

Topography of Terror: Mapping Sites of Soviet Repressions in Moscow

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The city of Moscow was at the epicenter of the state terror campaigns of the Stalin era, and yet these events left remarkably few visible traces on the urban landscape. Everyday popular knowledge of the specific sites linked to the repressions is generally very low. But in recent years Muscovites have been rediscovering their city's history. In this article we introduce the project "Topography of Terror," a grassroots initiative aimed at uncovering and mapping Moscow's sites of memory.

"Topography of Terror" is the name of the website (topos.memo.ru) that has been produced based on the extensive research conducted as part of the International Memorial Society project "Moscow: Sites of Memory" that began in 2013. The website is aimed at representing Soviet repressive policies on the contemporary map of Moscow. Our project team consists of International Memorial researchers and a range of volunteers, including students, photographers, cartographers, graphic designers, and programmers. Prominent experts in Soviet history (Arsenii Roginskii, Nikita Petrov, and others) have also provided generous assistance.

The concept of mapping sites of memory is closely related to the rediscovery and reclaiming of Moscow's urban environment that is currently underway. Recently, during the mass protests in Moscow in 2011–2012, this idea became very popular. Nowadays, civil society is rarely consulted on issues of Moscow city planning, and this has increasingly meant that people who live in the city have to put up with decisions taken by the local and federal government—

decisions that are often highly dubious from a whole range of perspectives: ethical, aesthetic, ecological, and pragmatic. Among other strategies that can help to counter these processes and to reconnect citizens with their city, restoring the memory of previous generations that lived in the city can serve as a powerful tool. Our project is thus aimed at “retrieving the lost city,” and bringing historical memory back into the public sphere.

We adopted the concept of “sites of memory” developed by Pierre Nora as the theoretical basis for our project.¹ According to Nora, sites of memory represent the collective memory of each society. In Russia and other post-Soviet states, the creation of sites of memory is complicated by the fact that historical memory and collective identity were manipulated repeatedly by state authorities throughout the twentieth century. Consequently, we often do not know exactly where potential sites of memory are located. In addition, the local and federal government do not seem to support the labeling of such sites. It is also unclear which of these sites would gain recognition and approval by citizens; at present, Moscow residents are generally almost completely unaware of the recent history of the buildings that surround them. Therefore, we are focused on doing the difficult ground work necessary to identify places in Moscow that bear the memory of crimes and human rights abuses of the Soviet era, with a view to restoring the city’s identity and deepening our knowledge of the city’s past.

The website’s name, Topography of Terror, was inspired by the well-known documentation center in Berlin (www.topographie.de). After much deliberation, we adopted the same name because it accurately characterizes the mission of our project. Although our possibilities are far more limited, we have learned a great deal—ethically, methodologically, and technically—from our German colleagues. The museum in Berlin is now quite large, but thirty years ago it too started as a civic and non-governmental initiative. The Berlin Topography of Terror project eventually succeeded in displaying its exhibitions in exactly the

¹ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring, 1989): 7-24.

same place where Nazi Germany's state security headquarters and prison were located—a powerful and symbolic location indeed.

Two Sides of Repressions: The State Monopoly on Violence

We are engaged in mapping not only the memory of the victims, but also the memory of the people and institutions that implemented the repressive policies. As Hannah Arendt argued, the machinery of the state can function only if people perform their tasks obediently, without much reflection. Therefore, it is important to reveal the entire chain of repressive orders—from beginning to end—so that one can clearly understand that every step involved in state crimes is connected to concrete decisions made by specific people.

Preserving the memory of victims and revealing their individual stories of life and death is undoubtedly the main part of commemoration. From the very beginning the main task of International Memorial was to commemorate victims who suffered from the repressions under Soviet rule. But if the memory of victims becomes the only part of this discourse, fewer people might be interested in exploring the causes behind the drama. One might think that political repressions were not the result of real people's decisions, but were events akin to natural disasters like tornadoes or earthquakes. The state has powerful means at its disposal to construct and attribute values, and consequently, to manipulate collective memory.² In Russian society's collective memory there is an almost complete absence of information about the authors and executors of repressive orders. In some ways, the government and the Russian Orthodox Church (now connected closely with the state) have admitted that the repressions did in fact take place in the 1920s–1950s. Besides the civic initiatives, some monuments to the victims of the Soviet terror have also been produced through cooperation with the state or church authorities. Yet, the main problem is that in the state's modern commemorative discourse

² Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006), 112–18.

there are no reflections about the individuals and institutions responsible for the repressive policies.

The right to violence is delegated exclusively to the state, and the state authorities rely on this monopoly completely. The Russian authorities do not wish to call into question the authority and legitimacy of the NKVD-KGB organs, even when it comes to the Stalin era, because this would raise inconvenient questions about the state's use of violence in the present. They do not wish to initiate a public discussion about society's right to dispute and place limits upon the state's use of violence, in part because of the threat this would pose to their own legitimacy. Accordingly, there is no public consensus about the state security apparatus in Soviet history. There are only a few references to the history of Soviet state security (Cheka-NKVD-KGB) in the public sphere. However, those rare references that do exist tend to be embarrassing. Consider, for example, the new gravestone erected in memory of Vasilii Blokhin, who was infamous for carrying out large-scale executions, which was recently placed in the Donskoe Cemetery, or the opening of the Stalin Museum in the Tver district in 2015.³ Such episodes do not occur very often, but they are symptomatic of a larger problem.

International Memorial Society makes a concerted effort to bring discussions about state violence and responsibility for political repressions into the public sphere. The Topography of Terror project is thus devoted mainly to documenting the repressive machinery of the state.

Structure of the Website

The purpose of our website is to explore the structure and the working principles of the repressive system. We are working to find out and to explain to our readers exactly what happened to a person who was arrested by the NKVD-KGB during his or her imprisonment and examination in court (if a trial even took place)

³ A. Polivanova, "Zdes' byl Stalin", *Takie Dela*, 19 October 2015, <https://takiedela.ru/2015/10/stalin>.

and to reveal sites where people were shot and buried, or where they were sent for transit before being transferred to the Gulag.

The website itself is an address book and database about the Soviet terror that took place in the city. There are two ways to explore the contents: via the map or via thematic articles. On the map of Moscow, you can activate one or several themed layers and find out more about the history of the marked locations. Every article includes the following fields: address; photograph of the location (if possible, from the period under discussion, or at least a present-day image); history of the building; and a description of the repressions connected with the site. We take care to document this as closely as possible, providing full archival references and specifying what exactly we do and do not know for sure about the sites in question. In the event that we are unable to locate a particular site accurately even after an exhaustive search through all possible sources, we indicate this by shading the area in question more faintly.

The articles on the website are organized by theme, and currently feature the following categories, directly connected to the Soviet terror: Sites of Imprisonment; Sites of Mass Executions; Courts and Non-Judicial Organs; Concentration Camps of the 1920s; Burial Sites; and *Sharashki* (secret laboratories in the Gulag labor camp system). A section devoted to the Gulag in Moscow, documenting the forced labor camps of the 1940s–1950s located within the city limits, is coming soon. There is also a section devoted to the history of non-violent public protests in Moscow.

Our interpretation of political repressions is broad: we are mapping not only direct repressions (such as imprisonment, mass executions, and exile), but also the relationship between individuals and Soviet society. The political system of the Soviet state overwhelmed every individual, giving him or her few possibilities to live and think freely. Therefore, we have also developed such topics as Varlam Shalamov's Moscow; Science under the Repressions; and Children of the State (perhaps the most tragic topic, since millions of children became direct or indirect victims of the totalitarian regime).

We set out to discover and to represent on the map the sites that are not known by people who live in Moscow. The slogan of our project is “This is right here,” and our aim is to show that people can find traces of Soviet terror along their habitual everyday routes, right near their home or their office. For example, the center of Moscow formerly housed secret prisons—Taganskaia, Sretenskaia, and Novinskaia—but these are also completely forgotten, and their precise locations remain unknown. And few people in Moscow know that during the first years of Soviet rule, approximately twenty concentration camps were opened in the city. Concentration camps were sites of enforced isolation where the Soviet regime sentenced citizens who were considered politically and socially dangerous or undesirable. In most cases, concentration camp prisoners were also sentenced to forced labor. Even though the camps were closed by 1923, the same idea of economics based on forced labor was used later in the well-known gulag system.

ТОПОГРАФИЯ ТЕРРОРА — МОСКВА

Экскурсии Афиша О проекте Города

Места заключения

- Коломенский завод
- Краснопresненская пересыльная тюрьма
- «Кубовская шарашка»
- Лагерь принудработ № 1 при Московско-Казанской железной дороге (не позднее 5 июня 1920)
- Лефортовская тюрьма
- Лефортовский арестный дом (1917-1924)
- Лубинская внутренняя тюрьма
- Мерфинская шарашка
- Московская городская электростанция (ОТБ-12)
- Московская центральная больница мест заключения

КРАСНОПРЕСНЕНСКАЯ ПЕРЕСЫЛЬНАЯ ТЮРЬМА

Адрес: г. Москва, 1-й Силикатный пр-д, д. 11, СИЗО № 3 УФСИН РФ

Окрестности железнодорожной станции Пресня с начала 1920-х годов использовались для концентрации и пересылки заключенных. В конце 1930-х годов рядом со станцией построен Пересыльный лагерь, официально — пересыльно-питательный пункт, ставший важнейшим транзитным узлом ГУЛАГА. С 1944 по 1948 год лагерь реконструируется и строятся новые здания. В 1946 году пересыльный пункт переименован в тюрьму.

The website also enables visitors to track episodes from the history of resistance in Moscow, such as the route of the anti-Stalinist demonstration on 7 November 1927. This demonstration began in the morning with students giving speeches in the yard of Moscow State University’s old building on Mokhovaia Street. A crowd consisting of several thousand people then marched toward

Red Square, but the entrance from the side of Vozdvizhenka Street was blocked. The majority of the members of this oppositional demonstration were imprisoned. This demonstration was the last open political act against dictatorship in the Soviet Union, yet it has been almost forgotten. Our project aims to recover this lost history and to concretize it by mapping it onto the cityscape.

Another example is the execution chamber of the Cheka-NKVD near Lubianka Square. More than ten thousand people were killed here, and yet the site has been consigned to oblivion. It was located in the Cheka garage that was built in 1918 in the courtyard of the building on Varsonofevskii Lane. It was used as a special space for regular mass executions until 1948.

We use all available sources to conduct our research, including archival documents, old address books, maps, newspapers, and magazines. We interview witnesses and experts, and try to track down sources from the Russian state archives. This is the most difficult task because even though we often know where the necessary sources are held, our access is restricted. Therefore, we have to make extensive use of indirect sources, such as the archives of party sections of prisons, administrative documents, and other related material. Though the history of the state machinery is our focus, we also follow the main principle of International Memorial which is to remember every individual story. So we include many quotations from published and unpublished memoirs, letters, and other personal documents of this kind.

Despite these limitations, making new archival documents available for public access is a huge part of our activity. We consider our website to be an educational project in the field of public history. We are doing our best to give our readers the opportunity to learn hard facts about crimes committed under Soviet rule. We aim to minimize interpretation in the texts on the website; it is our deliberate intention to let readers come to their own conclusions, so that reflections about the past become their own active work.

Further Activities

Eventually, we hope to extend our efforts to offline activities in the Moscow's urban environment. At the moment, there are two related projects underway: we are installing road signs pointing to the vanished historical locations on the territory of partner museums, and we are working on plans to develop an exhibition about the construction of the Moscow-Volga Canal built by the hands of prisoners from Dmitlag (Dmitrovskii Concentration Camp). We conduct walking tours in Moscow and recently we started publishing audio guides online (izi.travel/memorial). Some of the guides are already available in English. An English version of the website is coming soon as well.⁴

We plan to develop our projects further as part of our ongoing effort to present more details about Soviet repressions to the public, and we hope that our work with the past will help prevent such crimes in the future.

⁴ We are looking for volunteers who can help with translation from Russian into English. Contact information is available on the website.