

# THE GULAG RECLAIMED AS SACRED SPACE: THE NEGOTIATION OF MEMORY AT THE HOLY SPRING OF ISKITIM

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*Research for this article was supported by the University of Kentucky College of Arts and Sciences and by a Fulbright grant.*

**This article examines narratives about the Holy Spring of Iskitim gathered from visitors to the spring and from two local priests as well as members of their congregation. The holy spring is located on the site of the former Gulag quarry in the town of Lozhok in the Iskitim region. According to the most common folk belief, the spring is holy as a result of the execution of forty religious martyrs on this site by prison guards. These vernacular beliefs about the spring serve to reframe regional memory about the Gulag as well as local identity in the postsocialist context. The analysis relies on psychological, historical, anthropological, and folklore research on the role of narrative in coping with the memory of traumatic events.**

**Keywords:** Holy Spring; Vernacular Religion; Narrative Memory and Identity

*“Snizu griaz’, sverkhu dym, eto gorod Iskitim”* (Dirt underfoot, smoke overhead, that’s the city of Iskitim), so goes one variant of a local folk rhyme about the city of Iskitim. Iskitim is a drab, Soviet-era industrial city in western Siberia, located some 50 kilometers from the largest city in this part of the country, Novosibirsk. Despite, as the rhyme above indicates, its rather grim past and lackluster reputation, Iskitim is now associated with one of the most important religious sites in western Siberia. The city is home to the Cathedral of the Life-Bearing Spring, founded in 2002 and housed in a former Soviet-era store. The building has evolved steadily over the years from a small nave and dining area, when the store was still in operation, to a full-blown church. The Russian Orthodox Church now owns the entire building, which features a large gathering area for religious education and celebrations, an office for the priest Father Igor’ Zatokin, as well as a larger area for worship. The church was named in honor of a holy spring in the Iskitim region located about three kilometers away in the town of Lozhok.

Lozhok itself was once the site of a Gulag camp, Otdel'nyi lagernyi punkt no. 4 Siblaga (OLP-4). The Lozhok camp was in operation from 1929 to 1956 and consisted of a quarry where prisoners mined lime, gravel, and limestone for use in construction projects across the USSR (Applebaum 2003:247; Zatolokin 2007:17, 25). The holy spring on this site thus intersects with various aspects of the local past, from the Soviet-era prison camp system to the country's focus on industrialization and scholarly achievement, represented respectively by Lozhok, Iskitim, and Akademgorodok, the scientific research center to the east of Novosibirsk which lies between that city and Iskitim. In addition, the holy spring clearly has ties to conceptions about religious faith, including retention of faith through the period of official atheism, the resurgence of faith in Russian Orthodoxy in the postsocialist era, and, finally, to vernacular religion, since it was apparently local laywomen who originally proclaimed the spring to be holy. As Elena V.,<sup>1</sup> who moved to the area in 1959, reported about an experience not long after she had arrived,

I went out for lunch. A whole trail of *babushkas* comes walking along.... A whole trail of little, old *babushkas*. Some with bottles. It amazed me that one is carrying a mug, and she's already exhausted, the mug is half full of water, half had poured out. I say, "*Babushkas*, where are you coming from?" ... And she..., they say, "From the holy spring." And I say, "How do you know that it's holy?" "It's even written about in the Gospels that it's holy."<sup>2</sup>

In addition, it has become a site of regional pilgrimage, associated with local pride; as one resident of Novosibirsk said, "You cannot imagine how wonderful it is to have a religious site in our own region." As a result, the spring itself is a complex phenomenon, fraught with various aspects of local memory of the Soviet Russian past and the creation of identity through that lens. As Alexander Panchenko states in his study of sacred sites in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras:

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<sup>1</sup> All the interviews and narratives about the spring cited in this article were recorded by the author at the Cathedral of the Life-Bearing Spring or at the holy spring in Iskitim in August 2013. I am particularly interested in tracing the history of the spring and its conceptions at various times among the local populace. As a result, formal interviews for this project began with the oldest living generation of area residents who remembered the camp while it had been active, namely working class women born between the late 1920s and 1950s, as well as with two local priests. Thus the conclusions in this article relate to this particular group of the local populace. Due to the lower life expectancies for men in Russia, I was only able to speak to women of this age group. Each formal interview lasted roughly 45 minutes to an hour. I focused on active members of the congregation as well as visitors to the spring on the day I was conducting the more formal interviews. Because the latter interviews were impromptu, with people moving in and out of the interview setting while going about their own business, it was not always possible to get complete biographical information from each of those interlocutors.

<sup>2</sup> Official church recognition of the holy spring began in 1986, when Father Valentin Biriukov, a local priest, returned to his native Siberia from his parish in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. His friend told him about the holy spring. He stated that he jumped into the intensely cold water (even though it was a hot summer) and, when he emerged, his body was suffused with warmth, so that he knew that this was a sacred site.

After a holy place comes to communal possession, its symbolic meaning becomes more complicated and reflected in a wide range of narratives and ritual practices. Even at this level, the place can be a matter of competition between various families and/or ritual specialists.... The types of competition can vary from concurrence of various plots or motifs of narratives (both memorates and fabulates) and other forms of ritual behaviour related to a certain shrine, to contradiction of belief and disbelief narratives, worship and sacrilege. (2012a:48–49)

The narratives I collected about the Holy Spring of Iskitim in the form of legends and oral histories reflect just such competition among doctrinal Orthodoxy, vernacular Orthodoxy, and Soviet history and ideology. Different groups draw on various aspects of these sources to create their narratives and to construct their identities through their lens and to reconceptualize their memory of the Gulag past.

The literature on the memory of traumatic events and the sites where they took place is extensive and varied. While much work has focused on the Holocaust (Felman and Laub 1992; Hirsch 2012), scholars have also addressed trauma and memory in the United States after the Oklahoma City bombing and attacks on September 11, 2001 (Sturken 2007), and in post–World War II Japan (Takenaka 2009). Vieda Skultans (1998) and Olga Ulturgasheva (2012) have recently explored memories of the Gulag in the postsocialist period among the Latvians and Eveny. While none of these works entirely encapsulates the situation of the Lozhok holy spring, their insights will allow us to explore the role the spring has in construction of Gulag memory in this region.

## THE LEGEND OF THE HOLY SPRING OF ISKITIM

I will begin with an overview of the folk legends surrounding the holy spring that have led to its conceptualization as a sacred site. The legend of the holy spring, like any legend, has several variants. The first, and most common, is the story that forty “white and black” religious figures, that is priests (“white”) and monks (“black”), were killed on this site by prison guards at some point during the camp’s existence. In some versions, the religious were shot; while in others, they were buried alive. As is typical in legend texts, no specific date for this event is ever mentioned in the narratives I have collected. The number forty is noteworthy here, as it has a mystical quality within Russian Orthodoxy, being associated with the number of days it takes the soul to journey to or from the land of the dead, the number of days of Christ’s torment and of the flood, and the number of the martyrs killed for their faith at Sebaste, an official church holiday. Thus, it has resonance both in vernacular belief and in official doctrine. In essence, the legend conveys that the martyrdom of these religious figures at the hands of guards representing an atheist state caused the spring to become sacred.

Father Igor’ Zatolokin, the local priest who since 2004 has been spearheading the construction of a memorial park at the site of the spring, including a cathedral dedicated to the New Russian Martyrs and Confessors (an order of saints including religious martyrs killed during the Soviet era, the most prominent being Nicholas II

and his family), writes that it is unlikely that such an event would have occurred during the years in question. As he notes (Zatolokin 2007:21–22), such executions were not unheard of during the period of the Civil War between 1917 and 1923, but the camp opened long after that time.<sup>3</sup> Due to the popularity of his book among locals and certainly his interaction with his flock, his perspective has seemingly started to affect the legend itself. In the summer of 2013 I heard other versions of the legend that incorporate his view. Marina V., a former cook who now works at the icon kiosk on the site of the spring, stated that the site was holy simply because there had been a Gulag on that site, an interpretation in keeping with the priest's own contention that the suffering of the dead and prayers for the redemption of their souls have resulted in the miraculous spring—a trope that is central to many lay narratives as well, as we will see. As Father Igor' also told me,

This freshwater spring has always been associated with people's suffering. You have those [stories about] forty martyrs, the shootings, and all. But it seems to me that it [the spring's holiness] is connected primarily with the camp, which was here during the times of repression, which were intense in our region.<sup>4</sup>

Given that Marina V. is closely associated with the church, it is not surprising that she echoes its "official" position. However, a visitor to the spring, Ekaterina I., presented another version in which 28 to 30 priests had been buried alive on the hill above the spring. Marina V. also supported Ekaterina I.'s claim, despite the fact that she had already ascribed the origin of the holy spring to the Gulag alone. Anna F., whose uncle died in the camp, reported that former prisoners told her that "30 or 40 *sviatye* [saints]" had died there, but she was unable to give any additional details on the cause of their deaths.

What is significant about the legend of the holy spring at Lozhok, regardless of the variant, is the association between religious dead and the site. While it is clear that untold numbers of people, believers or not, died in the camp, in the local imagination the site is sacred because of the religious victims. Despite the fact that Father Igor' himself doubts this version of the past and espouses his own official, historical version in print, in public interviews, and from the pulpit, the core of the legend persists in the local oral tradition. In my view, this persistent belief is the key to understanding how the memory of the Gulag in this region is being (or has been) reframed in the postsocialist era.

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<sup>3</sup> However, his conclusion is contradicted by other historical records. Panchenko (2012b:322) discusses mass killings and arrests of priests in 1933–1938. In Novgorod, for example, more than 500 priests were arrested or executed in that period. However, no extant documents about this event have been discovered thus far, so that Father Igor' has been reluctant to substantiate this claim. He does note that camp records show that members of the clergy were indeed imprisoned there.

<sup>4</sup> Father Valentin Biriukov concurs with the view that the spring is holy because of the camp. He believes that prisoners who could no longer work were shot near the spring, but not that they were necessarily members of the clergy.

## REFRAMING THE MEMORY OF TRAUMA THROUGH NARRATIVE

Memory of trauma, whether memory of personal experience or narrated memory of that trauma to subsequent generations, demands exposure, perhaps even against the narrator's will. As Judith Herman argues,

The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness.... Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work. Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told.... Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites for the restoration of social order and for the healing of individual victims. (1992:1)

In the Soviet context, much of the Gulag past was suppressed and not dealt with openly in any meaningful fashion until the fall of the USSR. As a result, people were unable to narrate their experiences publicly, which, in Herman's view, restricted both the "restoration of social order" and "healing" for victims. In her study of "post-memory" Marianne Hirsch states that the practice of erasure inhibits memory at both the individual level and at the societal level: "Both embodied communicative memory and institutionalized cultural memory would be severely impaired by traumatic experience. They would be compromised as well by the erasures of records, such as those perpetrated by totalitarian regimes" (2012:33).

Victims and witnesses are thus driven to tell their tales. However, this desire has been at odds with the social institutions that attempted to suppress those memories, due to their political and social implications. This situation has changed, to some extent, in the postsocialist era, as a result of the activities of Memorial, a Russian human rights group dedicated to commemoration and rehabilitation of Gulag victims, and of local memorials such as the complex at the holy spring in Iskitim. However, there is still significant resistance to dealing with the memory and history of the Gulag within contemporary Russia more broadly. Therefore, it is particularly important to document how local narratives about the spring are engaging with the past and how they determine local conceptions, at least, of this period in Soviet Russian history.

Skultans (1998) provides a compelling case for the role of narrative in reestablishing meaning and identity among Latvians who had been sent into exile to the Gulag. While the situation for these people is not entirely parallel to the Russians in this portion of Siberia (as we will see below), their narratives perform a similar function, I would argue. Skultans contends that "narrators attempt to compensate for biographical disruption by restoring unity and coherence to narrated lives. The breakdown of the everyday structures of living creates a need to reconstitute meaning in story telling" (1998:26). In my view, the narratives about the past for these Siberians serve a similar purpose. The upheavals of World War II and their experiences of this Gulag disrupted their biographies as well, even if not in the same way as it did for the Latvians, given the vastly different sociocultural

contexts. Nevertheless, (re)telling the narratives now helps to rebuild a sense of who these women were as (Soviet) Russians and as individuals and citizens of the nation.

Of particular import is the fact that these stories are characterized by formulas, like all folk narratives. Skultans observed a similar phenomenon in the stories she collected, noting that “a reading of the narratives suggests the notion of pre-fabricated discourse. This consists of ‘verbal formulas—conventional phrases, idiomatic expressions, even whole sentences—that we have heard and used many times before’” (1998:49, citing Smith 1979:60–61). These narrative patterns indicate that the tellers are connecting to what Hirsch calls “institutionalized cultural memory” about the periods of World War II and the Gulag. When asked to discuss the past history of the spring and its connection to the Gulag, the great majority of my interlocutors would inevitably shift to a series of seemingly fixed narrative patterns, often unrelated to the Gulag or spring themselves. They included three basic topics: characterizations of this particular Gulag in the local imagination, the difficulties of their youth (as a result of World War II), and being members of a devout Orthodox family within an atheist state. At first blush, a collector focusing on the holy spring might be annoyed with such digressions. However, I quickly came to realize that these topics were intimately tied together and formed a coherent whole for building meaning and identity in their disrupted lives during the Soviet era and after it.

## **GULAG SPACE AND LIVING WITH THE DEAD**

An additional barrier to coping with Gulag memory during the Soviet era is how Gulag space was treated. Not only were people not invited to share their stories publicly, but the camps themselves, often in remote locations, were destroyed when many of them ceased operation after Joseph Stalin’s death. After the Lozhok was closed in 1956, for example, within a few years the buildings were razed to erase all traces of their existence. On the site where the barracks stood, a school and cultural center were built toward the end of the decade (Zatolokin 2007:21). Locals tell of the countless human bones that builders found when excavating the construction site, a detail often mentioned to me when discussing the camp. In essence, children were attending school and people celebrating holidays in a graveyard, something which certainly disconcerted the populace. Not surprisingly, Iskitim itself earned a negative reputation, not only as a dirty and drab industrial city but also as the location of the former camp “filled with bones.” In this sense, the attitudes toward it parallel those cited by Ulturgasheva (2012:131) with regard to the cursed and haunted Eveny village located on the site of a former prison camp. Lozhok, now part of Iskitim proper, resonates in local memory in the same way, even if locals express this perception in different terms. I heard no reports of ghosts of the unquiet dead like those Ulturgasheva recorded, but the disturbing presence of the remains of Gulag victims in a place where children study and people live their lives is a central part of the oral narratives surrounding the place.

Violent deaths, in particular, are a concern in the Russian folk tradition, since they are more likely to produce unquiet dead.<sup>5</sup> Memorates about the unquiet dead who died violently and attempts by the living to ensure their peaceful rest are common. For example, in an interview in 2003, a Novosibirsk native Marina K. related how her friend's husband had died after being stabbed in a mugging. On the day of his funeral, a pigeon with a wounded wing flew into the house and would not leave. When they returned from the funeral, the bird was gone. However, it returned on the ninth day after death for the *pominki* (commemorative funeral meal) and would not depart until after the meal. The wounded bird was perceived to be the soul of the deceased. The injured wing was highlighted since the victim was stabbed in the same side. The bird also served as a physical reminder of the need to commemorate the dead man properly to ensure that his soul, which had departed so unexpectedly, was at peace. Memorates about the unquiet dead highlight the relationship between the deceased and the living, that is, the dead return to their relatives and friends, not to those unknown to them. On the contrary, religious martyrs, like the clergy purportedly executed at the spring in Lozhok, are an exception to this general rule. Their suffering for their faith has redeemed their potentially unquiet spirits, so that they return to help the living and are able to interact with any person of faith.

Local knowledge of living among the dead is complicated by Russian folk conceptions of death and the afterlife. In particular, the site of one's burial allows for continued communication with the dead. Both on "Parents' Saturdays"<sup>6</sup> and on anniversaries of the date of death, family members visit the grave for *pominki*. They typically make *bliny* (crepes) and take them (along with candies) to the grave for a meal, leaving behind some of the food along with a shot of vodka for the deceased. They make reference to the fact that birds, long associated with the souls of the dead in the Russian folk imagination, will eat the food. In addition, they share this food with neighbors, especially children, and with colleagues.

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<sup>5</sup> I am using the term "unquiet dead" to cover a wide array of phenomena. In the Russian folk tradition unquiet dead may manifest themselves in corporeal form, for example as revenants that may harm the living. The most common example is the *rusalka*, a drowned maiden (often the result of suicide as a result of unrequited love or pregnancy out of wedlock). Memorates about people who died violently or unexpectedly young—*ne svoei smert'iu* (not their own death)—physically returning from the grave are also common in the Russian narrative tradition (for examples, see Sadovnikov [1884] 2003:236, 387; Zinov'ev 1987:50–54, 96–98, 116–117, 269, 271–273, 275–276; Vlasova and Zhekulina 2001:302–307; Chernykh 2004:90–96; Evseev 2004:42, 86, 89; Korepova, Khranova, and Shevarenkova 2007:93–103, 113–115, 157–163, 167, 169–170, 172, 176–178, 191). The term unquiet dead also covers those who return in noncorporeal form, for instance, in dreams or visions. In these cases, the dead are typically either dissatisfied with the state of their grave or the conditions in the afterlife (they may be cold, for example), or they appear to help the living friend or relative due to some imminent threat or problem. In the latter case, the spirit is restless only out of concern for the living but is still numbered among the unquiet dead.

<sup>6</sup> Saturdays during *Maslenitsa*, "Butter Week" (the carnival period before Lent begins), during Lent itself, during Passion Week, on the Tuesday of Saint Thomas's Week (called *Radonitsa*, Resurrection Day, the second week after Easter), the Saturday before Pentecost (called *Sviataia Troitsa*, Holy Trinity, seven weeks after Easter), and on Saint Dmitrii's Day (first Saturday in November) (Zelenin [1927] 1991:356–357).

They also make *bliny* after dreams about the dead, since the dream means that the deceased is not at peace and desires to be “fed” and remembered. Dreams may also prompt them to clean the graves and spruce up elements at the gravesite, if the relative mentions in the dream that s/he is not happy in the grave or with its current condition. If the deceased mentions something that s/he is lacking in the other-world or that s/he is cold, then family members will take the item or a sweater or coat and leave it on the deceased’s grave. In some cases, they may arrange to have the item buried with another person who has died recently. All of these actions are designed to properly commemorate the dead communally and publicly, so that their souls are at peace. These frequent commemorative meals also facilitate mourning for surviving family and friends (Rouhier-Willoughby 2008:195–202).

Given these conceptions about the ongoing relationship to the dead, the remains of Gulag victims in the town present an acute problem for residents. The victims certainly died violently, so that they are likely to not be at peace (unless religious martyrs; hence the focus on the clergy as victims, to deemphasize the potentially dangerous spirits of the remainder). However, their gravesites and, in many cases, their names are unknown. In addition, they may not have family members in the region who could commemorate them at home, even if not at the grave. Most importantly, the centrality of the gravesite for commemoration and mourning has been lost. Local relatives may know, as Anna F. does, that a relative (in this case, her uncle) died in the camp but have no idea where the body lies. Thus, they cannot perform the rites necessary for his soul to be at peace or to properly mourn him.

People are thus aware of the dead all around them and view the place as unsettling and ill-fated. Nevertheless, the dead do not appear to them, as they do to the Eveny living on the site of a former Gulag, as Ulturgasheva (2012) describes. In essence, emerging from the experiences of the Gulag and memories about it, we see the manifestations of two different conceptualizations of the afterlife and people’s relationship to the unquiet dead. The Eveny describe hauntings by the ghosts of victims. Therefore, anyone may see the spirits, rather like they see and interact with the spirits of any living or deceased being, a tenet at the heart of their animistic belief system. The Russian Orthodox view, on the contrary, limits such interactions, both positive and negative, primarily to deceased relatives and friends. However, such communication and proper commemoration is impossible with the anonymous Gulag victims, despite the sense that their unquiet spirits may be present. Thus, unlike in the Eveny cosmology, even those who died violently and are potentially dangerous to the living will not appear to or harm strangers. In contrast, religious martyrs may appear to help the living, since they may interact with any of the faithful. As a result, the holy spring serves as a locus to pray and remember all the dead, lay and clergy, so that they may be at peace, as Orthodoxy demands, even if they are unknown to the living visiting the spring.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Yekaterinburg is home to a noteworthy analog to the Lozhok spring, the so-called Memory Spring located roughly three kilometers from the Gulag memorial outside the city. While the spring is not considered to be holy, it commemorates the Gulag victims who died at the camp in the 1930s and 1940s. Like the Lozhok spring, it also is known for the purity and deliciousness of its water.



Within the Orthodox tradition, it is typical for holy springs to be recognized precisely due to visions of the dead: of the martyrs who died there, or of saints and the Virgin Mary. To give one example, Galina Liubimova (2012:71–72, 120–123, 184–194) has documented a holy spring in the village of Log in the Altai region of Siberia. During the Civil War in 1921, a group of counterrevolutionaries from the village was arrested. A portion of the group was shot immediately, while the others were hacked to death with sabers outside the village. A holy spring arose in that location after the murders. The mother of one of the victims, while sitting at the site of her son's execution, claimed that she saw his face in the water and heard his voice telling her to build a chapel on the site of the spring. She reported: "The communists killed them, tortured them, threw them underground [the bodies were thrown into a ravine], but the Holy Mother of God will not let them do that, she has washed their faces clean and has given us the holy spring. They are in holy paradise now, and we sinners suffer here" (187). Still others saw images of the Virgin Mary in the water (121), a sure indication of its sacrality.

However, such stories are not told about the holy spring at Lozhok. That is, there exists no single "discovery" narrative akin to that of the Log spring (and of many others). One possibility is that the anonymity of the dead prevents such visions. Nevertheless, even if the victims are unknown, people might see images of saints or of the Virgin Mary in the water. I have recorded only two mentions of such visions at all. Anna V. stated that there was a rock near the stream that looked like Nicholas the Wonderworker. She also said that, when she visited her incarcerated uncle in the late 1940s, he told her that an imprisoned priest had used the stream to escape, so that the prisoners themselves viewed the spring as sacred. Marina V. also reported that Father Valentin Biriukov saw an image of Nicholas the Wonderworker there. However, in his conversation with me, Father Valentin focused only on the physical effects of the spring after he bathed in it, which he took to be a sign of its sacred nature. He went on to describe how, as early as 1986, he saw how the water healed a paralyzed young woman as well as the director of a local factory who suffered from persistent headaches. It is primarily the spring's ability to heal that seems to have built its local reputation, but it has been difficult thus far to pinpoint the initial miracle that attests to the spring's power.<sup>8</sup>

## THE LOZHOK CAMP IN THE LOCAL IMAGINATION

Locals repeatedly use the same formula to describe the quarry at Lozhok: it was the worst camp in the entire Gulag system. For example, Marina V. told me, "and this camp was the most cruel. When they were convicted, they sent them specifically to Lozhok, and they all were afraid of this place." While historical descriptions of the camp certainly indicate that it was a horrible ordeal, it does not seem significantly

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<sup>8</sup> Valerii Mel'nikov (2006), a journalist for the local paper *Vechernii Novosibirsk*, published an article, "Dukh dyshit, gde khochet," in the newspaper's edition about the history of the spring. He writes that the spring arose on the site of the martyrdom of the forty clergymen. Soon after, it became clear that the spring was holy, because sick prisoners who had been thrown into the ravine to die drank from the spring and were healed. While no local resident has confirmed this variant to me, this event would be the earliest attested cure.

worse than other prison camps of the era. However, in my view, it is notable that residents repeatedly describe it in this fashion.

This characterization, it seems, allows for two interpretations that may seem at odds with each other initially. The first interpretation is that the camp was so terrible that it has been chosen by God to be the location for a holy spring. In other words, as the worst camp, Lozhok serves a metonym for the entire Gulag system and for its torment of the faithful. Geographically, there is merit in this claim, since Novosibirsk is perceived to be the center of the country (both east to west and north to south). Thus, a camp in this site represents the core of the vast array of prison camps that stretched across the nation. In fact, a chapel dedicated to Nicholas II reportedly stands, across from the Opera and Ballet Theatre, on the exact geographic center in downtown Novosibirsk, whose square is dominated by a huge statue of Vladimir Lenin even today.<sup>9</sup> The history of the chapel encapsulates the major shifts in the Soviet and Russian past. It was originally built in 1913 to honor the 300th-year anniversary of the House of Romanov. In 1930 it was destroyed and replaced ultimately by a statue of Stalin. That statue was removed during the Thaw, but the chapel (dedicated to Saint Nicholas) was rebuilt beginning in 1991. Thus, the chapel commemorates the imperial period, while simultaneously making reference to the socialist era (both positive and negative—Lenin and Stalin, roughly speaking) and the postsocialist religious revival, all with Novosibirsk at the geographic and political heartland of the country.

It is worth noting that Omsk, another city in Siberia, also features a holy spring on the site of a former Gulag. This situation has fostered a bit of local competition, as Marina V. indicated:

I went to the Achairskii Monastery. There was also a camp there. There's also a convent there. Of course, it's a nice place. They have warm water. But our, particularly our spring, I think people came and tested it specially in the spring-time. Someone had called the sanitary-epidemiology station and reported that our water was bad and that they had discovered tuberculosis bacteria in it. And they came, there were five of them from the sanitary-epidemiology station in Novosibirsk, and they tested the water with some kind of new apparatus. And they were astounded, they said that the water is remarkable.

Ekaterina I. supported her claim, saying that the water is full of silver.<sup>10</sup> Marina V. then added that, given its composition, no tuberculosis bacteria could ever survive

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<sup>9</sup> Novosibirsk and its surrounding cities, like Iskitim, have not been “de-Sovietized” through re-naming. In fact, in 2006, my first trip to the holy spring, the hammer and sickle that marked the entrance to the Iskitim region were still standing. They were replaced by the region’s heraldic crest only in 2010.

<sup>10</sup> This description is a common formulaic description for holy springs in general. However, the Lozhok spring water has also been tested by the Tomsk Institute of Spas and Physical Therapy. The test results indicated that it was a freshwater spring that contained high levels of sodium bicarbonate and low levels of minerals, no iron (a rarity in this region), and “notable amounts of carbon dioxide, which lends to its aroma of freshness and superior taste” (Zatolokin 2007:15). The water of this spring, as noted above, is also quite cold, unlike that at the Omsk site, which seems to lend credence to its better reputation as a source of clear, clean, and brisk water that leads to better health.

there, thus intimating that the call was designed to discredit the holy place and was not a genuine concern.<sup>11</sup> The women relied on scientific data to support their claim that the Lozhok site retains its primacy as the more important of the two Gulag springs in their experience.

The second interpretation of the view of this particular Gulag as the “best” example of a camp bolsters the reputation of the region, as I have just touched on. As I have mentioned, the site has become a destination for religious pilgrimage from around western Siberia and is a great source of local pride. While, in the imperial era, Novosibirsk (then Novonikolaevsk) was a modest town in the geographic center of Russia, its primary claim to fame came later as a Soviet-era think tank and academic center. Therefore, it is most renowned for its connection to the Soviet identity from the 1950s on, when mathematician Mikhail Lavrent’ev founded Akademgorodok and the Siberian branch of the Academy of Sciences as a research center for the bench sciences.<sup>12</sup> One would certainly not then expect this region to be the location of a holy spring when compared to the ancient cities of European Russia with their ties to Russian Orthodoxy. Siberians generally must cope with a feeling of inferiority when compared to these economic and political centers. Thus, the fact that there is an important religious site in this distant Siberian “Soviet” city (located in the “center” of Russia) serves to validate their worth overall in the sociocultural hierarchy.

In addition, like the Eveny that Ulturgasheva (2012:135) discusses, natives of the region often feel that they have been abandoned by the central government in the postsocialist world. To take but one example, a city resident told me in 2013 that Moscow has forgotten Siberia; hence he and his family, whose ancestors have lived in Siberia for several generations, are considering relocating to Moscow because the future will be brighter there. Thus, seemingly perversely, the status of the Lozhok as the most horrible example of the camp system validates local identity from a religious perspective as a site blessed by God through the suffering of those who died there and, indeed, of those in the region coping both with Stalin’s prison system and with the aftereffects of his World War II policies (discussed in more detail in the next section). It also increases sociopolitical status. This region is more than a backwater associated only with outmoded Soviet-era values and lacking the historical importance of the cities across the Urals.

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<sup>11</sup> A related cycle of legends about the Lozhok spring features its ability to survive attacks and thereby demonstrate its holiness. The range of threats have included not only this fraudulent phone call but also attempts by the local authorities to either bury the spring or place a garbage dump on the site. A garbage dump was placed near the site, but the congregation succeeded in having it removed in 2011. During the 1960s, as Panchenko (2012b:323–328) documents, such efforts were common in Soviet Russia after a secret memo dedicated to the elimination of sites of pilgrimage was issued in 1958.

<sup>12</sup> See Josephson (1997) for a history of Akademgorodok.

## WORLD WAR II IN GULAG NARRATIVES

World War II frequently emerged as common trope in narratives about the spring's past. One reason for this repeated motif was that people arrived in the region and began their interaction with the camp as a result of the disastrous effects of World War II on the greater populace. Another reason, I would argue, is that the Gulag and World War II are the two dominant legacies of the Stalin era, so that when one is raised, the other follows close behind it. The World War II experience became the defining factor of identity for the Soviet populace, both for those who experienced it directly as well as for subsequent generations (see Tumarkin 1994 for a discussion of the development of the World War II cult). Therefore, public discussion of the Gulag past has also been complicated by the positive aspects of Stalin's legacy,<sup>13</sup> namely his role as the leader of a victorious nation in World War II. He is lauded for his attempts to rebuild a society that, as a whole, had undergone a massive trauma during the war. Nevertheless, the suffering brought about by the war experience, either directly or to one's forebears, is part and parcel of the conception of the era and this site in particular. Russian Orthodoxy extols the virtues of suffering in this life as a promise for salvation in the next. As Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov wrote:

True Christianity is martyrdom. A Christian's life is a chain of struggles and sufferings that constantly follow one another. The victor is given life eternal and is wedded to the Holy Spirit. He whom God desires to enrich with spiritual intelligence and with gifts of the spirit is granted great struggles. (Archimandrite Panteleimon [1968] 2012:72)

Thus, both aspects of Stalin's troubled legacy contribute to the Russian cultural-religious conception about suffering (and endurance) as a mark of faithfulness and eventual reward.

Despite the horrors associated with the camp, it represented a chance to rebuild a damaged life through gainful employment to the women who moved into this region in the postwar period. Anna F. and Elena V. both worked at the quarry. Anna F. was employed there while the camp was still in operation, while Elena V. arrived after it had been closed. Elena V. came to the region because of the difficult situation in Novokuznetsk, where she had studied. They refused to give her a decent position in the local factories, so she moved to Novosibirsk. At first, the situation was similar, and she

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<sup>13</sup> This attitude has been strengthened as a result of the resurgence of pro-Stalinist ideas over the last decade, as Adler (2012) has documented. Works by Emel'ianov (2008), Bobrov and Furr (2010), Mukhin, Furr, and Golenkov (2010), Furr (2011), Holloway, Rayfield, and Furr (2012), and Tukhachevskii (2012) present the case that Stalin was framed for other people's crimes and/or that he simply did not know the extent of the system for which he is blamed. In addition, Gulag prisoners are depicted largely as traitors (for example, military officers who collaborated with the Germans or thieves who stole the people's rightful resources, a trope that plays well in the era of oligarchs). I have heard many such opinions from residents in this region of all ages but in particular from the last "Soviet" generation who has a profound nostalgia for the Soviet Union of their childhood (see Boym 2001 for a discussion of nostalgia for the USSR in the postsocialist context).

ended up working as a shopkeeper. Then she learned that the camp, recently closed, was taking on workers in her field of specialty. The buildings were still in existence, and the people who had been imprisoned there still ran the operation. As she says, "Kliuev was the manager of the concern, it was Kliuev. He was one of the prisoners who served here. He was a very smart man! He took me on as a master at the lime kiln."

For Anna F., whose father had died at the front during the war, leaving behind her mother to support her brothers and sisters on a kolkhoz, the quarry represented a type of salvation. She arrived in the area in 1948 without documents and could not find work without them. Nor was there a place to receive documents in the postwar chaos, so that she was at an impasse. As she reports,

Well, and we arrived and were sitting there at the station. We transported stone from the quarry. The quarry was here and we transported it over there. Well, my brother-in-law said, "They'll take you on there, people who have been resettled, many without documents, work there. Go, go there! You go and climb under the scoop. The vehicles take the stone from the quarry and you go to the quarry." So, we did just that. We got onto a dump truck.... And we arrived. We arrived in the snow in February, in February or March. Nope, in February, because the snow had totally covered the barracks, there was nothing there.... I wasn't yet 15. We loaded 60 tons each, we work in the quarry until 5, 4:30, and then get into the train at 5 o'clock.... And whatever stone you happen to grab, you load, maybe with a backhoe or with a shovel, for three or four hours, you have to load 60 tons. You load for two or three hours, then another three, and then we go on foot for two or three kilometers to the quarry. And we walked. That's how we worked. We had to do everything, even load the stone.

Both of these narratives illustrate how the opportunities presented by employment at the quarry to some extent balanced the horror of the camp for them.

That is not to say that these two women are apologists for the entire system or indeed the camp itself. They both stress how bad the camp was in their narratives of their experiences there. Elena V., for example, reported that,

there was so much evil, so much suffering, and it seemed that it had all been erased, as though it had never been. But those who lived here, they remember all the same. I remember very well, I have remembered it my whole life. How huge the walls were, how thick. It was frightening, but I was curious and I explored it all. Not alone, of course, other young women were interested in that too.

Anna F.'s uncle served two stints in the camp and died during the second one. She said the first time he was sentenced to fifteen years for taking some grain to try to grow food to support his family. He died of a heart attack during the second sentence of 30 years after receiving bad news in a letter from his wife and was buried in a mass grave with other prisoners. She also reported how she would take food to them and that the prisoners never stole from anyone, even though they were desperately hungry. She specifically contrasted that behavior to people today, who steal food from garden plots belonging to the elderly.

Informants who do not remember the camp personally, because they were born after its demolition, also participate in narratives about its horrors. For example, Marina V. supported her description of Lozhok as the worst camp as follows:

The work was very, very hard. And people extracted lime. They say that the labor was unbearable, Lord have mercy! The food was only a little bit of water and a bit of thin soup. They also said, I've heard, the locals who came here said that they would give them pickled herring, but not give them any water for five days at a time. That was the kind of abuse that went on here, it was absolutely horrible.

The distinction between the narratives of those who worked at the quarry (both when the camp was in operation and just after) and of those who have no direct memory of it is striking. For the latter, the camp simply represents an unredeemed horror. For those who worked there, the trauma of the camp is not in dispute. However, it also provided them with a way to survive in the difficult postwar years.

Therefore, these women offer a perspective that represents their own experience as victims of the devastation after World War II. Their ability to survive the damage brought to social order by both the camp system and the war taps into the Soviet-era cultural memory about this period in history as well as into Orthodox views about suffering as redemption. They, like the nation as a whole, managed to triumph over the adversity of the postwar years. They built meaningful professional and family lives despite the desperate situation in which they had found themselves. Their narratives, like those from the generation that Skultans collected, reflect this same understanding of the past:

Narratives which chronicle endurance or what might be termed "a coming through" use shared symbols to draw together seemingly random and chaotic events and suffering. They rearrange past pain and confusion by pointing to an underlying purpose and meaning. In this process they also link the individual to shared systems of meaning and thus create a sense of belonging. (1998:130)

Because these two past experiences validate their struggle to create an identity as (Soviet) Russian citizens, the locals I spoke to cannot simply condemn them. Nor can they completely embrace the superficial view that the war represented solely a glorious period in Soviet history. They experienced firsthand the results of the war, often viewed so nostalgically by those younger than themselves, and the failure of sociopolitical institutions as they tried to recover. By framing themselves first as victims and, ultimately, as victors in this battle, the narratives provide a sense of agency to these women's identities.

The postsocialist experience, as Anna F.'s statement about the increase in crime indicates, to some extent has threatened the identities these women had crafted for themselves. During the Soviet era, they could contend that they had not suffered in vain, pointing to the USSR broadly and to their own successful lives, despite past hardships, as evidence. In addition, as victims themselves, they were also protected from being accused of complicity in the camp system. In the postsocialist period, both of these contentions are more easily challenged, which has necessitated refram-

ing of the identities they constructed as Soviet Russian citizens. Past suffering for a beloved state that no longer exists may lead to doubts about the value of the ordeals one has undergone and thus, perhaps, to a personal crisis and a jaundiced eye regarding the present social context. It also, of course, enhances one's role as a member of the Orthodox faithful. In addition, while public conversations about their Gulag experience may finally allow people the chance to become whole, as Herman (1992) contends is the key to healing, they also open tellers to criticism for their role in the system. Dori Laub (Felman and Laub 1992:57–92) discusses precisely the threat to one's identity that narratives about trauma, in this case the Holocaust, present to a narrator. Survivors of trauma are often seen as flawed witnesses, due to the horrors they have undergone (81), but need to tell their stories to be able to reclaim and process the past suffering in any meaningful way (68, 78–79). One key to reframing one's Soviet Russian identity, at least among those who have professed faith in the holy spring, is assertion of one's enduring belief in God and one's suffering in life is demonstrable support for that claim.

## ENDURING FAITH WITHIN AN ATHEIST STATE

Every person of this generation that I interviewed formally about the spring made a point of discussing the fact that they were raised in devout families. While I am certainly not suggesting that they were lying about their faith, highlighting this aspect of their past allows them to reframe their own identities (and their nation's) in the postsocialist context. Ekaterina I., for example, reported that

from childhood, in my soul, I wondered why they had forbidden the church.... But we didn't have a church in our village.... So, we would ask father from the nearby village of Viatskie Poliany to visit us for several years. And he came.... And I remember how they baptized us. They baptized me first. I was, well, how old was I, maybe ten?

Her friend Liudmila I. told a similar story: "During the Soviet era they forbade baptism. I had two grandmothers, one on one side, one on the other, who arranged it on the quiet, because they were afraid, since our father was a party member, they baptized both me and my brother." Marina V. also said that her parents were both believers, and that she and her sisters even wore kerchiefs as a sign of devotion while in school, as she does to this day. The teacher scolded her mother for forcing her daughters to maintain a religious practice, to which her mother replied, "I'm not forcing them to do anything." Even Elena V., who initially doubted the testimony of the local *babushkas* that the spring was holy, reported she had always from childhood said the Our Father each night, even though she was a pioneer and, later, a member of the Komsomol. However, it was not until she was in her fifties that she had matured and began to attend church.

I would argue that this recurring formula about devout families facilitates a "christening" of the Soviet Russian past as well. Their choice to highlight this aspect of their personal stories provides a testament to their own identities as the faithful,

as well as challenges their nation's characterization as an atheist state. In essence, from this point of view, because average Soviet Russian citizens maintained belief in God and the Russian Orthodox Church, the nation could be viewed as an Orthodox one at its core, despite the official stance.

The religious victims at the heart of the legend are the key to the laity's reconceptualization of the Soviet Russian past in this region. While Father Igor' contends that the prayers for all the Gulag victims at the site have resulted in its holiness, the vernacular belief and legends highlight only the martyrs. Because narratives about the spring foreground only the religious dead, narrators (and the audience) are able to focus their attention on the single negative aspect of the USSR these women agree on—that religious belief was discouraged.<sup>14</sup> The martyrs overshadow the countless other victims of this camp in the vernacular conception of the site. These religious martyrs, like Christ himself, have thus redeemed the violent past of the Soviet prison camp system and been rewarded for their enduring faith and past suffering. The holy spring may thus be seen as a sign from God that they (and the nation) have been forgiven for any complicity they may have had in the system and were rewarded for their endurance in the face of desperate struggles. In addition, this past is tied to their conception of Soviet Russians as a people that had never truly abandoned faith in Orthodoxy, despite its acceptance of core Soviet values.

In fact, even Stalin himself has been "re-Christianized" to some extent. Two popular legends have been attested about his interactions with the Saint Matrona of Moscow. In one version, he asked her to help protect the USSR from the German invasion by flying around the borders of the country with the miraculous icon of the Virgin of Kazan'. In a second, Stalin visited Matrona in 1941 to ask her about the outcome of the war. She predicted that he would save Russia. An icon depicting their encounter is one of the most famous artifacts in Saint Olga's Cathedral in Saint Petersburg (Rouhier-Willoughby and Filosofova, forthcoming). In this legend cycle Stalin is depicted as a true believer leading an Orthodox nation, which stands him in good stead as he is being rehabilitated in the popular imagination.

It is telling that these various legends have gained currency at a time when Stalin himself and Gulag victims are being reframed in popular memory as well. If Stalin were not aware of the extent of the Gulag, which was thus the result of shadowy figures who had deceived him, the positive aspects of his legacy (as victor in World War II, as a forward-thinking leader and economic seer who brought the USSR into the modern, industrial age) can be preserved even as the Gulag legacy is acknowledged. Similarly, if many Gulag victims were actually "legitimate" criminals who betrayed their country and fellow citizens, then people may be justified in focusing only on those that were unjustly killed—primarily, in this case, the religious figures.

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<sup>14</sup> Even younger families express this view. The husband of a Novosibirsk couple in their early forties is the office manager at a recently built conservative Orthodox congregation. His wife has given up her work in the financial field to stay home with their youngest child. Now that her daughter attends the school, she teaches there and organizes the church's charitable activities. They both agreed that Stalin-era policies would be welcome today, with the exception of the lack of religious freedom.



## CONCLUSION

In *Tourists of History*, Marita Sturken (2007) discusses the American conception of itself as an innocent nation that did nothing to bring about the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and on the Pentagon in Washington, DC, on September 11, 2001. She argues that this position means that the nation “cannot see its own complicity in the workings of history” (Sturken 2007:31). The attacks then were perceived to be an event in which the country and its citizens were unfairly victimized at the hands of an irrational other who hated them for no apparent reason. The narrative frame of the innocent nation allowed people to be excused from their own direct (or indirect) complicity in their government’s potentially inflammatory actions on the international stage, which had undoubtedly contributed to the attacks. However, US citizens resisted acknowledging this fact due to the trauma of the events on that day. Despite the differences between the two situations (a single terrorist attack by an external force versus a prolonged domestic campaign of terror), we can argue that a similar situation existed for those who lived through Stalin’s reign and were closely connected to his Gulag legacy. They too were faced with a horrible trauma but viewed the system as something beyond their control. As a result, they did not consider themselves to be complicit in the events, even as they benefited from the penal system he had created, which does in fact suggest their complicity, especially if they lived and worked in the realm of the Gulag itself. As their narratives about the holy spring demonstrate, they reframed the situation as one in which they too had suffered at his hands, like the Gulag victims. The stories told about the spring help to protect the narrators from being seen as complicit in the guilt and indicate that the nation and the actions of its citizens have been redeemed through its suffering.

The Gulag prisoners and those whose lives were devastated by World War II shared a common fate as victims and, thus, as the Orthodox faithful. The narratives cited herein illustrate the centrality of their perseverance in the face of the postwar chaos and their chance to work at the Gulag to their creation of fulfilling lives. As a result, my informants, like many others of their generation, were dedicated to the values the USSR represented. These values were conceptualized in the context of a victorious nation that protected the world from fascism and created an enlightened society out of the ashes.

The fall of the USSR necessarily challenged these women’s essential narrative frames about their identity as Soviet Russians and as residents of this region of Siberia. The collapse was an indication that the suffering and struggle to triumph may have been in vain. However, they could not reject outright the narratives of their past or the Soviet Russian identities they represented. Rather, these women engaged in a process of reframing through narrative. Those identities were conflated with a postsocialist present in which the past was reconceptualized within a religious ethos. This step allowed them to preserve intact certain aspects of identity defined within their narratives about their past. This process is in keeping with Katherine Verdery’s argument that postsocialist attitudes toward the dead victims of the socialist system allow people to rewrite history and to give them a touchstone for coping with the upheavals its collapse brought about (1999:111, 115).

Nevertheless, the people I interviewed also were able, or possibly compelled, to share their narratives about the Gulag openly for the first time. This step also opened the door for the narrators to become the target of opprobrium for their own roles in the history of the camp system. The focus on the religious dead in the holy spring legend provides a frame for local visitors and believers in the spring to condemn the Soviet government for its bloody past and to establish their own positions as those who suffered for their faith and thus have been redeemed. However, the focus on the martyrs protects them (and the nation) from any complicity they and their fellow citizens may have had. The deaths of the religious victims expunge the associated guilt of a nation built at the hands of the unjustly accused Gulag victims. The existence of the holy spring is a palpable sign that they have been forgiven by God and have earned salvation as a result of their endurance in the face of earthly trials and persistent faith. Thus, the beliefs and narratives about the holy spring allow these members of the local populace to safely negotiate the complex strands of Soviet Russian history and their role within it.

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## INTERVIEWS

- Anna F., Gulag laborer and railway worker, b. 1929, native of Petropavlovka, interviewed August 12, 2013, in Iskitim.
- Ekaterina I., profession and date of birth unknown, approximately 60–65 years of age, native of Udmurtia, interviewed August 7, 2013, in Lozhok.
- Elena V., master of lime kiln, b. 1936, native of Kiev, interviewed August 12, 2013, in Iskitim.
- Igor' Zatolokin, priest, b. 1973, native of Novosibirsk, interviewed August 7, 2013, in Iskitim.
- Liudmila I., profession and date of birth unknown, approximately 60–65 years of age, native of Novosibirsk, interviewed August 7, 2013, in Lozhok.
- Marina K., bookstore manager, b. 1973, native of Novosibirsk, interviewed June 11, 2003, in Novosibirsk.
- Marina V., former cook, currently runs icon kiosk at the Lozhok holy spring, b. 1958, native of Iskitim, interviewed August 7, 2013, in Lozhok.
- Valentin Biriukov, priest, b. 1922, native of Barnaul, interviewed August 14, 2013, in Berdsk.

## ГУЛАГ КАК СВЯЩЕННОЕ МЕСТО: МЕМОРИАЛЬНЫЕ НАРРАТИВЫ О СВЯТОМ КЛЮЧЕ В ИСКИТИМЕ

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**В этой статье рассматриваются рассказы о Святом ключе в Искитиме, собранные от посетителей источника, двух местных священников и прихожан церкви, расположенной рядом с источником. Источник находится в поселке Ложок Искитимского района, где был карьер, входивший в систему ГУЛАГа. По убеждению многих верующих, родник является святым, поскольку именно на этом месте лагерными охранниками были убиты сорок представителей православного духовенства. Народные поверья об источнике служат способом переосмысления и переформулирования местной памяти о ГУЛАГе, а также местной идентичности в постсоветском контексте. Выводы основаны на психологическом, историческом, антропологическом и фольклорном исследовании нарратива как способа преодоления травмы.**

**Ключевые слова:** Святой ключ; народная религия; нарративная память и идентичность