

Call for papers

The Gulag Unbound: Remembering Soviet forced labour

The history of the Gulag is conventionally understood as a story of enormous injustice and heroic endurance. This story is “bound” to the compelling narrative of suffering of the intellectual in the Gulag, exemplified by the classic accounts of its highly literate survivors or mourners of its victims. Until recently, these narratives had been the principal prisms through which we saw the Soviet forced labour. The narrative of intellectual martyrdom was powerful, and its great moral prestige fuelled opposition to the Soviet system. Since the 1990s, the state archives of the Gulag have gradually been made available to scholars and this flood of documents must be weighed against the memoirs of survivors. The enormous paper trail generated by the security apparatus and its massive penal bureaucracy now challenges historians to consider the Gulag through the eyes of the perpetrators, those who imagined, built, and maintained the forced labour camps. How can we evaluate the factual validity, bureaucratic rivalries, and ideological aims that underpin these documents? How far can we trust the archival documents of the managers of the Gulag? With the issue of trust coming to the forefront of empirical research, moral and philosophical problems of interpretative judgement become more pertinent than ever.

The new bodies of source material compel us to reassess traditional narratives of Stalinist violence, and we are confronted with almost unbearable choices. How far should historians attempt to “reconcile” the diverging picture of the Gulag found in survivor memoirs and in official documents? How do we evaluate the economic consequences of Gulag activity? What moral and philosophical problems arise when we compare Soviet camps to those organized by the Nazi regime or Communist China? What is the place for the experience and testimony of Gulag employees and criminal prisoners? How far does the new material available to us challenge commemorative practices? What do the politics of memory in Russia and other post-Soviet states teach us about history of the Gulag, and history as a discipline? Is there anything to learn from comparison with other penal-colonial systems such as transportation to Australia? Is the paradigm of internal colonization and the broader context of postcolonial studies productive for understanding and remembering the Gulag?

Means of the resistance, sabotage, and subversion in the Gulag and other Soviet “corrective institutions” need more research. While colonial anthropology has developed sophisticated means of identifying “weapons of the weak”, Gulag historiography is only beginning to apply such analysis to the archived documentation of the camps. Like any long-term system of life management, the Gulag developed its ways of healing, entertaining, and educating its population. Inmates responded to their particular condition by developing equally specific means of artistic creativity, religious ritual, and erotic behaviour. These aesthetic, medical, religious, and pedagogical aspects of the life in the Gulag need to be discussed in conjunction – or counterpoint – with its archival history. The purpose of this symposium is to reflect on the challenges currently confronting history, cultural studies, anthropology, and other disciplines who work with these unbound – documentary, memoiristic, and folklore – archives of the Gulag.

We invite papers examining these themes to be presented at a workshop to be held at Cambridge University, 29–30 June 2012. The workshop is organized by Alexander Etkind of Cambridge University and Dan Healey of Reading University, with support from both institutions and the Memory at War Project, which is financed by the HERA foundation. Our confirmed keynote speaker is Professor Lynne Viola, University of Toronto, author of *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements* (Oxford & New York: OUP, 2007). Limited financial assistance for participants may be available. Papers should be original unpublished work, and will be pre-circulated to workshop participants. To propose a paper, please send a 300-word abstract and 2-page CV to Ms Jill Gather, Memory at War Project, info@memoryatwar.org, by Friday, 24 February 2012.