

AFTERWORD

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Much of what happened in the Gulag has been left unrecorded, unexamined, and unexpiated. The historian David Satter recently made the assertion that “Russia today is haunted by words that have been left unsaid” (2013:111). This important special issue of *Laboratorium* on the Gulag goes a considerable way towards correcting this lacuna.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s emblematic coupling of the incarcerations on Solovetskii Islands with Auschwitz draws our attention to the similar brutal activities in these morally close but geographically far-removed sites. Solzhenitsyn writes of how “the ovens of the Arctic Auschwitz had been lit right there” ([1973] 1975:45). However, the subsequent visibility and representation of these sites, their posthumous existence, if you like, have been very different. While the Soviets liberated Auschwitz, thus revealing to the world what had gone on there, no such revelatory liberation happened for the inmates of the Gulag camps. Indeed, the liberation of the one could be said to have promoted the unfettered development of the other. Remembering one atrocity is often an excuse for neglecting others (Skultans 2014).

Not only was physical distance a barrier to revelation but, more importantly, the lack of a visual record of Gulag atrocities and the willingness of Western visitors to be duped helped to contribute to the unreal status of these places and activities. Anthropologist Piers Vitebsky has stated that Siberia was for his family a catastrophe rather than a place (2005:vii–xi). A prime example of this readiness to be duped is provided by US Vice President Henry A. Wallace’s visit to Kolyma in June 1944. His book *Soviet Asia Mission* (Wallace and Steiger 1946), published two years later, makes ironic reading describing as it does the strong physique of the workers and their excellent pay and working conditions. A review in the *Far Eastern Survey* describes it as “an important contribution to the library of books-for-world-peace” (Watson 1946:287). Indeed, the massive movement of political prisoners by sea (some one million between 1932 and 1953) from Vladivostok to Kolyma was carried out with the help of the ship *Indigirka*, constructed in Wisconsin and sold to the NKVD in 1938. The naval historian Martin James Bollinger writes that “the West was a vital but unwitting accomplice in the Kolyma transport operation” (2003:119). Even less excusable is the collaboration of writers like Maxim Gorky, who on a visit to Solovki prison camp in June 1929 chose to ignore the testimony of a fourteen-year-old boy. This boy spent an hour alone with Gorky describing the terrible tortures that were in-

flicted upon inmates. Gorky later described the prison conditions as remarkably good. The boy was shot immediately after Gorky's departure (Solzhenitsyn [1973] 1975:62–63). As Anne Applebaum has argued, the complicity of the West in not admitting the moral awfulness of the Gulag continues in such traditions as the sale of Soviet military memorabilia to tourists (2003:5–6).

These episodes from the Gulag past remind us of the malleability of the past and the power of the victors to determine what is to be included and excluded from history. The term “memory wars,” coined in a different context, is such an apt description of historical practice, none more so than Soviet historical practice (Crews 1995). Memory is the only one of our mental functions that we accept as normal when it malfunctions (Warnock 1987). Its later collective shaping to conform to political dispositions and requirements is an extension of this malfunctioning.

The visual neglect of the Gulag is in huge contrast to the obsessive photographing of the Holocaust victims in a parody of earlier anthropometric studies. Janina Struk (2004) has brought to our attention the peculiar interest that the guards of the concentration camps had in photographing the prison inmates in obscene and repetitive order at the time of their admission and shortly before death. These photographs have parted company from their original owners, but they nevertheless promote a moral revulsion against the atrocities of the Holocaust. But the question remains: Do a visual record and the aestheticization of experience heal, or can they harm and exploit, as Struk suggests? The absence of such a visual record in the case of the Gulag accentuates the importance of this issue. At its best, literary historical and ethnographic writing has a visual impact. We can visualize the movement of prisoners in Vorkuta between prison and town (Barenberg, this issue). We feel the loss of bearings of young women sent to prisons thousands of miles from their homes (Pallot, this issue). Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby's article on the holy spring (Rouhier-Willoughby, this issue) shifts our attention to the malleability of interpretations of the past. The visibility of holy springs allows for an interpretation of the Gulag which confines attention to the repression of the Russian Orthodox Church and promotes the invisibility of other categories of repressed peoples.

These issues regarding the importance of leaving a record and making atrocity visible raise a number of painful questions regarding the nature of compassion and moral sensibility. Do collective traumas develop our moral sensibility, or can they work in the opposite direction by blunting moral responsiveness? In writing about Aristotle's conception of tragedy, Martha Nussbaum introduces the term “the social benefits of tragedy” (1992:267). Pity works both to pinpoint what is of value in human life and to connect one to others. Thus she writes: “And in granting pity to another, the pitier acknowledges that these things indeed have importance” (266). And later, “Thus in pity the human characters draw close to the one who suffers, acknowledging that their own possibilities are similar, and that both together live in a world of terrible reversals, in which the difference between pitier and pitied is a matter far more of luck than of deliberate action” (267). In a similar vein Jeffrey Alexander argues that “collective traumas have no geographical or cultural limitation” and that they open up new possibilities of moral sensibility and universalism (2004:27).

However, there is an economy of pity and moral attention. Elizabeth Spelman points out that “[n]ot everyone’s pain deserves notice” (1997:47). Spelman also has a very different interpretation of pity from Nussbaum’s: “In pity one holds oneself apart from the afflicted person and their suffering thinking of it as something that defines the person as fundamentally different from oneself” (120). The obsessive photographing of the starving prisoners in the Holocaust could be one mechanism whereby this otherness was reinforced. Ivan Peshkov’s article, by contrast, introduces us to a world where being a criminal prisoner overrides ethnic differences and overcomes “othering” (Peshkov, this issue). Perhaps compassion is only possible in certain specified and favorable social circumstances as a recent volume on the subject argues (Berlant 2004). For example, the prison ethos with its cruel routines might be one setting in which a certain degree of compassion is made room for. So how can we determine the nature and uses of Gulag narratives? Do they restrict or enlarge our concepts of human identity and experience? Or can they do both? Do they promote understanding or do they lend themselves to abuse? Is compassion a universally accessible human attribute?

The Italian oral historian Luisa Passerini in her introduction to a volume on *Memory and Totalitarianism* writes: “We can remember only thanks to the fact that somebody has remembered before us, that other people in the past have challenged death and terror on the basis of their memory. Remembering has to be conceived as a highly inter-subjective relationship” (1992:2). But, of course, this raises the question of how memory ever gets started. There has to be someone, a free spirit if you like, who is able to remember without the help of others. We have several well-known examples of such free spirits from Soviet Russia, among them the poet Anna Akhmatova, the physicist Andrei Sakharov, and of course the writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. There are also many less famous examples. Ukrainian psychiatrist Semen Gluzman refused to diagnose dissident General Petr Grigorenko as mentally ill and was himself sentenced to seven years in a labor camp. In the 1970s Gluzman distributed a manual in samizdat form to help political prisoners survive forced psychiatric treatment. This was later printed in New York by the firm Kessel and Esser (Bonnie 2001). However, in a totalitarian state only one version of the past is permitted. And yet the possibility of dissident thought challenges the dominant concepts of social memory, and dissident achievements return us to the nonacademic, everyday understandings of memory as being connected to individual experience and moral values.

The history of the Gulag offers a homeland for some of the most important moral concepts and arguments to have been developed in the last century. They provide a testing ground for the philosophy of utilitarianism associated with John Stuart Mill and the principle of the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Bernard Williams has argued that a philosophy that judges actions solely by their consequences misses out on the importance of integrity in human life. The famous example which Williams gives is of an explorer called Jim arriving in a South American town to be confronted by twenty Amazonian natives trussed up and about to be shot. Their captor tells Jim that in honor of his arrival he will let nineteen Indians go free if Jim shoots one of them. According to a utilitarian perspective, Jim should shoot one. However,

there is something morally unsettling about this position, in that it conflates active killing with the witnessing of killing (Smart and Williams 1974:93–100). We can make use of this example to better evaluate the history of the Gulag. No matter what might be the results of calculations of total well-being in the Soviet Union, should such calculations be practicable, even if it could be shown that the work of Gulag prisoners, for example in building the hospital in Vorkuta promoted the gross amount of social beatitude, there is clearly something very wrong with this argument.

The history of the Gulag is also threaded through with what Williams (1981) calls moral luck. This is not just about being in the wrong place at the wrong time, although that was clearly true for many Soviet citizens. But it is also about the way in which ultimate moral evaluations depend upon factors outside morality. Williams gives us the example of the painter Paul Gauguin to show how the evaluation of moral choices depends very much on outcome. In Gauguin's case, his abandonment of wife and children to develop his art in the South Seas would have acquired a far more negative meaning had his art not succeeded (Williams 1981:26–27). So too, in the eyes of Soviet citizens, Joseph Stalin's responsibility for Gulag deaths is attenuated not only by his victory in World War II but also by the myth of Stalin's golden age. Postwar surveys of social attitudes portray Stalin as having promoted work discipline, comradeship, cheerfulness, and sincerity (Koposov 2011:176).

Different historical epochs make available different cultural frames or imaginaries for life and, in particular, for sorrow, and these are just as important as the contingencies and afflictions of individual lives. Leona Toker (2000) has documented the importance of finding the right words or literary form for Gulag survivors. Olga Ulturgasheva (2012) demonstrates the connections between adolescents' narrative projections of a personal future and collective mythical structures of the Eveny. The precariousness of moving vast distances away from their families and childhood environments is made safer by connecting with the shaman's flight. This is not to argue that such imaginaries have the same significance for every member of a society. As Claudia Strauss argues, we need to distinguish between "socially shared symbols, individual's specific imaginaries, and the realities beyond the symbol" (2006:329). This issue of *Laboratorium* reminds us of the importance of a "imaginaries of real people, not the imaginaries of imagined people" (339). It reminds us of the changing boundaries of communities of pain and warns us of our own frailty as moral agents.

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