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From memory to denial in Russia

Robert Skidelsky | Warwick University | 03 November 2015

My most painful experience in Russia was a visit to Perm-36 in 1998, the only one of Stalin's forced-labor camps to have been preserved. I was in Perm, a city in the Urals, to take part in a seminar of the Moscow School of Political Studies. Founded by the remarkable Lena Nemirovskaya, the school's purpose was to introduce young post-communist Russians to democracy, self-government, and capitalism.

One bitterly cold March day, I joined a few friends on a trip to the former camp. Built in the early 1940s as a "regular" labor camp, Perm-36 was converted into a concentration camp for political prisoners in 1972. The last prisoners were released in 1987, three years into Mikhail Gorbachev's rule. In 1998, it was being restored as a Gulag Museum by Memorial, a human-rights group founded by the dissident physicist Andrei Sakharov, to remind Russians of their totalitarian past.

We were shown around the maximum-security wing. Surrounded by a barbed-wire perimeter, it had housed the political prisoners, mostly from the non-Russian Soviet republics, who were considered to be "particularly dangerous recidivists." After a Ukrainian television crew filmed the site in 1989, part of it was deliberately destroyed.

It was obvious that the prisoners had been subject to psychological torture and extreme physical hardship. The tiny radiator in each cell could hardly have dented the October-to-April frost. The prisoners slept on wooden planks or iron bunks. Their clothes and bedcovers were made of cotton, not wool, and an open hole served as the cell's lavatory.

Our guide, Maya, explained that the authorities liked to put together prisoners who got on each other's nerves. During the day, they were moved across the corridor to identical cells in which they uselessly worked making iron implements. For one hour each day, they were allowed into an "exercise block," a nine-foot (2.7 meters), tin-lined cube, with a barbed-wire roof and a guard post on top. The only other "recreation" was a weekly show of propaganda films.

Of the 56 "dangerous recidivists" held in Perm-36 in the 1980s, seven died. One was the Ukrainian poet and nationalist Vasyl Stus. The authorities called it a suicide, but survivors say that for fun, the guards unscrewed one of the wooden planks from the wall and dropped it on Stus's head as he lay sleeping.

As Maya recounted the grisly story, I watched the faces of the two young male guards who accompanied us. Their expressions were as frozen as the ground outside. Were they thinking about football or about making love to their girlfriends? Given enough vodka, would they, too, have been capable of murder for fun? The answer, I fear, is probably yes. Evil systems never seem to struggle to find the zombie henchmen they need.

Organisations like Memorial and the Moscow School of Political Studies have no place in Vladimir Putin's Russia. Officially, they are deemed "foreign agents" and have been subject to so much legal harassment that it is almost impossible for them to function.

Today, the Gulag Museum is under different management. "The new presentation," write Mikhail Danilovich and Robert Coalson, "is devoted not to the repressive forced-labor practices of the Stalin era but to the timber production at the plant and to its contribution to the Soviet victory in World War II." And, after 20 years, the Moscow School of Political Studies has been forced to suspend its Russian operations.

The fate of the museum and the school is part of the wider clampdown on freedom of expression and behavior in Putin's third presidential term. Dissidents are routinely dubbed deviants, fifth columnists, and traitors, as the regime leads a drive for national unity based on religion, tradition, and paranoid rhetoric.

This represents a major shift from Russia's early post-Soviet days. The liberal Russia's Choice party, led by the country's first democratic prime minister, Yegor Gaidar, received 15.5% of the vote in the 1993 general election, and with its allies formed the largest bloc in the Duma. At the time, this was regarded as a catastrophic failure. Today, liberal candidates cannot even get into the Duma.

How has this come to pass? Why have the hopes of Gorbachev's glasnost been so cruelly snuffed out?

A widespread view is that Russia is simply reverting to type – freedom was never more than a fleeting vowel in its historical alphabet. But this is a facile explanation. True, Russian liberalism has contributed to its own demise, by its incompetence and factionalism. But the West did not help. In the 1990s, it failed to put money behind the economic reforms that it sponsored. Expanding NATO into the Baltic States in 2002 – the Alliance's first enlargement into former Soviet territory – was a catastrophic mistake, which made it almost impossible for a Russian to be both patriotic and pro-Western. By both omission and commission, the West cut the ground from under Russian political liberalism, enabling the ascendancy of Putinism.

So far, Putin has displayed an accurate sense of limits. He allows Russians to dream of greatness without getting them into serious trouble. Under his leadership, Russia has shrugged off sanctions, forged a new alliance with China, and annoyed – but not openly challenged – the West in Syria. But those who know Putin say that he brooks no argument – he is the only one setting the limits. And no one can maintain supreme power for as long as he has without being corrupted.

For the moment, Putinism is the only game in town. But, although the forces represented by Memorial and the Moscow School of Political Studies have been marginalised, they have not been eradicated.

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