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### Contrasting Russian and American Media Perspectives on the Soviet Gulag

In seeking an expert historical opinion on the media representation and public conceptualization of the gulag in these two countries, I was directed to Erik Scott, a History Professor at the University of Kansas who specializes in Russian History. He teaches classes on Russian history and the Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union, and has published works on Georgian culture and Diaspora.

In our meeting he posited that there are differing concepts of trauma between Russia and U.S. Namely, that Russians as a nation contextualize their trauma in relation to the sheer amount of Russian lives lost in World War II. On the other hand, the only comparable metric that Americans can use conceive of such widespread trauma is the holocaust, even though it did not necessarily affect the United States as a nation itself.

Finally, he made note of an ongoing debate in Russia surrounding representation of the nation's history, especially considering the ever-changing socio-political climate which has most relevantly seen a recent growth of Stalinist exceptionalism, which has discouraged the representation of Soviet misdeeds. He touched on ongoing conflicts surrounding human rights in Russia from before the Soviet era which in several ways, continue today.

Professor Scott's informed theories provide a sturdy foundation from which to investigate the question of how these two countries' media representations and public perceptions of the Soviet gulag system compare. Literature, film, and historical findings, as well as how they are presented, what information is included, what information is omitted, and conversations surrounding the historical accuracy of materials and sources between Russia and the United States will be analyzed and compared

to provide a historical example of the difference in mass communication surrounding the gulag system between the two countries.

### Soviet Era Literature

It can be accurately stated that the first ripples in public and international discourse surrounding the gulag system were made by Soviet era writers who had lived in the camps themselves. Their primary & secondary accounts, memoirs, and biographic collections brought to light and heavily influenced conceptions of the human rights issues experienced in the gulag system.

The works of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Janusz Bardach & Kathleen Gleeson, Slavomir Rawicz, and others, though originally at the time of their writing were scarcely published, for several decades, were the major public source of information regarding the gulag. Thus, these works went on to form the foundation of the International conception of the Soviet gulag system.

However, in the post-Soviet era, as more of the historical record is becoming available, the historical authenticity of these literary works is being more and more questioned, while simultaneously giving rise to newer, non-fiction publications focusing on historical record and accurate anecdotal material. Regardless, American gulag museums still include these works in their lists of recommended literature (such as at <http://www.thegulag.org/resource-library>).

### The Gulag Archipelago

The Gulag Archipelago is a collection of primary and secondary anecdotal sources of experiences within the gulag system and Stalin's Soviet Union compiled by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. In non-academic circles and by some western museums, this collection is widely accepted as non-fiction. However, its historical authenticity is also widely criticized. Historians cite Solzhenitsyn's overestimation of inmate

statistics as compared to official documents, the unreliability of anecdotal evidence, and the embellished and propagandistic tone of the work as lacking objectivity.

Among Solzhenitsyn's critics is his own wife, who claims in her 1974 memoir, "Sanya: My Life with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn" that she was "'perplexed' that the West had accepted 'The Gulag Archipelago' as 'the solemn, ultimate truth,' saying its significance had been 'overestimated and wrongly appraised.'", and "she said that her husband did not regard the work as 'historical research, or scientific research.' She contended that it was, rather, a collection of 'camp folklore,'" (<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/06/world/natalya-reshetovskaya-84-is-dead-solzhenitsyn-s-wife-questioned-gulag.html>). Despite all the above, The Gulag Archipelago is still seen widely in America and the West as the definitive work on the Soviet gulag system.

#### Memoirs and Film Adaptations

When A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich was published in 1962, it marked the beginning of the gulag memoir as a genre. In the first publication of its kind, Solzhenitsyn describes life in a gulag labor camp through the eyes of political prisoner, Ivan Denisovich. While fictional, this memoir was meant to be an autobiographical window into, and call for awareness to, the conditions of the Soviet prison camp.

Another such memoir, this one written by Janusz Bardach and Kathleen Gleeson, titled Man is Wolf to Man, describes Bardach negotiating Soviet military service as a young Polish Jew followed by his experience in the Kolyma camps. It is worth noting that the events detailed in Bardach's non-fiction memoir after he was court-martialed match precisely with one of the anecdotes presented in Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago. As Professor Scott postulated, western readers often perceive similarities between these gulag memoirs and Holocaust memoirs such as Elie Weisel's Night, among others.

In 2010, the film “The Way Back”, an American adaptation of the memoir of escaped Soviet political prisoner, Slavomir Rawicz, was released. Historian and gulag non-fiction writer Anne Ablebaum acted as consultant to the production to ensure historical accuracy ([http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1023114/trivia?ref=tt\\_trv\\_trv](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1023114/trivia?ref=tt_trv_trv)). Though the memoir that this film was based on, Путь домой “The Long Walk”, is considered to be non-fiction by American Gulag Museum [www.thegulag.org](http://www.thegulag.org), it is unclear as to whether or not the events described actually happened, or if they did, whether or not it was Rawicz who endured them (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-11900920>).

Though there is some question as to the authenticity of some of these memoirs, the American canon of the Soviet gulag more or less accepts the material within to be representative of actual camp conditions and events, as evidenced by their non-fiction classifications in bookstores and the online American Gulag Museum.

#### American and Russian Gulag Museums

While there is no physical museum to the gulag system in the United States, The Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation maintain an online museum on communism, which includes a museum on the gulag, at <http://www.thegulag.org/>. Exhibits in this online museum include a “Virtual Gulag”, which is a 3D interactive tour of a virtual prison camp, a “Gulag Timeline” sequencing events in Soviet history surrounding the establishment of the gulag system, an interactive “Map of The Gulag” showing all camp locations by region, an “Art of The Gulag” gallery featuring a collection of paintings by Nikolai Getman, who was at one time a prisoner. The site also features links to other online gulag exhibits, including several Russia based museums. A notable feature of this museum is that it features a “Gulag Library” page, which contains links to fiction and non-fiction literature and film, including all the publications mentioned above. This is an interesting feature for a museum to include because of the ambiguity of the historical authenticity of these works.

Of the several Russian museums that include gulag related exhibits, there are a few that see it as their focus, including the Gulag History State Museum (<http://www.gmig.ru/>). Their exhibits include On-site performance art, photos, and prisoner writings, and an online collection of interviews with surviving prisoners. As the name suggests, this museum may be considered one on the museums which Russian state officials have a hand in curating. Мемориал, a human rights oriented Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) investigating Soviet era, historic and contemporary violations, including the gulag system, currently maintains an Online Gulag Museum (<http://www.gulagmuseum.org/>) as well. It features a collection of photos, paintings, documents, and profiles of prisoners as well as exhaustive lists of local Russian museums with gulag related exhibits, camps, prisoners. Unlike the American gulag museum which features gulag related literature, Мемориал's museum makes their bibliography publicly available on the site, allowing historians to scrutinize all of their sources for authenticity.

#### Мемориал and the Russian State

Мемориал Human Rights Center (<https://memohrc.org/>), which is constantly investigating human rights issues in both the present as well as historically, operates internationally but is based in Russia. As an international NGO, they receive international funding, including from the United States. Likely stemming from tensions with the Russian state, Мемориал Russia has been labelled a foreign governmental entity by the state. Furthermore, their offices were raided in 2009, during which their entire digital archive (including the entire collection of online museum files) were seized. Apart from simply being a watchdog for human rights violations in Russia, Professor Scott postulated that the gulag museum archives may have been seized because they pose a threat to the cultural shift of growing Stalinist exceptionalism.

#### Russian State Sponsored Mass Media

In two online stories from Russian State-funded news media outlet, Russia Today (RT) from 2008 and 2012, the differences between what is reported and what is not betray a growing trend of Stalinist exceptionalism over time. Later in 2015, BBC reported that all connections to Stalin at prison camp sites (namely the Perm 36 site museum) had been removed (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31711287>). The RT article from 2008 (<https://www.rt.com/news/stalins-death-camp-survivors-shed-light-on-gulag/>) mentions Stalin by name, “forced labor”, and interestingly estimates 3 million prisoners killed in Kolyma sites alone. This is notable because it conflicts with more conservative estimates, and falls within the realm of the overestimations made by Solzhenitsyn in The Gulag Archipelago. In contrast, the 2012 article (<https://www.rt.com/news/gulag-memorial-museum-perm-955/>), which focuses on the “Perm 36” site neglects to mention Stalin, though it does acknowledge political incarceration and “torture” – what kind and the severity is not reported.

#### Russian-American Contrast

To synthesize the above findings and analyses, the American representation of the gulag system is both historically and contemporarily based in the Soviet era literature and memoirs of prisoners on the subject. Widespread public trust in the historical authenticity of the memoirs and anecdotes of authors and their sources have been allowed to shape the media representation of the gulag in America. The trauma expressed by these writers is contextualized in the national American conception by comparing it to the trauma of the holocaust, which is not necessarily an entirely American national trauma. It must also be noted that a national history of oppositional political bias likely affects the perception, and stokes interest in, the human rights violations of the Soviet gulag system.

The Russian media representation surrounding the gulag system, on the other hand, is less reliant on the literature, and considering the natural advantage of access to these materials, is more based on artefactual evidence. In the theory of trauma posited by Professor Scott, the trauma caused by

the prison system, while significant, is contextualized, and thus dwarfed by other national traumas, namely the sheer amount Soviet lives lost in World War II. As seen in the experiences of Мемориал, the investigation of historical Soviet human rights misdeeds faces governmental and cultural opposition due to a growing bias favoring Soviet and Stalinist exceptionalism that has been proven to affect official media representation over time.