

# ISLANDS OF ONE ARCHIPELAGO: NARRATIVES ABOUT THE SOLOVETSKIE ISLANDS AND THE MEMORY OF SOVIET REPRESSIONS

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**In this article we consider the importance of the Solovetskie Islands for understanding of the memory of the Gulag in Russia. To better explain our argumentation we take a program we have developed for the Center for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding, which in July 2017 organized a summer school for PhD students from Poland and Russia on the Solovetskie Islands. By showing the assumptions and goals of the course we explain the complexity of the memory of Soviet repressions on Solovki in particular and in Russia in general. We describe the different memory narratives of Solovki’s repressive past that are present on the islands. We show that to understand the memory of Soviet repressions, it is important to recognize these diverse narratives produced by different memory actors, such as activists with the nonprofit Memorial Society and the staff of the local museum, but also various representatives of the local community. It is important not only to grasp what these narratives are about but also the interrelationships between them.**

**Keywords:** Historical Memory; Soviet Repressions; Commemoration; Solovetskie Islands

*The reader will ask: why had I chosen Solovki? What made me stay on the islands like on a watchtower, and look at Russia, at the world from here? Well, I will try to give an answer....*

—Mariusz Wilk, *The Journals of a White Sea Wolf*

In July 2017 we coorganized a summer school for PhD researchers, sponsored and coordinated by the Center for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding.<sup>1</sup> Our task was to develop the school's objectives and scientific program. In this article we explain why the Solovetskie Islands, an archipelago of six islands that is often known in Russia as Solovki, are so important for the memory of Soviet repressions and what one may learn about the memory of the Gulag from the visit to the archipelago. We describe the different memory narratives on Solovki's repressive past that are present on the islands. We show that to understand the memory of Soviet repressions in Russia, it is important to understand these diverse narratives produced by different memory actors such as Memorial<sup>2</sup> activists and museum staff, but also representatives of the local community, as well as the interrelationships between these narratives.

The quotation at the beginning of our essay comes from *The Journals of a White Sea Wolf*, a book that became a bestseller because its author, Polish journalist Mariusz Wilk, describes Russia not as an outsider but as someone from the inside, from the islands. Wilk settled in the Solovetskie Islands in 1991 to understand the Russian soul. He perceived them as a place of exile and a microcosm of the crumbling Soviet empire. His notes provide not only a description of life on the islands, its fears and small joys, but also deep reflections on Russian society in the 1990s. As Irina Adelgejm writes in her epilogue to the Polish edition of the book, Wilk chose the islands because "[o]n Solovki, one can see Russia, like a drop of water can reflect the sea" (2003:213).

Wilk is not the only one who perceived the islands as the quintessence of Russia and who tried to understand "Russian-ness" through Solovki. Scholars and researchers from different fields, from history to memory studies, often use the history of the islands to present the complexity of the country's past, memory, and politics. In the preface to his book on the history of Solovki, historian Roy R. Robson writes that

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<sup>1</sup> The school partners were the Institute of Sociology at Warsaw University, the Maria Grzegorzewska University, and the Centre for Independent Social Research in Saint Petersburg. The summer school took place between July 3 and 11, 2017, as a series of seminars and meetings with memory actors in Saint Petersburg, Medvezh'egorsk, Sandormokh, and the Solovetskie Islands. There were four memory scholars responsible for organizing the lectures and discussions during the school: Tatiana Voronina from the University of Zurich discussed the impact of socialist realist narratives on the memory of repressions; Zuzanna Bogumił from the Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw presented secular and sacred commemorations of Soviet repressions; Sofia Tchouikina from the Institute for Social Sciences of Politics in Paris spoke on Soviet-era repressions and the Gulag in Russian museums; and Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper from the Institute of Sociology, Warsaw University, moderated a discussion on local and national narratives of the past. For more information about the summer school see [http://cprdip.pl/projekty,szkoly\\_letnie,archipelag\\_wspolnej\\_pamieci.html](http://cprdip.pl/projekty,szkoly_letnie,archipelag_wspolnej_pamieci.html).

<sup>2</sup> Memorial is a name used by a number of organizations working on Gulag memory in post-Soviet countries. When we refer to the Memorial Society in this article we are indicating the "Memorial" Historical, Educational, Human Rights and Charitable Society (NIPC) in Moscow, which is a Russian historical and civil rights society founded in 1992. Memorial collects testimonies about Soviet repressions and conducts research on the history of the Gulag, repressions in the USSR, socialist opposition to the USSR regime, political prisoners and dissidents, and also protests against contemporary violations of human rights. For more information on the history of the Memorial Society see Nanci Adler (1993).

“[t]he Solovki archipelago has been a prism for Russia” (2004:ix). He also expresses the hope that through Solovki he was able to “illuminate the bigger experience of Russia’s past” (ix). Alexander Etkind in his book *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of Unburied*, in turn, begins the description of the process of dealing with the repressive Soviet past in Russia by recalling a 500-ruble banknote, which shows “the Solovetsk[i]i monastery, a magnificent edifice on an arctic island, one of the most cherished sanctuaries of the Orthodox Church” (2013:5). This banknote is used by Etkind as a starting point for his reflection on the warped mourning in Russia. The point is that the Solovetskii cathedral presented on the banknote is topped with wooden domes, built after a great fire on Solovki in 1923, when the islands were turned into the Solovetskii Special Purpose Camp (abbreviated in Russian as SLON). For Etkind, the fact that millions of Russians carry an image of the Gulag in their pockets “exemplifies the typical complexity of mourning for the Soviet victims” (7). It is also important to recall the last book by Iurii Brodskii (2017), a well-known local historian living on Solovki since the 1970s, entitled *Solovki: Labirint preobrazhenii* (Solovki: A Maze of Transformations). In this book Brodskii looks at the history of Solovki as a site of pride and tragedy of the Russian state. His argument is convincing, as he shows that the popular saying “Today in Solovki, tomorrow all over Russia!” is still very much valid.

There are many reasons why scientists and researchers of Soviet repressions are interested in the history of Solovki. First of all, as Irina Shcherbakova claims, there is significant biographical literature written by Solovki inmates. The first extant literature on the Gulag included publications by former inmates of the Solovki prison camp who managed to get out of the USSR and published their eyewitness testimonies in the West (Shcherbakova 2015:114). This specific genre of literature, exemplified, for instance, by Karl Albrecht’s *Socialism Betrayed* (1939), provides descriptions of the Soviet system of camps and prisons. Moreover, when the Solovetskii Special Purpose Camp was established and many representatives of prerevolutionary Russia were sent there for “reeducation,” they could continue their intellectual lives freely until 1930. As Andrea Gullotta (2018) claims, while those living inside the Soviet Union were indoctrinated by Soviet propaganda, inmates of SLON could publish uncensored literary texts in camp newspapers and journals. Between 1923 and 1930 Solovki became the “Paris of the northern concentration camps,” producing a unique “literary enclave” in the Gulag literature and also in the history of the twentieth century Russian literature in general—literature that fascinates researchers to the present day (Gullotta 2018:11, 283–284).

Further, the Solovki prison camp was one of a very few sites that became the topic of vivid Soviet propaganda. The works of proletarian writer Maksim Gorky (1930), who visited the camp in 1929 and described the merits of Solovki in a series of articles entitled “Po Soiuzu Sovetov” (Across the Land of the Soviets), and Andrei Cherkasov’s propaganda film *Solovki* filmed in 1927–1928 and released in 1929 help us understand the philosophy of Soviet propaganda embedded in the idea of the Gulag. Cherkasov’s film also provides some of the most remarkable pictures of Soviet prison camps, adding visual representations to the history of the Solovki camp (cf. Kizny 2004), something that many other camps do not have. Moreover, the Solovki

camp has a very special position in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's monumental work *The Gulag Archipelago*. Solzhenitsyn presents SLON as "the mother of the Gulag." This metaphor has inspired images of SLON and continues to influence perceptions and understandings of the Solovki camp (Applebaum 2003).

The Solovetskie Islands are also seductive for researchers because they have a long and eventful history. The first people came to Solovki in the Bronze Age, constructing stone labyrinths that still stimulate the imagination of many people (Kodola and Sochevanov 2003). This past was already prehistory when Orthodox monks Savvatii and German arrived on Solovki in 1429, establishing the monastery that in the sixteenth century became one of the most influential religious centers in Russia (Robson 2004). This centuries-long history of the Solovetskii Monastery was suddenly interrupted by the establishment of SLON in 1923. The history of the first Gulag camp was also suddenly interrupted by the beginning of the Second World War. The Solovki camp was transformed into a prison in 1937 and was liquidated in 1939. During the war the place housed a naval cadet training camp for the Soviet Northern Navy. This was a new stage in the history of the archipelago. Although this was a very short period, it is still vivid in the memory of former cadets, their families, and Russian Navy associations. After the war the cadet school was closed and a settlement was established on Bol'shoi Solovetskii Island (Takahashi 2008:12).

## PRESERVATION OF GULAG HERITAGE ON THE ISLANDS

The preservation of the past on the islands was initiated thanks to one person: Pavel Vitkov, the principal of the local school (Takahashi 2008). As early as late 1950s he started to write letters to various Soviet institutions asking them to solve the "Solovetskii problem"—that is, to ensure the "salvation of Solovki and the revitalization of life on the islands" (Takahashi 2008:13). In January 1960 he published an article entitled "Why the Solovetskie Islands Were Forgotten" in the local newspaper *Pravda Severa*. For the first time in the postwar period someone publicly advocated for the need to preserve the cultural and natural heritage of the Solovetskie Islands and create a "historical and biological reserve" on Solovki.<sup>3</sup> When the Solovetskii museum opened in 1967, it was 30 years after the closure of the labor camp. Between 1965 and 1985, as Sanami Takahashi explains, "the museum staff managed to support the self-awareness of the successors of 'our Russian' heritage among tourists who visited Solovki" (2008:24). And even if they could see traces of the Gulag, destroyed monuments, and the consequences of military mismanagement, as Takahashi claims, it was religion that "continued to exert influence" in the local scene.

However, this does not mean that the larger history of the islands was completely forgotten. From 1967 onwards, former inmates, their families, and Leningrad intelligentsia started to visit the islands, looking for traces of the Gulag. Although it was not possible to openly talk about the history of the camp, guides would invite tourists to their apartments where they shared information about the history of the

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<sup>3</sup> Website of the Solovetskii State Historical and Architectural Museum-Reserve (<http://www.solovky.ru/reserve/history/>).

Gulag (Takahashi 2008; Bogumił 2018). The de-Stalinization period, initiated by Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech delivered during a closed session of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, was drawing to a close and gradually fading as the USSR entered the Brezhnev era (Etkind 2009). Nevertheless, the wave of revelations provoked by the discovery of the true extent of Joseph Stalin's crimes made it possible for people to share their experiences for the first time, and the Solovetskie Islands became the most important authentic post-camp landscape for these discussions.

At the end of the 1980s a "carnival of memory" started on the islands, and the history of the Solovetskii camp became a subject of open public discussions (Bogumił 2018). In 1989 the first historical exhibition dedicated to the history of SLON opened and the first monument commemorating the victims of the Solovki prison camp was erected. This took place during the first Days of Remembrance organized jointly by the Solovetskii museum and the Memorial Society activists. These events marked the beginning not only of commemoration of the victims of Soviet repressions on the islands but also of cooperation between the museum and the newly established Memorial Society in the process of returning the repressive past to the islands. The process lasted until 2015, when the museum decided not to coorganize the Days of Remembrance with Memorial anymore. This decision was made by the new director of the museum—since 2009, the abbot of the Solovetskii Monastery. Interestingly, when the first official Russian Orthodox Church service was to take place in Solovki in 1989, "the local authorities, taking fright at these circumstances, demanded that, before they issued an official permit, someone should take responsibility ... [by] signing that they are responsible for this act of reviving the Orthodox ministry on the island" (Iofe 2002b:54). The signature was eventually given by Veniamin Iofe from the Saint Petersburg chapter of Memorial.<sup>4</sup> However, 20 years later, it was the Solovetskii Monastery that decided that the Memorial Society was no longer a partner in the formation of the islands' cultural landscape and that the memory that Memorial activists were developing was not welcome on the islands. Memorial is most committed to remembering the Soviet repressive system, while the Solovetskii Monastery emphasizes the memory of the persecutions of the Russian Orthodox Church and the death of the Solovki "new martyrs." When SLON was established in the Solovetskii fortress in 1923, the centuries-long history of the monastery was interrupted and its traditions destroyed. Many Orthodox hierarchs were imprisoned on the islands and died there. Since its reappearance on the islands in 1992, the Solovetskii Monastery has gradually tried to rediscover its history and make efforts to commemorate the new martyrs, canonized in 2000 by the Russian Orthodox Church, in the islands' cultural landscape (Kahla 2010; Rock 2011; Christensen 2018). These commemorative activities undertaken by the monastery contribute to the gradual transformation of the islands into a site of religious memory.

For 20 years, there were three powers on the Solovetskie Islands—the local authorities, the Russian Orthodox monastery, and the state museum—who had to ne-

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<sup>4</sup> Only 10 years later, he wrote in his memoirs that he regretted taking this action.

gotiate with one another. Since 2009, when the museum and the monastery were amalgamated (the same person now heads both the monastery and the museum), the balance between the three powers was shaken. In consequence, the border between the secular and the sacred became blurred. At the same time, however, some new memory actors have appeared on the islands, with their own interpretations of the islands' past and visions of "what Solovki really is." Since 1992, when the Solovetskii Monastery was included on the UNESCO World Heritage List, the number of tourists and pilgrims has increased every year. The islands attract people seeking seasonal work in the tourism industry, but islanders increasingly decide to spend winter on the mainland. Turning into contemporary nomads, these people are able to look at the islands from a distance.

## UNDERSTANDING THE MEMORY OF REPRESSIONS ON SOLOVKI

In 2017, while preparing the summer school program, we were interested in the diverse social worlds existing on Solovki. As our focus was on the memory of repressions, we wanted to understand the following: Who are currently the key memory actors developing narratives about the past of the Solovetskie Islands? What are their narratives about? What is the key memory project they support? And why one rather than another? We were interested not only in the texture of specific memories but also in the deconstruction of mutual relationships between them. We wanted to reconstruct the genealogy of these narratives and understand the data and social images they refer to. In other words, when planning the summer school on the Solovetskie Islands, we focused on a dichotomous approach to the analysis of historical memory, presupposing the existence of a plurality of agents using the historical past and creating their own interpretations of events (Misztal 2003).

We were interested in contemporary local and global memory actors participating in the creation of the Solovki narrative. We relied on the assumption that the growing popularity of some interpretations—and the neglect of others—reflected the essence of the changes in the politics of memory in Russia during the last few decades. For instance, the memory of the Solovki prison camp is just one page of the islands' rich history. However, it was this page that earned the archipelago its countrywide fame. As we have already shown, the history of Soviet repressions is inconceivable without the history of SLON. A major role in popularizing this knowledge was played by Moscow and Leningrad/Saint Petersburg human rights activists from the Memorial Society. They initiated the study of the camp's history on the islands and organized the first trips to the islands for people whose biographies were associated with Soviet repressions. They also initiated the Remembrance Trail between Sandormokh<sup>5</sup> and Solovki. The discovery of mass graves of the victims of the so-

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<sup>5</sup> There are two different official spellings of this site: Sandormokh and Sandarmokh. The group of activists from Memorial who located the site disagreed on the proper spelling of the name. In the end, the activists from Karelia Memorial use Sandarmokh and Memorial activists from Saint Petersburg use Sandormokh (Iofe 1999).



called Great Terror in Sandormokh in Karelia in 1997 was also connected with the history of the search for the prisoners transported from Solovki during that period. Sandormokh was the place where one group of prisoners was executed by firing squad in 1937 on their way from Solovki (Merridale 2001:1–20; Makhotina 2014). We agreed that despite the decreasing role of Memorial in the creation of the narrative about the past of Solovki, because the society was among the key memory actors in the 1980s and 1990s, we wanted to get a better understanding of their memory project on Solovki and the significance of the islands' history for Memorial.

### THE MEMORIAL SOCIETY NARRATIVE ON SOLOVKI

In this context it is not surprising that the summer school program opened with a lecture by Irina Flige, director of the Saint Petersburg chapter of the Memorial Society. She told the summer school participants about the expeditions to the Solovetskie Islands organized by Memorial. Then, she presented a story about the opening of the memorial honoring the victims of political repressions in Troitskaia Square in Saint Petersburg in 2002 (Figure 1). She also discussed the history of the discovery of Sandormokh where Solovetskii camp prisoners were killed on their way from Solovki and explained the meaning of this site of memory (Figure 2).

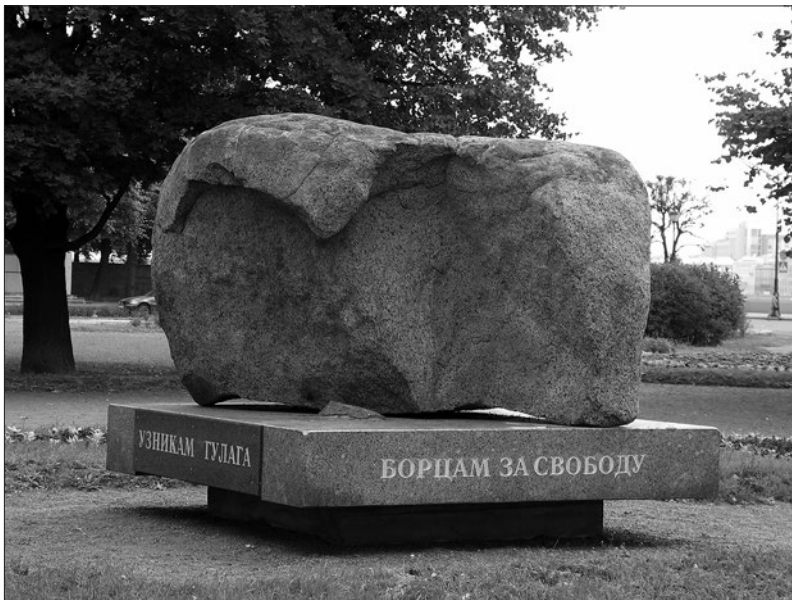


Figure 1. Solovetskii Stone, a memorial to the victims of political repressions erected by the Memorial Society at Troitskaia Square in Saint Petersburg in 2002.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Photos 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 are by Zuzanna Bogumił. Photo 3 is by Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper.



Figure 2. Sandormokh Cemetery in Karelia, the site of mass graves of the Great Terror 1937–1938.

The Solovki archipelago plays a key role in the Memorial Society's narratives of Soviet repressions. Its historians and human rights defenders searched for the traces of the prison camp, located burial grounds, and erected a monument in honor of the prisoners who died there. It is not a coincidence that the main symbol used by Memorial is the Solovetskii stone: boulder monuments brought from the shores of the archipelago and installed in different Russian cities (Arkhangel'sk, Moscow, Saint Petersburg) as memorials to honor political prisoners. For Memorial activists, this symbolic action is, on the one hand, related to the centrality of SLON in the entire repressive system of the Soviet Union. It was the first prison camp for political opponents of the Soviet authorities. Therefore, the history of SLON reveals the dreadful truth about the Soviet regime as an "evil empire" that crushed dissent. On the other hand, Memorial activists see the stone from the Solovetskii archipelago as a symbol of individual heroes struggling against the totalitarian state. The stone installed in Saint Petersburg, moreover, tells a story of political protest and the courage of spiritually strong people who died in torture chambers but were not broken by the system. The heroes of this story were the political prisoners imprisoned in the Savvatievskii Hermitage on Solovki, who rebelled against the camp leadership in 1923 and died in the fight for freedom and the rights of prisoners of the camp (cf. Applebaum 2003:56-58).

In the 1980s and 1990s Memorial undertook enormous efforts to restore the tragic history of the Solovetskii archipelago, forgotten during the Soviet times. They located and published written testimonies about the Solovki prison camp, compiled lists of prisoners' names, recorded memories of former prisoners, prepared museum exhibitions, made expeditions to former lager camps, and honored the memory of the



deceased—just a few of the things human rights defenders did for the memory of SLON (Adler 1993, 2002:239–267; Smith 1996).

Since 1989 Memorial has held local Days of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repression in Solovki. These commemorative events include speeches by human rights activists, politicians, and public figures. For years those Days of Remembrance were connected with the international Remembrance Day of the Victims of Political Repressions celebrated annually in Sandormokh on August 5. As a result, unlike other regional politicians, the authorities of Solovki were familiar with the heads of diplomatic missions and public activists from many countries (Poland, Lithuania, and, until 2014, Ukraine), who often participated in these events, laying flowers and commemorative wreaths by the Solovetskii Stone. In 2015 the museum and regional authorities ceased coordinating with Memorial in holding the Days of Remembrance—an event that marked a new stage in the development of historical memory on the islands. And while Memorial still organizes its events on the islands, increasingly they are attended by Memorial activists alone. Other delegations and missions, formerly always present at the Days of Remembrance organized by Memorial, limit their involvement to the commemorative events in Sandormokh and do not come to Solovki. Those who *do* come take part in the Days of Remembrance organized by the museum rather than by Memorial, as was the case with the Polish delegation in 2017.

Although Memorial was an important memory actor actively participating in the creation of the narrative about Solovki for 20 years, the society does not have this status any more. This is because Memorial's interpretation of the Soviet repressions has become less popular in the national discourse, but also because some islands' insiders are increasingly interested in the creation of their own narrative of Solovki's past, different from that pursued by Memorial. Among those memory actors we have distinguished two institutions—the state museum and the monastery—as well as individual memory actors whom we refer to as “local activists.”

## THE MUSEUM AND MONASTERY NARRATIVE ON SOLOVKI

The Solovetskii museum, as mentioned, opened in 1967 and since that time has developed its own narrative about the past of Solovki. However, various historical moments, such as de-Stalinization, the repressions of the Brezhnev era (cf. Etkind 2013), the “carnival of memory” in the late 1980s (Bogumił 2018), and the “personal union” of the museum and the monastery under Archimandrite Porfirii (Shutov), provoked radical changes in how the museum presents the history of SLON and Soviet repressions in general. Before coming to the islands we already had some knowledge of how the museum's memory project had been developing (Takahashi 2008; Bogumił 2018). Thus, during our stay in 2017 we were mostly interested in the current status of the memory project on SLON's history. We asked the following questions: How is the repressive past presented? Which facts are presented and why? During which excursions and at which sites is the repressive past recalled? What is the role of this history in the overall history of the archipelago? To answer these questions, we decided to attend three excursions and to talk with the museum's deputy director Oleg Volkov.

During our conversation with Volkov we learned about the museum's development plans, problems with exhibition spaces, and the preparation of new exhibitions. However, the main task of the administration of the new monastery-museum is to adapt Russian Orthodox discourse to the work of the museum, once famous throughout the country for its first exhibition about the Gulag. Interestingly, when Volkov worked as a guide in the monastery, he was one of the authors of the mobile exhibition entitled *Solovki: Golgotha and Resurrection*, which toured dozens of Russian cities telling the story of the special role of Solovki and, more generally, of the Orthodox clergy in the country's history. At the moment, this exhibition is a key display project of the museum, and it seemed clear from our conversation with Volkov that the way this exhibition presents Solovki is how the museum wants to develop its narrative about the islands' past. For this reason, we decided not to attend the tour organized by the monastery's pilgrimage center and instead took more excursions organized by the museum. We knew that pilgrimage tours provide much more information on the new martyrs (inmates of SLON canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church) and include time for individual and group prayers. We also knew that the texture of the narrative about the past of the museum and the monastery was the same. Thus, we were interested in how the secular state-owned institution, which had presented the history of the monastery as secular heritage for many years, constructed its narrative today, with the state museum now managed by the abbot of the monastery.

The influence of Russian Orthodox discourse on the understanding of the past of the Solovetskie Islands manifested in a kind of monopolized entitlement to the story about the monastery's past and the appropriation of its places of memory. For instance, tourists may visit the Solovetskii fortress, the Anzer Island, and a number of other areas in the reserve only as part of an excursion group accompanied by a museum guide. By barring other memory actors from accessing places of importance to the history of Solovki, the monastery-museum thus turns into a monopolist, controlling the past and sense-making. Those who want to see Sekirnaia Hill, which during SLON was a penal isolator where prisoners were tortured and killed, or the Anzer Island, where a camp hospital stood on Golgotha Hill, must accept the religious rules of pilgrimage-based sightseeing. Before visiting these sites as part of museum-organized excursions, tourists symbolically recognize their sanctity, agreeing to respect the Orthodox rules of conduct in those places. Special clothes for women (a headscarf and a long skirt), pauses for prayers, and a special candle-lighting ceremony in the temple are just some of the procedures to be observed during the excursions, ritually confirming the Orthodox rules of conduct at the site. As a result, visitors wishing to see Sekirnaia Hill become participants in Christian Orthodox rituals whether they want to or not. The story of the camp's past during the excursion to Sekirnaia Hill told by the guide is intertwined with a more general narrative about the special character and sanctity of this place, as was repeatedly emphasized during our excursion. Tales of miracles and the appearance of saints are told by the guide regardless of the degree of religiosity among the excursion group.

Religiosity in the concept of the monastery-museum is displayed not only in the excursions. It also manifests in the peculiarities of museum exhibitions. The concept

of “new martyrdom,” developed in Orthodox circles, presupposes special attention to members of the clergy who suffered during the Bolshevik Revolution and Soviet repressions. This concept is reflected in the permanent exhibition at the museum. Portraits of Orthodox clergymen who suffered during the revolution and the Great Terror are used to decorate internal passageways in the fortress. A temporary exhibition about the history of the murder of the royal family (which has no direct relationship to the history of Solovki) was included in the interior tour of the museum.

Notably, the new interpretation of Soviet repressions as a heroic moment for the Orthodox clergy became part of a concept that went beyond the Solovetskii monastery-museum. This concept was also reflected in the temporary exhibition brought from the Medvezh’egorsk District Museum, dedicated to the Days of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repressions that were organized by the museum in July 2017, instead of the Memorial-initiated Days of Remembrance. The exhibition, entitled *Prisoner’s Suitcase*, narrated about the construction of the White Sea–Baltic Sea Canal (Belomorkanal) (Figure 3). The usual Soviet narrative about the Belomorkanal, represented by numerous propaganda photographs and a screening of a 1932 Soviet film about the construction of the canal, was unexpectedly supplemented by some portraits of priests who died in the construction of the canal and who were subsequently recognized as new martyrs by the Russian Orthodox Church. This turn reflected the sensitivity of the organizers of the Medvezh’egorsk exhibition to the new reading of past repressions. The emergence of portraits of new martyrs at the exhibition about Belomorkanal was a reaction to the new trends in representing this theme.



Figure 3. The temporary exhibition entitled *Prisoner’s Suitcase* prepared by the Medvezh’egorsk District Museum and presented on Solovki during the Days of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repressions in July 2017.

This omnipresence of Russian Orthodox religious discourse means that the history of SLON and of the Solovetskii prison presented in one of the former barracks in the Solovki settlement seems peripheral and of little importance. The exhibition was prepared before the museum was merged with the monastery. The first exhibition, called *The Solovetskii Special Purpose Camp 1923–1939*, was opened on the premises of the former monastery in 1989, during the first Days of Remembrance on Solovki. It was prepared by the then-staff of the museum: Antonina Mel'nik, Antonina Soshina, Aleksandr Bozhenov, and Iurii Brodskii. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the modernization of the exhibition began. As the premises where the exhibition was located were to be returned to the monastery, the museum decided to update the information on SLON and to place the new exhibition in a reconstructed former camp barrack located in the center of the village (Figure 4). Responsibility for this work was assumed by Ol'ga Bochkareva, who was the director of the Gulag historical research unit at the time. The exhibition finally opened in 2010, one year after the abbot of the monastery became the director of the museum. In January 2016, however, Bochkareva was dismissed from the museum. In our conversation with deputy director Volkov in 2017, the new management of the museum openly admitted that the exhibition about the history of SLON would soon be replaced with a new one more in line with their view of these events.



Figure 4. The exhibition on the Solovetskii Special Purpose Camp displayed in the former camp barrack on Solovki.

## THE NARRATIVES OF LOCAL ACTIVISTS

Local activists are the last memory actor that we identified as important in the formation of the narrative about the islands' past. Two groups can be distinguished here. First, there are people who began their memory-related activity during the Soviet period and are still active and influential. Secondly, there are members of the new generation: they are newcomers, but their narrative about the islands and their past has become significant and serves as an alternative to the one promoted by the museum and the monastery.

Among the representatives of the first group, we talked to Iurii Brodskii. He settled on Solovki in the 1970s and participated in the creation of the first exhibition devoted to the history of SLON. Brodskii became known to the general public thanks to his active journalistic involvement and coverage about the lives of the archipelago residents. Notably, the group of enthusiasts who came to Solovki in the 1960s or later appreciated not only the history of this place but also the people who remained in the settlement after the camp was reorganized and the military base was closed down. The everyday life of the local people and their leisure on the islands appears to be included in the general narrative of the past emerging within this group. In their understanding, the history of the Solovetskii archipelago is not only about the distant past of ascetic monks or inmates of the Solovki prison camp but also about the people who live outside the monastery walls today. Officially, 898 people reside in the six settlements of Solovetskii village. Ninety of them live in the monastery.<sup>7</sup> They are the heirs to the rich history of this place. This is presumably why Brodskii's well-known photo album contains many portraits of the Solovki "ab-origines" that are as numerous as photographs of material remnants of the history of the camp or the amazingly beautiful landscapes surrounding the monastery (Brodskii 2002).

Another representative of the local community, who offered not only interesting lectures but also accommodation for the summer school participants, was Oleg Kodola, a local businessman and opponent of the Church's monopoly on Solovki. His name is connected with the early days of modern tourism on the islands (he owns a hotel complex, a number of tourist facilities, and a tourist agency called the League of Independent Tour Guides). Kodola not only talks to tourists but also actively influences the image of the archipelago created through the excursion programs offered by the guides. Taking a stance against the "privatization" of the monastery's past by the current management of the museum, independent tour guides conduct excursions to subvert the interpretation offered by the museum and the monastery. In contrast with museum-organized tours, independent tour guides are somewhat limited in choosing their itineraries (they are not allowed to hold excursions within the monastery), but they compensate for this restriction with the high quality of their

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<sup>7</sup> "Interv'iu naseł'nikov Solovetskogo monastyria," Spaso-Preobrazhenskii Solovetskii stavropigial'nyi muzhskoi monastyr', September 6, 2017 (<http://solovki-monastyr.ru/abba-page/intervyu/1828/>); official website of Solovetskii village (<http://www.primadm.ru/mop/solovetskoe/>).



tours. All tour guides working for the League are well trained and highly experienced. Their Marxist approach towards the understanding of monastic history (with a description of feudal relations and class struggle) looks like an obvious alternative to the miraculous story of the Solovetskii Monastery—a much sought-after element of the modern neo-Orthodox interpretation of the past promoted by the museum. Some unusual remarks on the origin of the Neolithic monuments on the territory of the archipelago give credit to the research conducted by Kodola himself (Kodola and Sochevanov 2003). However, this is the only deviation from the standard reading of Russian history taught at Russian universities.

During the excursion around the village and along the walls of the Solovetskii fortress, the monastery was described as a major feudal lord and the most important theme of local history (not without historical reasons) were the reformist activity of the Metropolitan of Moscow Filipp (Kolychev) and the Church schism that happened in the time of Patriarch Nikon (1653), who was also connected with the Solovetskii Monastery. The history of the Solovki camp and prison was described in truthful terms, without any attempts to embellish or retouch the narrative. Moreover, to subvert the church narrative, independent tour guides stressed that throughout the existence of the monastery—centuries before the Soviet Union—its premises were used to imprison dissidents and monks often acted as jail keepers. During the excursion they explained that clergymen (especially the monks of the Solovetskii Monastery in the very early days of the camp's existence) who had been imprisoned during the Soviet years were generally in a privileged position in comparison with other groups and social classes, thus contesting the official museum guides' view on the martyrdom of Russian Orthodox clergy. It appears that the main thread of discord concerns the understanding of the role of the monks in the history of Solovki and the meaning of "new martyrdom."

Apparently under great pressure from the museum and local authorities, Kodola and the League of Independent Tour Guides seek to counter the Church's narrative about the past of the islands with a clearly secular view, where the Solovki camp is described as a place where people of all social classes, religions, and nationalities were executed. In protest against the attempts of different countries to build nationalist narratives around the history of Soviet repressions, Kodola initiated the installation of a monument called "To Russians Died in SLON" (Figure 5) on the Avenue of Remembrance in the village (Figure 6).

The construction of the Avenue of Remembrance started in 1989, when the first memorial to SLON prisoners was erected during the inaugural Days of Remembrance. This first monument, in the shape of the Solovetskii stone, was dedicated to all inmates, irrespective of their nationality, religion, social background, or political views. At that time, people could gather in front of a common monument on Remembrance Square rather than on the Avenue. The first conflict around this site occurred in 1999, when the Organization of Doctors and Anesthetists of Northwest Russia erected a memorial cross by the Solovetskii Stone to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the closure of the Solovki prison camp. As Veniamin Iofe said during the Days of Remembrance in 1999: "Our nonreligious memorial to all

victims of Solovki repressions is now overshadowed by a religious symbol.... Every day the shadow of this cross is being cast on the stone commemorating people many of whom would never have approved of such symbolism. This is an act of spiritual violence" (2002a:54).



Figure 5. The monument "To Russians Died in SLON" erected by Oleg Kodola on the Avenue of Remembrance.



Figure 6. The Avenue of Remembrance on the Solovetskie Islands.

However, Memorial's understanding of the site has also changed over time. Memorial started to support the idea of different groups erecting monuments dedicated to specific categories of victims, as it is at the Levashovo Cemetery near Saint Petersburg or in Sandormokh in Karelia. From 2009 onwards, monuments were erected in the Avenue of Remembrance and now include ones commemorating Yakuts (2009), Poles (2011), Ukrainians (2012), socialists and anarchists (2013), Scouts (2014) and, finally, Russians (the latter erected by Kodola in 2014). As a result, the memorial complex on Solovki stopped emphasizing prisoners' shared fates and started to draw attention to different categories and ethnicities of repressed persons. This change of focus has had a marked effect on how the message of the site is comprehended.

Kodola erected his monument "To Russians Died in SLON" (which he himself refers to as "To Russians from Russians") in an act of protest against the appropriation and nationalization of the memory of the past. This was an ironic utterance, provoking people to reflect on the politics of memory and the hierarchies that are being built within it. However, most of the visitors do not know that Kodola initiated the monument or understand his motivations and simply interpret the monument as one of many national monuments rather than as a countermonument that aims to provoke a reflection on the past.

Notably, Kodola rejects the interpretation offered by the museum and the Russian Orthodox Church, which assigns primacy to the Orthodox clergy and Russian Orthodox Christians in the hierarchy of victims of repressions and terror. Nevertheless, he always emphasizes that Russians made up an absolute majority of prisoners in the Solovetskii camp. Thus, the history of the Solovki prison camp becomes entangled in the conflicts of interests among local activists who, when recounting history, are talking not only about the past but also about the present.

The history of Soviet repressions that we saw on the Solovetskie Islands in July 2017 comprises various interpretations by different memory actors. Some of them are more successful in promoting their version of history than others. The Solovetskii museum, which is part of the monastery, has become a conduit for the Russian Orthodox version of the past and has gradually recaptured the secular space of the islands, offering its "holy sites" and its own memory of the camp. Local activists must either cooperate with the museum and support its undertakings or oppose the idea of cooperation, seeking to counter the Church's narrative with a secular vision of the monastery's past. Over the years, Memorial has been losing importance as the main investigator of the memory of repressions, and its influence on the islands has dwindled. Some actors have left the scene, while others have become more influential. In any case, tourists coming to Solovki are presented with different interpretations of the archipelago's past.

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## ОСТРОВА ОДНОГО АРХИПЕЛАГА: НАРРАТИВЫ О СОЛОВЕЦКИХ ОСТРОВАХ И ПАМЯТЬ О СОВЕТСКИХ РЕПРЕССИЯХ

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В этой статье мы рассматриваем значение Соловецких островов для понимания памяти ГУЛАГа в России. За основу текста была взята программа, разработанная нами для международной российско-польской летней школы Центра польско-российского диалога и взаимопонимания и Центра независимых социологических исследований. Эта летняя школа проходила в июле 2017 года в Санкт-Петербурге, Медвежье-горске и на Соловецких островах. Рассказывая о целях и задачах школы, мы старались объяснить сложное устройство памяти о советских репрессиях в России. В наши задачи входило описать различные нарративы о репрессивном прошлом, существующие на Соловецких островах. Среди наиболее заметных сил, воздействовавших на способы, средства и содержание исторических репрезентаций, здесь были активисты общества «Мемориал», Русская православная церковь, сотрудники местного музея, а также различные представители местного сообщества. Для нас было важно не только понять смысл, который разные субъекты памяти придают рассказам о советских репрессиях, но и определить взаимосвязи, существующие между их интерпретациями.

История советских репрессий, рассказанная нам на Соловецких островах в июле 2017 года, включала в себя различные интерпретации. Авторы одних из них были более успешны в продвижении своей версии в публичном пространстве, другие – менее. Соловецкий музей, ставший частью монастыря, является проводником православной версии прошлого и постепенно отвоевывает светское пространство островов, предлагая свои «святые места» и собственную память о лагере. Местные активисты либо сотрудничают с музеем-монастырем, включаясь в разработку нового видения прошлого в свете церковной истории, либо выступают против его интерпретации, стремясь противопоставить церковному дискурсу светский. Влияние общества «Мемориал» на Соловецких островах в последние годы сильно сократилось. Так или иначе, туристы, приезжающие на Соловки, могут услышать разные истории о трагическом прошлом архипелага.

**Ключевые слова:** историческая память; советские репрессии; мемориализация; Соловецкие острова