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The particularity of the Komi Republic is not only due to it being a home to numerous Stalinist labor camps, which gave rise to towns such as Vorkuta, Inta, Ukhta, and Pechora, and that many former Gulag prisoners, having nowhere to return after serving their sentences, settled permanently in these towns. It also lies in the fact that the Komi Republic—and only this republic—established, in 1998, the Pokaianie Foundation, financed from the republican budget, whose mission was to commemorate the victims of political repression. It is precisely the legacy of the Gulag experience and the subsequent work of memory surrounding it that inspired Tyler C. Kirk to write *After the Gulag: A History of Memory in Russia's Far North*.

This is an important and highly recommended study not only because it examines a region profoundly shaped by the history of Soviet repression, but also because Kirk gives voice to former prisoners and explores how they remembered the Stalinist camps, how the experience marked their lives, and how they interpreted it during the period that I describe in my book *Gulag Memories* (Bogumił 2018) as the “carnival of memory.” By this I mean the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Russian society, in a spontaneous and unprecedented way, began to discuss in the public sphere the experience of Soviet repression. Former prisoners wrote letters recounting their experiences in the Gulag and reflecting on the significance of those experiences, sending them to the newly established Memorial Society—which at the time was the largest civic organization in Russia and arguably one of the most significant in the country's modern history—as well as to local newspapers, which became important arenas for public debate. Drawing on these memoirs, Kirk highlights the importance of what he calls the “brotherhoods of zeks [prisoners],” groups of former inmates who met regularly, often in one another's homes, and collectively shaped and negotiated their memories of the camps. In this respect, Kirk's book makes an important contribution to the existing scholarship on former prisoners' narratives of the Gulag experience. At the same time, by extending his analysis beyond personal testimonies to include other mnemonic media—such as exhibitions, monuments, and commemorative initiatives—it also provides valuable insight into the formation of Gulag memory in the Komi Republic.

The book consists of an introduction, five chapters, and an epilogue. In the introduction, Kirk provides a concise history of the Gulag camps in the Komi Republic, outlining the ethnic composition of the prisoners and emphasizing that between 68 and 75 percent of them had been convicted under Article 58 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation for “counterrevolutionary activity.” This distinguished the region from most other Gulag complexes, where political prisoners constituted a

much smaller proportion of the inmate population. Following the adoption of the 1991 Law on the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression, many former prisoners began writing to the newly established regional branches of the Memorial Society, seeking assistance in obtaining official rehabilitation. The importance they attached to this status is perhaps best captured by one of the former prisoners quoted by Kirk, who wrote: "I don't need any privileges. I want to die rehabilitated, nothing more" (p. 45). In addition to requesting rehabilitation, former prisoners used these letters to recount what they had endured and to reflect on how the Gulag experience had shaped their lives. Drawing on this rich collection of correspondence, Kirk succeeds in presenting former prisoners as active historical subjects engaged in the struggle to reclaim both their rights and their dignity. At the same time, he demonstrates how difficult this struggle was. In the absence of an established mnemonic framework through which the experience of Soviet repression could be publicly understood, former prisoners' memories remained fragmented. They were profoundly shaped by post-camp encounters and discussions with fellow survivors, but above all they developed in the shadow of the dominant Soviet metanarrative of the Great Victory in the Great Patriotic War, which in important ways constrained how the Gulag could be remembered and publicly articulated.

In the first chapter, Kirk reconstructs the history of the emergence of the Memorial movement in Syktyvkar, the capital of Komi Republic, and explains how the organization succeeded in gaining the trust of former prisoners, who gradually began entrusting it with their memoirs, thereby contributing to what he describes as the "institutionalization of Gulag returnees' collected memories" (p. 24). As Kirk argues, many former prisoners decided to share their recollections out of a sense of responsibility to preserve the memory of those who had not survived the camps. In doing so, they became active participants in the process of recovering and shaping public memory in the Komi Republic. One particularly interesting issue discussed in this chapter concerns the contested understanding of who should be recognized as a victim of political repression. While assisting former prisoners in obtaining official rehabilitation, Memorial activists engaged in debates among themselves as well as with state authorities over the very definition of the "victim." As Kirk demonstrates, members of Memorial sought to broaden this category beyond former Communist Party members to include exiles, children born in camps, and family members of the so-called enemies of the people. He also discusses a debate published in the newspaper *Krasnoe znamia* in 1989 (p. 28), in which a reader accused Memorial of whitewashing war criminals such as the Banderites and the Vlasovites, who had fought alongside Nazi Germany against the Red Army in the Great Patriotic War.

Although this example is highly revealing, Kirk does not develop it further by engaging with what Margaret Comer (2023) has conceptualized as "implicated victims." This issue received considerable attention in the special forum "Perpetrators, Collaborators, and Implicated Subjects" published in the *Slavic and East European Journal* and edited by Comer and Eneken Laanes. The editors and contributors demonstrate that the victims of Soviet and communist repression should not be understood simply as a collection of different persecuted groups. Rather, they constitute

an ethically ambiguous and internally contested community, within which experiences of victimhood, collaboration, complicity, and perpetration often intersect. Kirk's account, however, leaves many of these complexities unexplored. His brotherhood of *zeks*, reconstructed from a selected corpus of prisoners' memoirs, emerges as a remarkably coherent community, united by friendship, mutual support, and solidarity, in which members do not question one another's status as victims. While this portrayal captures an important dimension of post-Gulag sociality, it arguably underplays the moral ambiguities and internal tensions that characterized the broader community of former prisoners.

In the second chapter, Kirk discusses how the writings of former Gulag prisoners should be interpreted in relation to the existing scholarship before turning to the phenomenon of the brotherhood of *zeks* and its contribution to the formation of memory of Stalinist repression in the Komi Republic. He argues that this community was built upon bonds of friendship and mutual solidarity, while at the same time excluding certain groups from its boundaries. Kirk mentions only criminal prisoners as falling outside this community; as noted above, he does not address the more complex issue of implicated victims. Although his reconstruction is clearly selective and therefore necessarily incomplete, the chapter offers a compelling account of the diverse motivations that prompted former prisoners to write to Memorial. More importantly, it convincingly demonstrates how decades of enforced silence surrounding the Gulag made it difficult for many former prisoners to reconstruct their own experiences. Rather than producing coherent life narratives, many of their letters presented what Kirk describes as "a mosaic of contrasting images" (p. 104), reflecting the fragmentary and often disjointed character of post-Gulag remembering.

The third chapter is devoted entirely to the letters and artwork of one former prisoner, Konstantin Ivanov, who remained in the Komi Republic after his release from the Gulag. During the 1990s, he wrote 154 letters to the Vorkuta Museum and Exhibition Centre and donated 53 works of art that realistically depict everyday life in the camps. Through a close reading of these letters, Kirk demonstrates how Ivanov constructed two autobiographical selves: one narrating his life in the Gulag and the other his life after release. I share Jeffrey S. Hardy's assessment that this is the strongest chapter of the book, as it gives "voice to those who could not, often due to unresolved trauma, bring themselves to tell the full story of their Gulag experiences" (2024, 312). By combining textual and visual materials, Kirk offers a nuanced account of the long-term consequences of imprisonment and the complex ways in which former prisoners sought to reconstruct their identities after the camps.

The following chapter is likewise devoted entirely to the memories of a single former prisoner, this time Elena Markova. It is based on her letters, poetry, and an interview that Kirk conducted with her in 2017. The chapter revolves around the central question that Markova repeatedly asks herself: "How did I remain a human being?" Unlike many former prisoners like Nikolai Volkov discussed in chapter 2 who after their release identify themselves as Soviet citizens and wanted to be perceived as members of this community, Markova neither identified as Soviet nor embraced an explicitly anti-Soviet position. Instead, as Kirk argues, she found the strength to survive through

what he describes as “spiritual resistance after release” and by maintaining close relationships with a selected circle of former prisoners, who together formed what she called the “Vorkuta diaspora.” This chapter offers a particularly insightful exploration of the moral and existential dimensions of post-Gulag life, showing that survival did not end with release from the camps but continued as an ongoing struggle to preserve one’s humanity and reconstruct a meaningful social world.

In the final chapter, Kirk undertakes the formidable task of analyzing articles published in local newspapers across the Komi Republic from the late 1980s to 2021 that addressed the history and memory of political repression. On the one hand, he examines public debates, including discussions between former prisoners and those without direct experience of the Gulag, tracing changing understandings of the “enemies of the people,” who gradually came to be recognized as victims of political repression, as well as shifting meanings attached to victimhood itself. He then turns to debates surrounding the creation of memorial sites in the Komi Republic, such as the Dzimtenei memorial in Inta and the Monument to the Victims of Political Repressions in Syktyvkar, together with commemorative practices including the Week of Conscience in Ukhta.

While the breadth of the material analyzed is impressive, this chapter ultimately left me with the greatest sense of dissatisfaction. This is largely because Kirk does not engage with the growing body of scholarship on the memory infrastructure of political repression in the Komi Republic, including Sofia Gavrilova’s *Russia’s Regional Museums* (2023), my own *Gulag Memories* (2018), or the extensive Russian-language literature on the memory of Soviet repression in the Russian Far North by scholars such as Natalia Drannikova (2019, 2020). Instead, he largely reconstructs local memory debates on the basis of his own source material. As a result, it remains unclear what new insights his analysis contributes to existing understanding of the institutions, commemorative practices, and mnemonic landscapes of the Russian Far North. A more explicit dialogue with the existing literature would have enabled the author not only to situate his findings within the broader field but also to clarify the originality of his own contribution.

In the epilogue, Kirk argues that although by 2021 the Russian state’s approach to the memory of political repression had already begun to change and leading Memorial activists such as Mikhail Rogachev had passed away, memory in the Komi Republic continues to endure thanks to the existence of the brotherhood of *zeks* that he reconstructs throughout the book. Reading this conclusion, however, I found myself wondering whether it reflects a degree of wishful thinking rather than the current reality of the region. Like the rest of the Russian Federation, the Komi Republic is now experiencing the systematic dismantling of sites commemorating political repression, alongside the renewed marginalization, tabooization, and even criminalization of public discussion of Soviet state violence.

Kirk argues that the testimonies and letters collected by Memorial constitute a form of collected memory, preserved for future generations. Yet under the conditions of an increasingly aggressive state policy aimed at erasing the memory of political repression, these collections appear to function more as soft memory than as hard

memory (Etkind 2004). They preserve traces of the past but offer little protection against the social oblivion that is gradually engulfing the Komi Republic, much as it is other regions of the Russian Federation. Moreover, the members of the brotherhood of *zeks* belong to a rapidly disappearing generation, and many have already passed away. Whether their descendants will continue to sustain this memory remains an open question. Equally plausible is the possibility that these memories will increasingly come to be experienced not as a legacy to preserve but as a burden—and, under current political conditions, as a source of fear of renewed stigmatization.

The principal strength of Kirk's book lies in its unique documentary and historical value. Conducting this kind of research in Russia would today be virtually impossible, and the fate of some of the archives on which the book is based remains uncertain. Kirk gained access to exceptional source materials, many of which may no longer be available to researchers, making the book an invaluable record of a memory landscape that has since undergone profound political transformation. At the same time, the book makes an important contribution to scholarship on the legacies of mass repression by demonstrating the crucial role of social networks, former prisoner communities, and civic initiatives in processes of coming to terms with the Stalinist past.

The book would undoubtedly have benefited from a more sustained engagement with the existing scholarship, including not only English-language but also Russian-language studies on the memory of Soviet repression. Yet this limitation is shared by many works in the field. In my view, the originality of Kirk's source base and the historical significance of the materials he documents far outweigh these shortcomings. *After the Gulag* will therefore remain an essential point of reference for anyone interested in the memory of Stalinist repression, the history of Memorial, and the politics of remembering in Russia's Far North.

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