

Local legacies of the GULag in Siberia

Anthropological reflections

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Abstract: This essay, based on field notes from 1976 to 2013, explores resonances of the GULag and exile system in Siberia, focusing on often ignored indigenous peoples in villages and towns. Interethnic relations, diverse community relationships with prison camps, and dynamics of Russian Orthodox and pre-Christian spirituality are explored. Debates about how to understand, teach, and memorialize the significance of the Stalinist system are analyzed, as are issues of shame, moral debilitation, and cultural revitalization. Featured cases include the Khanty of West Siberia, Sibiriaki of West and East Siberia, plus Évený, Évenki, Yukagir, and Sakha of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). The author argues that what local people have chosen to emphasize as they reflect on and process the GULag varies greatly with their and their ancestors' specific experiences of the camps and exiles, as well as with their degrees of indigeneity.

Keywords: Gulag, indigeneity, interethnic relations, Siberia

Consequences of the Stalinist GULag system have reached far into local communities, leaving legacies of bitterness and occasional attempts at spiritual reconciliation. The following cases, drawn from intermittent fieldwork in Siberia beginning in 1976 and extending to 2013, reveal a range of local, interactive, multiethnic responses to the tragedy of human suffering in the GULag. They constitute a tentative effort toward multilocal historical ethnographies connecting the vast GULag system to its “archipelago” surroundings. Traces of the GULag have bubbled up over the years unexpectedly, constituting a significant body of volunteered information that diverse interlocutors thought I should know. This information is supplemented here by research and reflection that reveal the

personal and emotional nature of the material for many, including myself, as multiple generations attempt to understand their painful memories in a process that Alexander Etkind (2013) has called “warped mourning.”¹

This article is organized thematically and geographically, since the timing of the narratives and vignettes is haphazard and overlapping. While a neat chronological approach is effective when dealing with changing bureaucratic policies “from above,” it fails when describing more messy and complex responses to terror, pain, and shame “from below.” These traumas have spawned partial, sometimes distorted memories that deserve analysis and catharsis.²

A major goal is to grapple with diverse kinds of interethnic relations that were generated by



the system of GULag camps and their local community support networks. A cliché among multiethnic political prisoners, spread further by the intelligentsias that tacitly or actively supported them, was that Soviet authorities paid Natives well to hunt down and turn in escaped prisoners, who were treated inhumanely. Some of the following accounts help belie or make more complex such stereotypes about Siberian Natives. I suspect that camp guards and officials mendaciously threatened prisoners with capture by “wild” Natives as a way to instill extra fear, when they had no intention and no need to follow through with “bounty” rewards for Natives they had already bullied into submission.

Locally grounded, highly contextualized perspectives by definition defy generalizations yet can stimulate theoretical implications. I suggest that supposedly ingrained and unhealthy cultural patterns in interethnic relations can be changed when people themselves openly acknowledge officially sanctioned brutality and actively work to expose and self-consciously analyze its ripple effects. This is the deeper meaning of the process that Mikhail Gorbachev and those around him set in motion when they signaled the legitimacy of recovering “blank spots of history.” The narratives and perspectives that follow are not simply about power and powerlessness. More subtly, they convey various ways in which those with power interact with those without power, and how each is changed in those processes of interaction. Furthermore, no one ethnic or indigenous group should be automatically correlated with power or powerlessness, given early Soviet policies of “advancing” indigenous peoples, and given Russian authorities’ cruelty to their own people.

With these narratives and perspectives, we are plunged into squirmingly uncomfortable cases of scapegoating and conspiracy (close cousins), as well as learned cruelty and sadism. But we also see glimmers of community building and spiritual recovery.

Khanty perspectives and “Sibiriaki” legacies

During fieldwork in Ob-Ugrian Khanty villages in the summer of 1976, I learned that some Khanty reindeer-breeding families in the 1940s had been horrified to find forced settlers deported to the Khanty-Mansiiski okrug near their “culture base” of Kazym. They were told these settlers were “enemies of the people” and were frightened of them. Much worse, some of the settlers were housed without Khanty permission in Khanty traditional winter semisubterranean homes. These basic dirt-floor homes, rather than being abandoned as the local Russian authorities who reassigned them allegedly claimed, were instead part of the regular seasonal rotation that nomadic families continued to practice, despite official proclamations about completed settlement of the nomads in the 1930s.

Khanty perspectives on this unexpected, jarring interaction have survived in local memory. Khanty interlocutors felt that both they and the settlers were being punished by officious “new-comer” Russian officials who poorly understood indigenous lifestyles, motivations, and productivity. Khanty recalled that they had to fight to get their homes back, and then they attempted to help the interloping settlers build other housing in time for the harsh winter.³

The legacy of working together in the sub-Arctic to get the settlers more appropriately housed is part of what has intensified over several generations a sense of identity for those committed to living in Siberia as “Sibiriaki.” In the 2010 census, increasing numbers of mixed ethnic and Slavic-background inhabitants of “Rossiia” living east of the Urals identified as “Sibiriak,” an identity that has become quite controversial. Some of these came from early settlers, intermixed families from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century migrations, but many were from descendants of GULag prisoners released yet not allowed to return to European Russia, as well as from families of deported exiles. Their significance in Siberia has been underestimated in historical literature, as has

the survival of Russian Orthodoxy in remote settlements.⁴

Russian Orthodox perspectives and miracle healing legacies

An important Russian Orthodox complex built in the post-Soviet period reveals a contrasting resonance: how Russians and Sibiriki have gradually come to terms with their local GULag history. On an island near the Cossack settlement of Achair, a half-hour boat ride on the Irtysh River from the town of Omsk, the Achair Cross Convent was established in the 1990s. In 2003, a recently ensconced nun recalled that local authorities had hoped to use the land for something productive. “But nothing would grow on this land of blood and sorrow,” she explained to our small group of sympathetic ethnographers. Local businessmen also could find no use for the land. So Omsk officials decided to donate the land to the Russian Orthodox Church, especially since it had been a female commune and church site in the early twentieth century.

By the 1930s, the church was destroyed and the site became part of the prison labor system, where an estimated 200,000 people died over a period of 16 years. Political and criminal convicts were mixed together and housed in unheated, flimsy barracks. Fed poor-quality oats and forced to log in extreme cold, the prisoners died at a rate of about 35 a day. Their bodies were left to rot in ditches, and the territory became a closed zone until 1991, when local officials showed the ravaged territory to a profoundly shocked Metropolitan Feodosii of Omsk. He requested that a memorial cross be placed on the island by the local Lesnoi collective farm.

In stages, about 50 hectares of land were donated for agriculture, convent housing, and religious architecture. Church officials raised money throughout the former Soviet Union to make the territory into one of the few convents in Russia. It houses several gate chapels, temples, and one red brick Cathedral of As-

sumption (Uspenskii) with nine domes. Chapels in memory of Saints Prince Vladimir and Patriarch Tikhon adorn the territory, as well as a temple in memory of Saints Konstantin (Constantine) and Elena (Helena). At the Northern Gate is a church honoring the warrior martyr Dmitrii Solunskii, where today soldiers and soldiers’ mothers come to pray. Nearby is a small, simple ground-floor chapel honoring the Soviet period Omsk martyr Sil’vestr, canonized in 1998 as a legendary priest stabbed and crucified in the 1920s. This chapel is housed in a larger old-style Russian wooden church that honors the female saints Vera, Nadezhda, Liubov, and their mother Sophia. These days, weddings often take place here.

Soon after the land was given to the Russian Orthodox Church, our youthful, black-clad nun-guide recounted, an underground hot spring “miraculously burst onto the surface of the earth.” One of the charming wooden chapels, called Ioann Krestitel’ na vodakh” (John the Baptist on the Waters), was then built at this site, enabling its waters “which never freeze over, even in our harsh winter,” to become integrated with the church building.⁵ The spring was consecrated by Patriarch Aleksei II in 1993, and the chapel was dedicated in 2000. Locals consider this site to be the locus of the whole sacred territory, and narratives of blessings and miraculous cures have begun to accumulate around the spring. The complex has become a place of pilgrimage, attracting supplicants not only from the Omsk region but also from all over the Orthodox world.

I witnessed pilgrims bathing in the rock-rimmed hot pool created by the spring and taking away “sacred water” in jars. Elegant, separate men’s and women’s baptismal fonts inside the chapel were linked to the water of the spring in an ingenious system. Our reverent nun stressed that the land and water had become loci of spiritual renewal, where the ghosts of the dead could be put to rest by the benevolent use of the site of their sacrificial suffering. She emphasized that the site’s bitter history “must never be forgotten.”



FIGURE 1. Sacred Spring at Achair, with chapel. M.M. Balzer, 2003

Éveny, Évenki, and Yukagir perspectives, and education debates

Shifting to the territory of my more recent and long-term fieldwork, the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), I learned in 2012 from a Native colleague who returned from Oimiakon, northern Sakha Republic, that a small museum on the site of the former Oimiakon prison camp has been created and maintained with republic money by descendants of prisoners and exiles.⁶

Passionate debates and tensions have developed over how the presence of the former Oimiakon work camp should be taught in the schools. Russian teachers whose families came to the North because of the work camps or due to Soviet political exile have been arguing that the full horror of the camps and the desolation of the region should be emphasized to the local children, who are mostly Éveny, Évenki, and Yukagir. Native parents are suggesting a contrasting approach that depicts the homeland of their indigenous peoples as rich in resources, natural beauty, and spiritual power. Although they do not want their local history to completely ignore Sovietization and the flood of newcomers who were integral to all sides of the GULag system, they would prefer that it be framed as an historical anomaly that has been transcended. They prefer that their children memorize the poetry of local indigenous writers lauding the landscape, rather than the verses or prose of famous outsiders who withered in nearby camps.

Some of these Native parents are themselves children of mixed ethnic marriages, formed when people released from the camps were not permitted to leave the region. Éveny-Russian and Éveny-Ukrainian families were accepted in northern communities, where often somewhat better educated Native women chose non-Native husbands. Although the community knew who had mixed family backgrounds, many mixed ethnic children were perceived in their villages as Native, with maternal influ-

ences quite strong, and with some learning Native languages. Nonetheless, when an extensive amnesty was declared in the late 1980s, some of the mixed ethnic families went back to the “mainland,” as European Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus were conceptualized. Others felt that strong enough roots had been planted in the North to stay, or that they had no good prospects elsewhere. Home had become “Yakutia,” and they sometimes called themselves “Yakutiane.” Several years later, some of the families who had left to try their luck elsewhere returned to “Yakutia.”⁷

Oimiakon, Sredniaia Kolyma, Verkhniaia Kolyma, and the village of Topolinoe were several of the nodes of GULag work camps. While the first three had been trading posts that grew into towns, Topolinoe was expanded on the base of an early Soviet work camp site after it had been, in effect, decommissioned. It is the birth village of the Éven anthropologist Olga Ulturgasheva, whose doctorate is from Cambridge University. She has written with poignant power about the widespread resentment that local current and former reindeer-breeding Éveny feel at being coerced into having a former camp site as their main administrative center. The decision was made far from local leaders, in Yakutsk and Moscow. Olga Ulturgasheva (2012: 132–133) explains that Éveny discomfort with “trespassing on previously occupied spaces, and the pervasive presence of ghosts of former (blonde, Russian-looking) GULag prisoners in the village buildings, invokes a sense of curse (in the Éveny language, *ningichaen*) among the local population ... This space is full of malevolent forces of the deceased which still continue to bring misfortune and unhappiness to the world of the living.” Éveny youth are juggling ways to transcend their problems, especially since the post-Soviet chaos of disrupted transport and political-economic uncertainty has made intense unease in the village more, not less, relevant. This is true elsewhere in the republic as well.

Sakha (Yakut) perspectives, collaboration and moral debilitation

While I have not visited Topolinoe, I twice have done fieldwork in Sredniaia Kolyma villages, in part because it is the home region of my close friend and sometime co-author Uliana Vinokurova, a Sakha sociologist and former republic parliamentarian. As I was walking with Uliana's Sakha husband Petr in the summer of 2003 on the main street of Sredne Kolymsk, he suddenly said: "You know we are walking on the bones of slave laborers? The GULag built this road. Sometimes it is unbearable to think about how this town was built up." His comment flooded my brain with thoughts of Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* (1994) and my distant relative the poet Osip Mandelstam, who died in a prison clinic in Vladivostok, where a monument was raised to his memory in the mid-1990s.⁸ I mused on the contrast between the anonymity of so many of the innocent but condemned, whose names and numbers are too numerous to have been accurately fixed in the greater Kolyma region, and the honor for Mandelstam to have been memorialized. We discussed how rarely Sakha mention the camps, possibly because they have been ashamed of this part of their local history, including notorious attempts to make Siberian Natives into collaborators in Stalinist crimes.

One counternarrative has been that Sakha villagers sometimes tried to save escapees from the camps, in emergencies when it was a matter of their freezing to death or being rescued with warmth and food. But the Sakha were petrified—the survival hospitality law of the North had become quite frayed with Soviet propaganda that such escapees were murderous traitors to the country. Such propaganda was also poisonously laced with direct threats that Sakha family members, especially heads of households, could be arrested if they harbored such "criminals." And indeed, some of the prisoners were genuine criminals. Thus the pressure to turn people in after their lives had been saved was great—and morally debilitating. In a village

atmosphere where everyone knew everyone else's business, and where Soviet socialization encouraged everyone (including children) to turn in traitors (including the children's parents), it was hard to harbor an escapee for long.⁹

Even more morally debilitating was the pressure that Sakha local leaders felt to cooperate with prison authorities or to become prison administrators and guards themselves. While this was rare, it did happen, especially in impoverished villages where the number of hunters on payroll, receiving steady money from the Soviet monopoly that bought fur products, was limited and shrank over time. Official employment of some Sakha in the Communist Party elite structure became one more aspect of notorious interethnic tensions between Sakha and other Natives, as well as between Sakha and local Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians who were former prisoners. In such contexts, Sakha officials were more mobile, considered "outsiders" in some mixed ethnic villages, and frequently requesting transfers. These Sakha, a few of whom later became my friends, behaved variously, occasionally allowing their wives to live in the capital, Yakutsk, while they served in the North, an unhealthy situation that bred resentment and infidelity on all sides.

Awkward ramifications of semi-ethnic-based employment structures included the necessity to live with serious splits in Soviet official jurisdictions. In the Stalinist period, lower-level Communist Party officials, more likely to be Sakha, sometimes chafed against the more powerful centralized GULag apparatus. Higher-level GULag officers were more likely to be outsider Russians or Ukrainians, functioning with direct orders and support from Moscow. Toward the end of the Soviet period, well after the omnivore and economically ineffective prison labor GULag system had been somewhat reined in, the legacies of such splits had become notoriously dysfunctional, as was poignantly illustrated by a disgruntled Soviet army officer's description of chaotic disaster relief.¹⁰

A Sakha friend who grew up in a local town near a prison camp in the 1950s explained

that no one who had experienced the camps, whether of Slavic background or Sakha, could talk about them. Far from a matter of personal preference, it was forbidden to discuss any aspect of the camps during the Soviet period. When this friend was a schoolgirl, some pupils in her school were multiethnic children of exiles or of former camp inmates, but it was unthinkable to bring this up or question the children about their parents. “We were afraid. Terror simply hung in the air. For example, even accidental insults to the image of a high government official could get one in trouble.”

A few hard-core, loyal members of the Communist Party are left among the Sakha and Russian elite in the republic, as revealed by the back story of an ultimately successful 2013 memorial to Stalin in Yakutsk. The politics of this have riveted the mostly disapproving Sakha intelligentsia in the past few years. The first attempt to place a leftover bust of Stalin somewhere prominent came in 2007, when the Sakha mayor of Yakutsk was Yuri Zaboiev. Horrified, he dramatically curtailed a plan to memorialize

Stalin in front of a centrally located government building housing the Volunteer Army and Sea Service headquarters. Communists had hoped to install it near Lenin Square on the symbolically salient Russian Revolution anniversary, 7 November. A car with the bust was on the way to the site, where a few stalwarts had gathered, but the car was stopped and turned back, creating a delicious scandal that made the generally ineffective mayor somewhat more popular.

Finally in 2013, under a newly elected, younger Sakha mayor, Aisen Nikolaev, negotiations “released” the imprisoned bust, allowing it a more private spot in front of a new bank, owned by a Sakha businessman in the diamond industry. A small group of elderly, mixed Russian and Sakha veterans led by Viktor Guborev improvised a short nostalgic ritual with red flags as the undersized bust was placed in front of Almaz Anabar just before Victory Day, 9 May.¹¹ Additional small Stalin monuments have materialized in the semi-industrialized regional centers of Amga and Mirnyi, where many of the residents are Russian. The relic busts had been

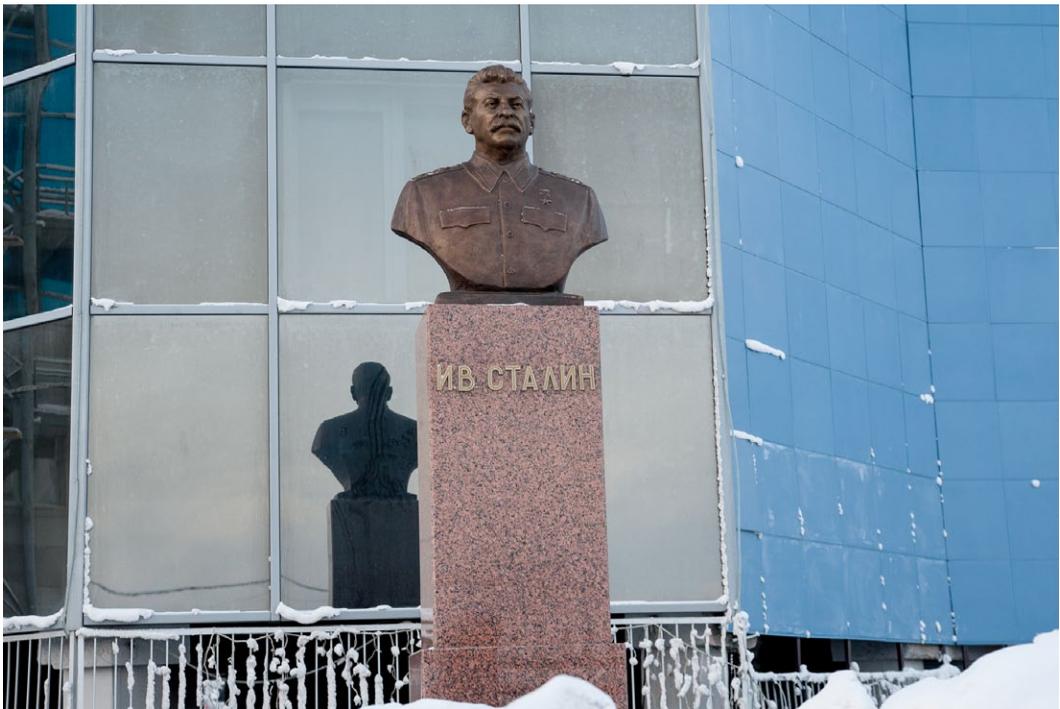


FIGURE 2: Bust of Stalin in front of bank. M. Ivanov, 2013

kept hidden in a warehouse, and recently the one in Amga appeared in a row of other “heroes” of the Soviet period. Sakha interlocutors who regaled me with these stories added: “Authorities have put up other monuments recently, including one to a foal. Soon there will be one to a dog. What’s the difference between this and Stalin?”

Muffled and unmuffled howls of the Sakha repressed

At the Sakha-language theater in 2010, I attended an astonishing, cathartic premiere performance of a new historically accurate play called *Kuemel* (Ice Breakup), by Kharuskhal (Vasilii Vasil’iev’s pseudonym, meaning “Protection, Defense”) about the repression in the late 1920s of all those associated with the elite Ksenofontov family. Its Lena River estate-owning patriarch had been Vasilii, whose iconographic sons included Gavril, an ethnographer; Nikolai, a lawyer; Arkhadii, an engineer-dreamer; Pavel, a revolutionary who broke ranks when the Bolsheviks refused confederal status for Yakutia; and Konstantin, who escaped to America via China. Their repression has been termed in the republic, first sotto voce and then at full cry, “Ksenofontovshchina.” It eventually swallowed and destroyed around 300 people with ties to the well-educated and wealthy family. Many were sent to the notorious Solovki camps in northern Russia, where most perished and three made a dramatic escape to Finland. A special delegation of Sakha went to the territory to place a memorial cross and plaque there in 2010.¹²

Kharuskhal’s play, vividly portraying multiple generations of Ksenofontovs and their friends, was directed by the legendary theater director turned Minister of Culture Andrei Borisov. When its curtain came down, the mostly Sakha audience rose to its feet with a spontaneous surge of clapping, sobbing, and shouting unlike anything I have ever seen in the theater. Uliana Vinokurova called it an “egregor” moment, using the Greek term for intense community solidarity. During the joyous curtain

call, filled with an avalanche of flowers, Zoia, an elderly trembling Ksenofontov granddaughter and one of the last descendants of the once-mighty clan, was called to the stage. Actors and officials of the Megino-Kangalass region and the republic shared in the triumph, jubilant in their palpable transcendence of repression.

Toasts at the reception valorized Gavril Ksenofontov’s volumes of folklore for cultural recovery and Pavel Ksenofontov’s confederalism for political dignity. But during the intermission, I had a disturbing conversation with a healer from the Megino-Kangalass region. He said bitterly that no amount of current exposing of the repressions and of “uncovering blank spots of history” could make up for the losses of the most talented Sakha of the twentieth century and their unborn children. “We still have not recovered from the genetic destruction of our intelligentsia, especially the family and clan and friends of the Ksenofontovs. Their whole clan was nearly destroyed, even the brothers who tried to cooperate with Soviet power. Think of all the Sakha who could have been born but who were not, due to the cutting off of the branches of the best Sakha minds before they were able to have their own families.” I tried and failed to comfort him by explaining that missing genes in a diverse population cannot genetically destroy a whole, admittedly small, people. He and many others are “scientifically certain” that a special kind of elitocide has occurred. Later I found that many of my friends were divided on this “genofond” ramification of the repressions. Some also argued that an important lesson of the play was that new generations continue to be unreconciled: “trust between the generations was broken,” and traditional Sakha values of love and tolerance were lost.

In the 1920s–1930s, other major networks of accused and jailed oppositionists revolved around the Sakha revolutionary and poet Oi-unskaa (a penname combining “Shaman” with a Russian ending), whose birth name was Platon Sleptsov, and the prominent Bolshevik leader Maksim Ammosov.¹³ The numbers of associates killed as followers of these early heroes of

Soviet Yakutia were even greater than those jailed in the Ksenofonotovshchina. Each has a museum in Yakutsk devoted to their careers. Oiunskii's is especially impressive, featuring the history of Sakha folklore and literature and periodically sponsoring folklore and epic singing competitions. Oiunskii is also remembered as the founder of the Institute of Languages, Literature, and History, now called the Institute for Humanities Studies. Ammosov's memorial is a much smaller house museum, focused on his Communist Party loyalty and his simple roots in the nearby Nam region.

In the Nam region, where civil war fighting was particularly brutal, a giant "reconciliation stone," carved with the names of local "Sakha martyrs," was unveiled with ceremony in the early 1990s to honor all the dead on all sides of the protracted civil war. I attended this poignant ritual, sponsored by the then-activist group Sakha Omuk (The Sakha People), along with Sakha intellectuals whose memorial speeches touched on the dashed hopes of early Sakha Soviet leaders, on the incomplete amnesties that arbitrarily reunited families or kept them apart, and on the roundups of Sakha that began in the late 1920s with the arrest of the talented orator-politician Oiunskii. Oiunskii's most famous epic poem ([1925] 1978), called the "Red Shaman," has been enacted in many forms over the years, after he was rehabilitated in the Khrushchev period.

Shamans themselves were arrested in hard-to-document numbers in the Stalin years, mostly for crimes of anti-Soviet agitation or hoarding of wealth but sometimes explicitly for illegal practice of nonlicensed medicine. They were termed "shaman-kulaks" in Soviet propaganda. Legends describing their arrests, and how local shamans sometimes managed to foil Soviet tormentors, proliferated underground throughout the Soviet period. I collect these fascinatingly stereotyped, mystical narratives, arguing that they became morale-building releases for people whose faith in shamanic cosmologies survived many of their shamanic healers (Balzer 2012: 35–56).

Vasilii Yakovlev—whose penname was Dalan, meaning Restless Despair—wrote of his experiences in the camps. His vignettes of numerous ruined Sakha lives reveal that repressions extended beyond the destruction of early revolutionaries, shamans, the wealthy, and the intelligentsia. Dalan became the Sakha equivalent of the writer Varlam Shalamov, and reputedly they befriended each other in the camps. Dalan was accused under article 58, chapter 10, as an "anti-Soviet" student in the early 1950s "Basharin Affair," in essence a fight over rewriting 1920s history and one of the last spasms of Sakha destruction before Stalin died in 1953.

In his famous essay-novel *My Destiny*, Dalan (1994) recalls one illiterate, non-Russian-speaking elder, Afanasii Terekhov from Kobiai, who landed in the GULag after World War II (The Great Patriotic War). Terekhov, originally from a Sakha family prominent enough to have been designated "princes" in prerevolutionary times, had long been dispossessed and poor in the Soviet period. He had fought with the "white bandits" in the civil war, been amnestied and made a horse breeder. His true crime came in 1948, when he made the mistake of recounting a dream, a charming and once healthy custom in traditionally oriented Sakha families. While collecting hay with his collective, he mentioned that before the revolution people had lived better. Afanasii rashly critiqued the "unprofitable" kolkhoz system and noted that "during the war America saved us with their cans of preserves." In his dream, he rejoiced that "America had come to occupy Yakutia, and he joined their forces as a young soldier, to advance further into war."

Dalan dryly noted that anyone can dream of anything, even flying while dead, but the "Communist regime saw fit to imprison an illiterate man." Dalan's writings are cherished by those trying to understand what happened to their loved ones. Although Afanasii was released in an amnesty after 1953, his children only understood what happened to their father through Dalan's account.¹⁴

Several of my friends and colleagues were caught in the Basharin Affair, whether as students and professors at the university or scholars in the Institute of Languages, Literature, and History. Some were arrested for defending the historian Georgii Basharin, while others had their careers derailed. Mutual enmities polarized the small Sakha intelligentsia for many years, and this sometimes extended to relationships among their children. The esteemed historian Egor Alekseev (2000) has written about the whole range of repressions, helped found and advise the activist group Sakha Omuk, and has inspired a website to chronicle grievances, called the “virtual museum of the GULag.”¹⁵ Another scholar, Mikhail Ivanov, imprisoned for 10 years, is today honored for the integrity of his historical interpretation and for his refusal to turn on his colleagues. His modest pseudonym is Bagdaryn Siul’be, glossed as Little Flowing Brook in the Sakha language. His life work has become his memorial—the meticulous collection of toponyms from all over the republic, revealing the often Éveny, Évenki, and Yukagir roots of many geographical and settlement place names in the region.¹⁶

In sum, whether through history, theater, monuments, literature, or the Internet, a pattern of Sakha memorializing finally has begun to give voice to the monstrosities of the Soviet period, although it has not been able to fully exorcise the terror. Some voices of experience warn not to howl too loudly, lest expressions of specific, historically contextualized resentment become misinterpreted as expressions of more general, chauvinist nationalism and evidence of interethnic conflict.

Famous prisoner perspectives and interethnic tensions

An incident that still gives me the chills, from my fieldwork in early 1986 in Yakutsk, made me a target of Soviet authorities’ provocateur scheming. I occasionally ate lunch in a squalid self-serve café on Lenin Prospect, where few

strangers were willing to sit with someone rumored to be “the American.” (My friends at the time were students, senior ethnographers, and members of the Sakha cultural elite with permission to meet with me.) One day a disheveled older man, who introduced himself as Jewish, plunked his tray down and conspiratorially, uncomfortably soon, whispered: “I know who you are, and why you are really here. You are here to make contact with Yuri Orlov, right? I can help you.” I was startled and immediately distrustful but allowed myself to admit that I knew who Yuri Orlov was. I quickly declared that I had no intension of seeing him and certainly had brought nothing from the West for him. At the time Orlov, a physicist-dissident who was a founder of the Helsinki Accord Human Rights Group, had been exiled to the village of Kobiai after seven years in a prison camp near Perm’. While ethnically Russian, he was a defender of Jewish rights to emigration to Israel and was far better known in the West than he was in the Soviet Union. I was somewhat appalled by my sharp self-protective response.

Later that year, with no domestic publicity, Yuri Orlov was allowed to leave the Soviet Union, having been saved by Western outcries and an activist wife. Orlov’s story of hard labor followed by a series of mendacious, technically illegal persecutions in his mostly “Yakut” village of exile came out only in the West. In 1985, he had been beaten at night by two youthful, drunken assailants near the police station, possibly with official encouragement (since they asked his name before they beat him), to the point where his peripheral vision was damaged. Significantly, many of the villagers were sympathetic enough about the beating to coax one of the never arrested suspects into behavior that revealed he was ashamed, although he never completely confessed what had happened. Years later, I learned through Sakha connections that the incident with my Jewish mystery man had indeed been a test to discover whether I was a true ethnographer or a “Western, Jewish, imperialist agent.”¹⁷

Unprovoked beating of exiles released from camps without permission to leave their assigned villages occurred often enough to constitute a pattern, rarely exposed. The testimony of Viacheslav Chernovil, later mayor of L'viv in newly independent Ukraine, revealed a case that blurs the distinction between official terror and unofficial interethnic tensions. In the late 1970s, Chernovil, a Ukrainian exile living in the predominantly "Yakut" village of Chapandu, reported that Slavic people were in danger if they trespassed in areas he called the "Yakut ghettos" of some villages and towns.¹⁸ After several threatening personal incidents, mostly with drunken youths, the unprejudiced Chernovil felt he had become "a victim of local internationality tensions" and requested transfer. He also described sexual graffiti insults exchanged by "Yakuts" and Russians of Niurba (where he was transferred), plus mutual stereotypes. Russians called the "Yakuts" "monkeys" or "slit-eyes," as well as "terrible nationalists" who would "still be in furs" on the edge of starvation if it were not for Russians. "Yakuts"

claimed that the Russians were exploitative, interfering "racist louts," although Chernovil carefully noted this was not everyone's opinion about every Russian.

In sum, this volatile mutually suspicious atmosphere was one that local authorities could insidiously exploit if they wanted to teach an exile an informal lesson. Although many villagers experienced and still value the childhoods they remember as filled with multiethnic friendships and tolerance, a countertrend was just below the calm surface. Far from the "brotherhood of the peoples" of Soviet propaganda, interethnic tensions existed in Soviet villages and towns under certain mistrustful, conspiratorial conditions. It is tempting to broaden Katherine Verdery's term "conspirativity" for this socially constructed pattern of suspicion.¹⁹ It was exacerbated by impoverished conditions in the Far North, where politically maligned newcomers without local kinship networks were perceived to be extra burdens. The later, widely publicized interethnic tensions of the post-Soviet period hardly developed full-blown from a vacuum.



FIGURE 3. Sredne Kolymsk. M.M. Balzer, 2003

Reflections and comparisons

Regardless of what people confess to me, internal debates about “memory and forgetting” are alive and well in Siberia.²⁰ In many cases, people who would prefer to forget the camps or their ripple effects after the Stalin period are not able to forget, forgive, or foreclose their own mixed emotions. This torment resonates with Alexander Etkind’s (2013) description of Russia today as a “land of the unburied,” where memorials to Stalin’s victims are inadequate, memorials to Stalin himself are popping up in unexpected places, and people continue to grapple with Stalinist legacies using competing narratives of the past. Generational changes are crucial, as are various symbolic, socially and politically appropriate ways of cathartically mourning. Memorializing has intensified in many forms in the post-Soviet period, but, as the Sakha scholar Tatiana Argounova-Low (2012: 129–147) has analyzed, the Sakha intelligentsia risk stimulating Russian accusations of nationalism, plunging them back into a familiar history of patterned scapegoating and sinister misunderstanding.

Significantly but messily, what local people have chosen to emphasize as they look back and process the GULag varies greatly with their and their ancestors’ specific experiences of the camps and exiles, as well as with their senses of indigeneity. Where the “best and brightest” of a small cohort of Native intelligentsia and wealthy merchants were obliterated, cathartic recovery takes many generations. When Natives were told (not paid) to turn in escaped prisoners, forcing local communities to become police in an already distrusted police state, resentment and interethnic tensions continue to fester. Where their very homes were co-opted, resentment becomes astonishment at the cruelty of the official Soviet Russian “other.” Where restless ghosts of maltreated “goners” are perceived to still lurk, nothing seems to purify the unclean, bloodied earth, suggesting a level and scale of “pollution” and danger beyond the realm of ritualized behavior that the anthropol-

ogist of symbolism Mary Douglas (2006) made famous.

Where sympathetic people of Slavic backgrounds were punished for not becoming informers, as happened with Yuri Orlov’s Ukrainian landlady, villagers have tried to suppress memories of constant moral compromises. Where Russian and Sibiriki families of camp guards remain ambivalent about what happened on their turf, but without their initiatory “agency,” as at Achair near Omsk, they stress that their guard grandfathers never actually shot anyone. Guards just helplessly stood by as people who had been reduced to subhuman, oats-eating animal status dropped dead.

To redeem their hardened-guard souls, as well as those of the unquiet dead, a sacred, miracle-cure-producing purifying spring has sprung up. Its pre-Christian “folk religious” ripple effects are powerful and internally contradictory. While a few clear-eyed Russian folklorists admit to the “pagan” aspects of the beliefs and practices that have surged around Achair, its whole rationale is couched in Russian Orthodox convent housing. The emerging “folk logics” are not fully congruent with standard Christian messages about the sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ. A dual motto of the Achair Cross Convent is: “A place to remember and not to forget. To never forgive the crimes of the communist regime.” At least some Russians of Cossack backgrounds distance themselves from Soviet crimes through the symbolism of chapels built in honor of Russian Orthodox Church martyrs of various time periods. They do this without a self-cleansing humanistic identification with the executioners as well as the victims of Stalinist crimes, without repeating Christ’s salvation mantra “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.” Perhaps the pain is still too raw for this level of purifying radical empathy and release from denial (compare Balzer 1992 and 2012).

No one individual, religious movement, ethnic group, or indigenous local community can serve as a model for how to transcend and put to rest the pain and shame of victimization, moral

debilitation, collaboration, or multigenerational collateral human damage. For those who remain committed to Siberian homelands, whether relatively recent or ancient, various degrees of guilt and silence must yield to new levels of solidarity and community building. Whether done through sacred springs or cathartic theater, some kind of openly acknowledged spiritual reconciliation seems to be crucial to the healing process.

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Notes

1. Compare with Solzhenitsyn 1974. GULag research projects include a 2013 conference organized by Michael David-Fox and Peter Holquist, selected articles from which appear in *Kritika* 16(3); and a section edited by Olga Ulturgasheva in *Laboratorium* 2015(1). My conventional use of Siberia includes Russia's Far East.
2. The literature on socially constructed memory, individual and collective, including problems of retrospective interviews, is vast. See, for example, Berdahl 2010; Kansteiner and Classen 2009; and Kligman and Verdery 2011: 9–15.
3. Recollections of my interlocutors did not extend to the exact year of the intrusions or the ethnicity of the interlopers. This may have occurred in 1944 with Russian exiles and Kalmyk “punished peoples” settlers. See Balzer 1999 for context.
4. Compare <http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2013/12/window-on-eurasia-east-of-urals-people.html> by Paul Goble; Balzer 1994; Dymchak and Kashpur 2013; Hartley 2014: 171.
5. See <http://club.eomsk.ru/?gid=291&pid=84>, where anonymous authors suggest that the spring “almost never freezes over.” Compare with Rouhier-Willoughby 2015.
6. Sakha ecologist Vera Solovyeva, August 2012 personal communication. Oimiakon is famous as a contender for the coldest continuously inhabited place on earth.
7. I am grateful to Uliana Vinokurova, Olga Ulturgasheva, and Gail Fondahl (1998) for insights into patterns of mixed ethnic marriage and migration. After the Soviet Union collapsed, Vinokurova (1992: 4) declared, “There are places for all those in the republic who wish to see her as a mother, not a step-mother.”
8. See the memoirs of Nadezhda Mandelstam ([1970] 1999, [1974] 2011). “The Mask of Sorrow” by Ernst Neizvestny in Magadan memorializes all camp victims, as does the Solovetskii stone in Moscow placed by the Memorial Society.
9. The reference is to Pavlik Morozov, the young boy who, as Soviet propaganda drilled in the schools, had turned in his parents for political disloyalty and thus become a hero. Sakha friends were horrified in private over this story, wondering if it was real.
10. A letter by Lieutenant Colonel A. Chomchoev, “Aktual'noe pis'mo,” *Izvestiia*, 11 February 1989, explained the dysfunctional administration of disaster relief in January 1989 in the village of

Chokurdakh on the Indigirka River. For the range of camps and their administrative structure, see <http://khandyga.ru/?p=1106> by Andrei Starovoitov.

11. Coverage in <http://rt.com/politics/north-russian-republic-sakha-yakutiya-988/> mentioned other places where Stalinist “PR stunts” have occurred, including advertising on St. Petersburg buses in 2010 to mark the World War II victory anniversary. On Stalin’s popularity, see Waal 2013.
12. On Solovki [Solovetskii], see Ilin, <http://ilin.sakhaopenworld.org/>. On the dramatic escape, see <http://sitim-sir.ru/2011/09/tragicheskaya-sudbatrex-muzhestvennyx-yakutyay-bezhavshix-iz-solovkov/>.
13. Revealingly, many wrote with pseudonyms from the earliest days of the Soviet period.
14. See <http://sakha.gov.ru/node/16819> under “Eti strashnye gody repressii,” especially the article by Vasilii I. Ivanov. Dalan is excerpted at Sakha Open World “One more secret of Stalin’s Russia” <http://diaspora.sakhaopenworld.org/nl11.shtml>.
15. For the museum, see <http://gulagmuseum.org/showObject.do?object=483419&language=1>.
16. On the Basharin Affair and for perspective, see Argounova-Low 2012: 61–68. For his defense of Sakha elites, see Basharin 1996.
17. See Orlov 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/15/magazine/my-life-in-exile.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>; and Schmemmann 1986, <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/02/15/world/limbo-or-bitter-exile-the-dissidents-left-behind.html>. Cold-war provocations against me included a bottle thrown at my feet from a turquoise taxi that had been following me for days.
18. V. Chernovil’s document was “Zaiavlenie ministru vnutrennikh del IaASSR o mezhnatsional’nykh konfliktakh v Iakutii,” 30 August 1979, appearing in Svoboda, 22 February 1980. A Russian manuscript version is in my archive.
19. Katherine Verdery 2013 uses “conspirativity” to explain patterns of compartmentalization in Romania’s security services, http://www.ucas.pitt.edu/nceer/2013_826-01g_Verdery.pdf. The larger issue becomes how intimidation, informant systems, and propaganda stimulating suspicion led in many socialist countries to the popularity of conspiracy theories. The political and cultural contexts of “conspirativity” remain a disturbingly productive direction for analysis.
20. On memory and forgetting, compare Ricoeur 2004 and Todorov 2010.

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