

FROM THE SOLOVKI TO BUTOVO: HOW THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH APPROPRIATES THE MEMORY OF THE REPRESSIONS. *Summary*

Veronika Dorman

In Russia today, keeping the memory of the Soviet regime's political repressions alive is a struggle waged by a few in the face of general indifference. In addition to groups who have traditionally championed this cause, such as human rights activists and victims of the repressions, Orthodox believers are now actively involved, and the Russian Orthodox Church is increasingly monopolizing commemorative activities. This tendency is unsurprising given the growing role of Orthodoxy in Russian society. The Church is an obvious framework for identity formation: it is heir to the Byzantine tradition that links religious confession with national identity; as an eminent victim of the Revolution, it channels representations of the pre-revolutionary past; it is the only institution spanning the entire territory of the former USSR; and finally, it is the designated guardian of mores, customs, and morals in Russia today. Nevertheless, the eminent commemorative role that the Church claims for itself is part of a larger process of privatization of memory. Today, commemoration matters to those who feel directly concerned in some way by the memory of the repressions. The duty to remember is seen as a function of closeness—physical or symbolic, real or imagined—to the victims.

This study is based on fieldwork carried out in the spring of 2008, retracing the steps of a procession that carried a giant cross from the Solovetsky archipelago in the White Sea to the Butovo firing range near Moscow, along canals dug by Gulag prisoners. This procession was the only large-scale, non-local commemorative event to take place in 2007, the 70th anniversary year of the purges of 1937. My aim was to interrogate the relationship between this crucession and the places it through which it passed.

The Solovetsky monastery remains the uncontested central symbol of the Gulag; its laboratory and the mass grave at Butovo, which holds the remains of over 20,000 people executed in 1937–38, has come to be seen as the other Russian Calvary. In contrast, the memory of the enormous Volgolag and Dmitlag forced labor camps is eclipsed by the even more monumental Rybinsk Reservoir and Moscow Canal that

they served to build. The procession of the summer of 2007 aimed to address this gap. The declared ambition of the Butovo pilgrims, or *Butovtsy*, was to establish landmarks in order to place the successive locations of Stalin's repressions on the same level, thus contributing to a complete and adequate representation of the horrors of totalitarianism.

"*Lieux de mémoire* are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration," Pierre Nora writes in *Realms of Memory*. The act of *placing* memory, he stresses, is provoked by our fear of breaking the continuity with a mythified past that we see as our sacred origin. "Our perception of the past is the *vehement appropriation* of that which we know no longer belongs to us." Concerning my object of inquiry, however, would it not be more appropriate to say "that which we know has never belonged to us"? A different process seems to be at work in attempts to record the memory of the repressions. The point is not so much to re-establish a relationship of possession than to establish one. The effort is more about appropriating that which has never belonged to one than about re-appropriating that which has been lost. The memory of the repressions must be created rather than maintained. Since it is not derived from a tradition and does not correspond to a historical object clearly situated in space and time, this *lieu de mémoire* is a purely potential part of the overall memory of the Soviet past in Russia—a creation, in the literal sense. The collective subject of remembrance could only be established as a subject through the act of embodying, in such a place, its will to remember.

THE SOLOVKI-BUTOVO PROCESSION: ORIGINS AND EXECUTION

The project of marking the ground of Butovo with a sacred symbol from the Solovki was originally intended as a way of commemorating all the victims of Stalinism by way of a typically Orthodox monument. The idea of using the canals that link the White Sea to Moscow (initially suggested for technical reasons) transformed a route into a crucection. The idea of adding a traveling exhibit to the procession was an afterthought. It came to be seen as an opportunity to tell the story of the Solovki and Butovo, of the channels and construction sites, of the martyrs and the cross. The common theme chosen by the resident historian of the Solovki, Antonina Sochina, and the chronicler of Butovo, Lidiia Golovkova, the two main authors of the exhibit, were the victims, and specifically those prisoners who followed all the "stations of the cross": imprisoned at the Solovki, exploited at the canals, and executed at Butovo.

THE CROSS IN PROCESSION: INSCRIBING MODERN COMMEMORATION INTO TRADITION

In the Orthodox tradition, the cross functions as a seal of baptism, able to sanctify even physical territories of memory simply by covering them. At the Solovki, the difficult relationship between the repressive past and the commemorative present is illustrated by the massive re-erection of monumental crosses, an old Northern

Russian tradition. The archipelago had over 3,000 such crosses before the Revolution; monks and pilgrims built them in order to mark the place of a vision or miracle. Today, crosses made by woodcutter Georgii Kozhokar' are invested with a new significance: they are funereal symbols and topographical indicators of the common graves that dot the archipelago. Homage is paid to the past by restoring and modifying a tradition in a way that seem to cancel out the break in chronology. The act of erecting such a cross at the Butovo firing range in order to link it to the archipelago shows that the two sites compete both in horror and in sanctity. Unlike at the Solovki, however, at Butovo the point is not to restore a sacred monument to old times that the revolution sought to annihilate. The appearance of churches—first a wooden chapel, then a stone church—marks the birth of an Orthodox site not linked to any past that could be revived.

Igor' Gar'kavyi, a historian and Butovo parishioner, attempts to link the firing range to ancient Russian traditions of mass burial. However, putting post-Soviet Russia on a par with medieval Russia trivializes the totalitarian experience. Can the Stalinist mass graves be compared to the common graves that were dug at the edges of battlegrounds to bury the poor and the vagabond outside the towns? Stalinist mass graves represented an absolute novelty in the history of mass burial, and not only because of the totally new nature of the purges. There were victims of sixty nationalities and of all kinds of ethnic, religious, and social origins. Yet the proportional predominance of Russians, and of Orthodox Christians among them, as well as the current supremacy of the Russian Orthodox Church, "naturally" turned the site into a Russian Orthodox memorial. Hence the idea to link Butovo to the tradition of "churches on spilt blood."

In planning the procession, Gar'kavyi also sought to find a link with ancient practices. He mentions the tradition of processions of pilgrims that once traveled across Russia carrying sacred relics, miraculous icons, or saints' bones. In 1652, Metropolitan Nikon traveled from the Solovki to Moscow with some of the relics of Saint Philipp (hegumen of the Solovetsky monastery, then Metropolitan of Moscow, executed by Ivan the Terrible), using the existing waterways and everywhere holding services of repentance and commemoration. The reference to this period of Russian history underscores the position of those most active in the memorialization of Butovo: by emulating the past, they seek to repent in the sole way that they believe can assure a serene future.

SOCIETY AND THE PROCESSION: BETWEEN DEFERENCE AND INDIFFERENCE

At the *Butovtsy's* invitation, monks from the Solovetsky monastery participated in the procession. The state-owned museum, however, refused to take part in this overly religious adventure. At the other end, no Moscow-based human rights organization took part in the project; *Memorial* was present in observer status. In the summer of 2007, the Church was the main actor in the commemoration of the Terror, at least in terms of public visibility.

At each station, Father Kirill Kaleda, priest of the Butovo parish (and grandson of Vladimir Ambartsumov, who was executed at Butovo in 1937) held a joint service with local priests who came to meet him with their parishioners. The procession was spontaneously welcomed due to its Church affiliation. Nevertheless, information about it was scarce, it attracted few people and failed to become much more than a quasi-private event. Only when it approached Moscow did the wave swell. For a few days, the news cycle was full of images of the procession. Butovo entered public discourse.

THE CONSECRATION OF A "SITE OF MEMORY"?

On August 7, the cross was erected next to the Church of the Resurrection, at the edge of the firing range. However, it was only really consecrated two months later. On October 30 (the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repression), President Putin, Moscow regional governor Boris Gromov, and Human Rights Commissioner Vladimir Lukin visited the firing range for a religious service held by Patriarch Alexis II. This was the first time that the head of the Church was present in Butovo on October 30, a secular date *par excellence*. It was also the first time that a head of state solemnly and officially took part in a commemorative ceremony for the victims of Soviet repressions.

The response was mixed. Of course the event was above all a victory for the *Butovtsy*, the best possible sign that their memorial was recognized and promoted from local to "metropolitan" rank. The joint presence of the state, the Church, and the Office of the Human Rights Commissioner also seemed to indicate that the duty to remember was generally recognized. However, there was also doubt as to the intentions and motivation behind the president's visit. Both religious and *Memorial* activists judged that he could not have ignored the 70th anniversary of 1937 without losing face.

The union of Church and state under the Solovki cross at the Butovo firing range could have embodied that long-awaited moment when popular memory (the memory of the victims and their families) meets official memory (joint recognition by the heads of the two institutions). However, despite media attention to this historic date, there is still no up-to-date legal framework for commemorating the repressions. However, the erection of the monumental cross at the firing range caused an immediate surge in visits to the site. The flow of visitors consists of pilgrims of memory as well as patrons of piety, and the latter appear to be in a majority. Despite the Butovo memorial activists' proclaimed intention to commemorate all victims of the Terror indiscriminately, Butovo is becoming not simply a religious, but an Orthodox memorial.

LITURGICAL COMMEMORATION: A SELECTIVE MEMORY?

The rising number of martyr canonizations has been accompanied by a progressive and discreet transfer of responsibility for commemorative affairs from the state to the Orthodox Church. This has led to the dominance of a particular kind of memory

of the repressions, one that singles out among the millions of victims those who died for their Orthodox faith. At “mixed” sites, the new martyrs are usually overrepresented, and religious commemoration tends to take pride of place. Secular organizations have been alarmed by these developments. The most obvious result of this polemic has been to divide memory activists into a secular and a religious camp. The former view the Gulag as a political fact and seek legal recognition for the repressions, if possible accompanied by material reparations. The latter view the Gulag as a metaphysical fact and seek symbolic recognition of martyrdom, accompanied by the construction of crosses and churches. The first group consists of former victims and dissidents who are now members of non-governmental organizations critical of the state, and believe that memory is an inalienable human right as well as a general civic duty. The second group, consisting largely of recent converts who have joined newly revived parishes, seek state support and turn to memory as a new source of identity.

By charting a course from the Solovki to Butovo, members of the procession not only established a spatial link, but also suggested a chronology of the Gulag. The various places they passed are stations in both space and time as well as in the development of the camp system from experiment to extermination. In addition, the authors of the project sought to underline specific continuities by presenting profiles of those prisoners who followed the stations from the Calvary of the Solovki to the Butovo death fields.

In the wake of the procession, the Butovo firing range has become a *lieu de mémoire*—a place where people fight oblivion by materializing the past and constantly recreating an awareness of it. Since the 70th anniversary of the Terror, it has been made into a condensed chronicle of the violence of the Communist regime. From an anonymous and invisible mass grave, it has become a cemetery with a thousand names. The memorial is crowned by the cross transported from the original site of the Gulag in order to merge the “two Calvaries” into one. By following Stalin’s canals before dropping anchor in the capital, by unearthing in the archives the names of those who spent time at the Solovki to then meet their death at Butovo, the procession lifted the firing range from its status as a communal grave of regional importance, such as exist in all big Russian cities. The events of 2007 brought back to light the variety of national, ethnic, social, professional origins, and age groups of the victims, which make Butovo into a veritable compendium of the purges and a site of memory of the repressions, originating “with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally” (Nora).

But what kind of a site is this, and what kind of memory does it embody? While the Butovo memorial has all the features of a memorial to the repressions, it seems to signify above all the impossibility to record this memory in Russia today. This has to do with the general context: Russia today is still at a stage when different memories are competing with each other. In the absence of a strong desire, be it on

the part of the state or of society, to create Russian sites of memory, the existing ones serve this purpose only potentially, in embryonic or contradictory fashion. But there is also a more circumstantial reason. Butovo is a site of overdetermination for the Church (what should it do about the large numbers of Orthodox clergy and believers in the mass graves of the NKVD?) and of indeterminacy for the state (how should it deal with the crimes of Communism?). Thus a crucial element in its establishment as a “site of memory” is lacking: an institutional designation that would ensure that it is accepted as such. At the moment, the state is neither able nor willing to record the memory of the purges, be it at Butovo or elsewhere, and to establish a site of commemoration, of official pilgrimage. As for the Church, in order to become the repository of national memory, it would need to proclaim loudly that it was persecuted by the Bolshevik state, and open up its commemorative practices more explicitly to all victims of the Communist regime, without claiming a monopoly on lands which, by virtue of what they contain, belong to all.

Translated from the French by Mischa Gabowitsch