-bazy-zhertv-repressij/>>.

¹⁸ On a nationwide scale, the competition ceased to be held in 2021 due to governmental persecution of the Memorial Society. However, certain regional branches of Memorial Society, notably the Perm branch, persisted in organising and conducting the competition until the summer of 2023. The competition’s archive and numerous publications related to its activities are preserved on the “History Lessons” website: <<https://urokiistorii.ru>>.

¹⁹ It is indicative that later, Chechnya became the first region in Russia where authorities initiated a campaign against this “inconvenient” memory. The initial target of Ramzan Kadyrov’s administration was a memorial date associated with the deportation of the Chechen and Ingush peoples: 23 February (coinciding with the date of one of Russia’s annual military holidays). In 2011, by Kadyrov’s decree, official events related to the deportation were shifted to 10 May (the anniversary of the burial of Ahmad Kadyrov, the father of the current Chechen president). Following Kadyrov’s example, the authorities of Ingushetia also moved the memorial date to 24 February in 2014. In February 2014, Kadyrov’s administration liquidated the grassroots memorial commemorating the victims of the Chechen deportation in Grozny. See: Murad Magomadov, “Memorial v Groznom: likvidacija pamiati chechenskogo Naroda”, in: *BBC News*, 20-02-2014, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/blogs/2014/02/140220_blog_caucasus_chechnya_deportation>, [2024-01-15].

²⁰ See the photo and the description of the monument on the site of the Perm regional branch of the Memorial Society, in: <<http://www.pmem.ru/index.php?id=5454>>.

in 2017), memorials dedicated to victims of repression beyond the borders of national republics were almost always created by groups of civic activists without the involvement of state, or often, even local authorities. This holds true for memorials and monuments of the third type, which commemorate the victims of deportations of Lithuanians and Poles. Typically, they were established by representatives of ethnocultural Polish and Lithuanian communities or, in some cases, places of memory for such communities became a “common” monument to victims of political repression in a particular region (again, exemplified by Perm).

This brief (and by no means exhaustive) overview of the “infrastructure” of the civil memorial space concerns the traumatic past developed by the forces of civil society for the first decades of post-Soviet period. I will conclude by mentioning numerous public museums and memorial complexes dedicated to the history of political repression in the USSR. The most famous among them was the Museum of the History of Political Repressions “Perm-36”, established by civic activists in 1995 on the site of one of the camps of the infamous “Perm Triangle”, where political dissidents were held from 1972 to 1989. In 2014, in the situation of the raised state oppression against the “inconvenient past”²¹ fifty-eight such museums directly devoted to the history of Soviet political repressions established The Association of the Memory Museums.²² Additionally, there are civil commemoration projects such as “Return of Names” (a public reading of the names of victims of Soviet authorities held annually on 29 October, starting in 2007) and “Last Address” (similar in design and concept to the German “Stolpersteine” project, involving the installation of steel memorial plaques on the houses where victims of Soviet political terror lived; the project has been implemented since 2014).²³

The situation underwent a qualitative transformation from 2012, after the mass protests on Bolotnaya square in Moscow, when Russian authorities launched an active struggle for the domain of public history, treating it as a mobilisation “resource”. In this year, two pro-government organisations were established to exert control over historical policy in the country: the first was the Russian Military Historical Society (Rossiyskoye voyenno-istoricheskoye obshchestvo – RVIO) under the leadership of the Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Medinsky. The second was the Russian Historical Society (Russkoye istoricheskoye obshchestvo – RIO), led by Sergey Naryshkin, who was the Chairman of the State Duma at that time. This period witnessed the imposition of a

²¹ The term coined by Nikolai Epple. See his *Neudobnoje proshloje: pamiat o gosudarstvennyh prestuplenijah v Rossiji i drugih stranah*, Moskva: Novoje literaturnoje obozrenie, 2022.

²² The Association continues its activity. See its site: <<http://memorymuseums.ru/members>>.

²³ As of the beginning of 2024, nearly 3,000 plaques of the project have been installed in Russia and beyond. The coordination of “The Last Address” project is managed by an independent foundation of the same name. The information on the principles of project organisation and plaques already installed or planned for installation, is presented on its official website: <<https://www.poslednyadres.ru>>.

statist narrative, advocating that discussions about historical events should exclusively be framed with pride. A declared campaign against the “rewriting of history” ensued, and pro-government “historical” organisations initiated efforts to establish a “unified history textbook”.

This trend intensified from early spring 2014 onwards: appeals to historical events were utilised by pro-Kremlin politicians and media as a means of mobilising the population in the conditions of unleashed armed aggression against Ukraine. Moreover, it was in 2014 that a mass campaign for the “rehabilitation” and public glorification of Stalin became prominent (referred to as the “Stalinist banneriany”, with some earlier manifestations dating back to 2011).²⁴ A little later (from 2016 onwards), monuments to one of the darkest historical figures, Ivan the Terrible, appeared in Russia for the first time in its history, situated in cities such as Oryol, Alexandrov, and Cheboksary. Projected on to historical events, the thesis develops: the state has the right to dispose of people’s lives as it sees fit. In the same year, 2014, pro-government forces carried out a “raider seizure” of the public museum of the history of political repressions, Perm-36 (formerly not only a museum but also a venue for annual mass memory forums and political discussions “Pilorama”). On 5 May 2014, Article 354.1 was introduced into the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. This stipulated penalties for the “rehabilitation of Nazism” which, among other things, includes the “dissemination of knowingly false information about the activities of the USSR during the years of the Second World War”²⁵ (including, for example, information about the close collaboration between the USSR and Nazi Germany from late August 1939 to June 1941).

Nonetheless, post-2014, the resistance against the “statist turn” remained quite intense. In response to the “raider seizure” of the public history domain by pro-Kremlin politicians, professional historians established the Free Historical Association, led by Nikita Sokolov. It was in 2014 that the civil commemoration project for victims of Soviet political repressions, “The Last Address”, was initiated. Existing memorials were supported, and new ones dedicated to the victims of political repressions emerged. An illustrative example is the memorial in Galayshor in the northern part of the Perm Krai, situated in an abandoned cemetery of Lithuanian and Polish “special settlers”. The creation of the memorial was initiated in 2016 by Leonid Ladanov (son of an administrator of the former camp) and his friend Antanas Gurbshnis (son of Lithuanian special settlers). The initiative was realised with active participation from the Perm Memorial Society and Lithuanian

²⁴ Aleksey Kamenskikh, „Vizualizatsia pamiati o politicheskikh repressijah i istoria ‘stalinskoj banneriany’: permskij keis (2014–2015)”, *Lectorium of the Museum of Contemporary Art PERMM*, 15-01-2021, in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWiYc59O5qY&embeds_referring_euri=https%3A%2F%2Fpermm.ru%2F&source_ve_path=Mjg2NjY%2C>, [2024-11-12].

²⁵ *Ugolovnyj Kodeks RF. Statja 354.1 UK RF “Reabilitacija nacizma”*, in: <<https://www.ugolkod.ru/statya-354-1>>.

volunteers. Immediately after the installation of the memorial in Galayshor, a vigorous campaign unfolded around it in the regional media of Perm. Fortunately, during 2016–2017, the matter concluded favourably for the creators of the monument, and Antanas Gurbshnis received a letter of appreciation from the human rights commissioner in the Perm Region.

However, repression against defenders of the “inconvenient” memory intensifies. In December 2016 Yuri Dmitriev, the head of the Karelian branch of the Memorial Society, was arrested. Due to his long-term research and enlightening efforts, the Sandarmokh forest in Karelia – a site of mass executions of inmates from the Solovetsky Special Purpose Camp (Solovetskiy lager' osobogo naznacheniya – SLON), became an important place of memory and mourning. Dmitriev and his colleagues managed to identify the names of almost all the nearly one thousand individuals executed in Sandarmokh.²⁶ Despite a prolonged public campaign for his release (which involved acquittal and subsequent re-arrest, leading to a new criminal prosecution and a sentence of 15 years in a strict-regime colony), Yuri Dmitriev remains in detention. In January 2018, the head of the regional branch of the Memorial Society in Chechnya, Oyub Titiev, was arrested (in June 2019, thanks to a mass campaign in his defence, he was released). Attempts are being made to transform the former Museum of the History of Political Repressions Perm-36 into a “Museum of the History of the USSR Penitentiary System”. Pro-Kremlin historians have attempted to “redesignate” Sandarmokh, claiming that the remains in the Karelian forest are not of Solovetsky camp inmates but of Red Army soldiers executed by the Finns in 1918. A similar “redesignation” effect has been achieved by installing stands in the exposition of the Katyn Memorial Complex, narrating the difficult fate of Red Army soldiers captured by the Polish army in 1920. In the spring of 2020 in Mednoye, near Tver, copper memorial plaques installed in 1991 on the wall of the Tver Medical University, commemorating the Polish officers shot in this building in 1940, were dismantled. During the period spanning the autumn of 2019 to the beginning of 2021, a new wave of persecutions emerged, involving harassment in both regional and federal media, along with searches and legal proceedings. They were targeting the defenders of the memorial commemorating Lithuanian and Polish special settlers in Galyashor – Leonid Ladanov and the staff of the Perm “Memorial” organisation.

A pivotal moment in the changes of the mnemonic regime in current Russia occurred in the winter of 2021–2022. As preparations for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine were underway, Russian authorities sought to carry out a comprehensive purge of the field of memorial culture, targeting any institutions that supported competing historical narratives. The decision of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation led to the liquidation of the

²⁶ See: Irina Flige, *Sandarmokh: Dramaturgija smyslov*, Sankt-Peterburg: Nestor-Istorija, 2019.

International Memorial and the *Human Rights Centre* – two central entities within the network of organisations affiliated with The Memorial Society.²⁷

From the spring of 2023 onwards, we can observe the execution by pro-government forces of an unofficial nationwide campaign to destroy monuments commemorating the victims of Soviet repressions and deportations. These had been established early in memory of the representatives of “unfriendly countries” (in the current official terminology), particularly to Lithuanians and Poles. In April 2023, news emerged of the destruction, using heavy machinery, of a monument dedicated to Polish and Lithuanian exiles in Galyashor. In May, monuments commemorating Stalin-era repression victims among Lithuanians and Poles were demolished in the village of Pivovarikha in the Irkutsk region. In July, a memorial honouring repressed Poles at the Levashovo Memorial Cemetery in Saint Petersburg mysteriously disappeared. From June to September, there was a gradual destruction of the memorial complex dedicated to Polish exiles in Yakutsk. In September, a massive concrete monument dedicated to Poles working in the Gulag mines was destroyed near Vorkuta.

Throughout the country, instances of desecration and destruction of plaques from the “Last Address” project are being reported. In the summer and autumn of 2023, Russian authorities finally implement their long-standing project to introduce a “unified history textbook”. This textbook, edited by Vladimir Medinsky, is distributed to schools nationwide, aimed at achieving objectives more related to “statist indoctrination” than education. In this textbook, all moments in Russian history where state power did not present itself in the best light are either sidestepped or described using legitimising and glorifying formulations. The annexation of the territories of present-day Western Ukraine and Western Belarus in the autumn of 1939 and the seizure of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in 1940 are interpreted in this textbook as the return of territories that “were taken from our country” in 1918–1920. The term “genocide” is used in this textbook only to refer to the actions of forces “unfriendly to us” (the Holocaust carried out by the Nazis “with the support of local collaborators” in the Baltic States and Ukraine; the actions of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army forces against the Polish population of Galicia and Volhynia in 1943–1944).

In the emerging memorial regime, narratives of genocide against the peoples of the former USSR may acquire new functions not previously inherent to them, being employed in internal struggles among representatives of pro-Putin political elites. An example can be found in the statement made by Ramzan Kadyrov (the head of Chechnya) in the

²⁷ The Memorial Society not only organised projects related to commemorative practices but also actively engaged in human rights advocacy. With this, and taking into account the destruction of other oppositional organisations by the Russian authorities (primarily those associated with the activities of the opposition figure Alexej Navalny), the relatively weak level of consolidation within the protest movement at the onset of the Russian military invasion of Ukraine becomes more understandable.

autumn of 2023, opposing Medinsky’s textbook, which essentially justifies the deportation of Chechens and other peoples of the North Caucasus in 1944. As a result of the conflict, the distribution of the new textbook within the territory of Chechnya was halted, and the author of the textbook visited Grozny to apologise for the “mistakes” made during an audience with Kadyrov.

At the same time, under the backdrop of Russia’s war against Ukraine, a new manifestation of the protest potential of the memory of victims of Soviet-era political repression is observed. In January 2023, a residential building in Dnipro was destroyed by a Russian missile. Dozens of monuments to victims of Soviet political repression across Russia alongside monuments and places associated with Ukraine in urban spaces (such as those dedicated to Lesya Ukrainka and Taras Shevchenko), became sites of spontaneous grassroots anti-war memorials expressing grief and solidarity with the Ukrainian people.²⁸

The focus of the Russian authorities on the memory of Soviet political repression victims as a significant arena of “mnemonic battles” continued, even amid the war against Ukraine. This is demonstrated by the decision made by the Russian government on 20 June 2024, to introduce amendments to the State Policy Concept for Commemorating the Victims of Political Repressions. These amendments are so extensive that they effectively eliminate the concept’s practical impact,²⁹ thereby bringing an end to the practice of simulating remembrance of Soviet political terror victims at the official level. These changes to the State Policy Concept were followed by a statement from the Prosecutor General’s Office of the Russian Federation about an unprecedented process of “de-rehabilitation” underway since mid-2022: a review of the cases of political terror victims and the re-affirmation of guilty verdicts once issued by Stalin-era prosecutors.³⁰

Thus, changes affecting one segment of Russia’s contemporary “memorial landscape” – the memory of Soviet-era political repressions – exemplify a growing trend in modern Russia to institutionalise a specific form of statism that legitimises all state actions, past and present, as an official and dominant ideology. A consequence of this process is the marginalisation of memories of state-perpetrated crimes from the relatively recent past, pushing them out of the canon of historical memory.

²⁸ Cultural anthropologist Alexandra Arkhipova refers to this wave of spontaneous anti-war actions as “quiet” or “flower” protests in her research. See: Alexandra Arkhipova, “Empatija kak protest”, *Holod*, 02-02-2023, <<https://holod.media/2023/02/02/flower-protest/>>, [2024-11-12].

²⁹ Detailed analysis of this changes is offered by Boris Vishnevsky, “Memento – shory: V Rossiji utochnili kanony gosudarstvennoj istoricheskoy pamjati: sovetiskije repressii ne byli ‘massovymi’, a amnistii politzegov dali svobodu ‘banderovtsam’”, in: *Novaya Gazeta*, 02-09-2024, <<https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2024/09/02/memento-shory>>, [2024-11-12].

³⁰ Katja Zagvozdina, “Prokuratura za dva goda dobilas otmeny reabilitatsiji bolee chem 4000 chelovek”, in: *Forbes*, 19-09-2024, <<https://www.forbes.ru/society/521510-prokuratura-za-dva-goda-dobilas-otmeny-reabilitacii-bolee-cem-4000-celovek>>, [2024-11-12].

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Aleksej Kamenskich

„Nepatogios praeities“ išstūmimas: sovietmečiu vykdytų represijų ir genocido atmintis dabartinėje Rusijoje

Santrauka

Straipsnyje apžvelgiami posovietinėje Rusijoje vykę atminties politikos, susijusios su sovietiniu laikotarpiu vykdytomis politinėmis represijomis, pokyčiai, apžvelgiant laikotarpį nuo XX a. dešimtojo dešimtmečio pradžios iki šių dienų. Remdamasis Jano Kubiko ir Michaelio Bernhardo pasiūlyta atminties politikos studijų metodologija bei Aleidos Assmann kultūrinės atminties „kanono“ ir „archyvo“ koncepcijomis, autorius nagrinėja šio Rusijos „atminties kraštovaizdžio“ segmento pokyčių dinamiką, veikiančią politinių poslinkių, susijusių su agresyviais 2014–2022 m. Rusijos vadovybės veiksmais dėl atminties apie politinius valstybės nusikaltimus išstūmimo iš viešosios erdvės kaip politinio elito kovos su priešingai teigiančia „kontratmintimi“ forma. Ypatingas dėmesys skiriamas pokyčiams, vykstantiems sovietinių politinių represijų atminties politikoje nuo Rusijos visapusiškos invazijos į Ukrainą pradžios.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: sovietinės politinės represijos, atminties politika, mnemoniniai veikėjai, „Memorial“ draugija.