Virgin Oil Lands Conquered?

The Project of Historical Memory on the Territory of Yugra

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Abstract: The historical memory of Siberia is heterogeneous and diverse; different parts of this region have their own emphases in the politics of historical memory. This article focuses on the historical memory of Yugra (a historical territory roughly coterminous with the Khanty-Mansiiskii Autonomous Okrug), as it is from this territory that the development of Siberian oil lands began. Oil has become the central focus of memory for the northern region of Western Siberia, and oil workers are symbols of territorial development in Yugra. The creation of the oil and gas complex is portrayed as a victory over nature, and oil workers are portrayed not only as pioneers who opened the region, but also as soldiers.

Keywords: commemoration, memory, Salmanov, virgin oil lands

Virgin Oil Lands as the Actualized Past of Western Siberia

The northern territory of Western Siberia is implicated in a unique project of historical memory. Its uniqueness is partly due to the fact that, unlike other Soviet projects related to geographical exploration and socialist construction, the oil frontier continues to remain relevant. The colonization of territories in the north of Western Siberia began in the sixteenth century with the arrival of the Cossack Yermak’s detachment. For many years, the region became a frontier gradually populated by Russian settlers and exiles. While numerous researchers are interested in the problem of the colonization of territories annexed to Russia at different stages of its past, Siberia is often overlooked; the focus is on the western territories, studied in the context of the annexation of Poland, and the eastern territories, considered in the context of orientalism. However, the history of Siberian colonization is often reduced to the expeditions of Yermak Timofeevich and the problem of exiles, while
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more detailed histories remain solely of interest to historians from Siberia itself.

For the history of Yugra, Yermak’s campaign also proved to be pivotal, as it led to the establishment of the main outpost of the metropolis, Surgut. Although Surgut had the status of a city, in essence, it remained a large village. In the 1920s, Yugra experienced a decline, and its largest city, Surgut, lost its status and turned into a village (Stas’ 2016). In the 1960s, the region experienced a new birth thanks to the discovery of rich oil and gas fields. It can be assumed that the massive colonization of the region began with the discovery of Big Oil. The power of the metropolis was no longer limited to fur collection points but spread to more remote areas where oil and gas extraction began.

The historiography of the formation of Yugra as a region with its own identity includes several directions. First and foremost, there are works on the exploration of Siberia and the North by pioneers. The discovery of oil became an important part of the history of this territory, and therefore the problem of exploration, extraction, and development of the oil region is today one of the most popular historiographical topics. Separate works focus on the image of the North and the topic of self-identification among the population (Ganopol’skii 1998; Gololobov 2017; Stafeev 2008). The region’s historical memory really takes off in the 1960s, with a long history of geographic exploration and historical memory, as with the “young cities” of the Urals, whose lives began in the era of industrialization. The main plot for the historical memory of the region was the development of nature and the appropriation of natural resources (Barabanova 2020).

In this article, I focus on the project of historical memory in the north of Western Siberia within the framework of the Khanty-Mansiiskii Autonomous Okrug–Yugra. The historical memory of Siberia is heterogeneous and represents more of a patchwork quilt with common motifs and local narratives. Siberia is included in the nationwide memory project of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945 (part of World War II), but the memory of conquering nature and exile has become more prominent in many of the regions of Siberia. For many northern parts of Western Siberia, it is the conquest of the oil frontier that has become the actualized past. However, different parts of this region have each had their own particular emphasis in the politics of historical memory. This article’s focus is the historical memory of Yugra, as it is from its territory that the exploration of the oil frontier began.

Pierre Nora, in his study “Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory,” drew attention to the fact that modernity is the era in which
the world celebrates memory. There has been a change in attitudes toward the past and its processing (Nora 2005). Thus, two types of memory should be distinguished: autobiographical and historical. Nora discussed memory sites as a unity of the spiritual and material, which over time and by the will of people have become symbolic legacies of national collective memory (Nora 1989). The memory sites discussed by Nora and his colleagues were created to serve the nation-state and provide a foundation for the identity of French citizens (den Boer 2010: 21). Memory sites are important in their material, symbolic, and functional aspects, and Nora explained the existence of numerous memory sites by the absence of memory in social groups (Nora 1989). Memory sites encompass buildings, books, songs, events, and even individuals. A prominent example in this regard is the work of Michel Winock (Winock 1999) on Joan of Arc as a memory site of France. In the context of Russian history, another key study focusing on a specific memory site is Frithjof Schenk’s research on Alexander Nevsky, which explores the history of memory of the prince from the late thirteenth to the late twentieth century (Schenk 2007). There is an abundance of sites dedicated to the memory of the oil frontier, which is due to the involvement of various groups in the process of conquering the territory of the north of Western Siberia.

As Olga Malinova points out, politics works with social representations of the past rather than the past itself. In this regard, her thesis on collective memory—relying not on myth but on the actualized past—is interesting. According to the author, the actualized past is based on already established myths, with less obvious but familiar meaning constructions at its periphery (Malinova 2017). In the historical memory of the north of Western Siberia, the indigenous Khanty and Mansi peoples became figures of silence. Despite national projects aimed at preserving the culture of Indigenous Less-Numerous Peoples of the North, their representatives did not become part of the actual memory project of oil frontier development. Thus, the Khanty and Mansi were displaced from the region’s memory project by the figure of the pioneer, whose arrival marks the beginning of the history and historical memory of the north of Western Siberia (Barabanova 2022).

For this research, I examined published memoirs of the油 frontier pioneers and those who later created its artistic image. The memoirs of Salmanov are of particular interest, as they serve as an excellent example of creating a cohesive hero image. In his memoirs, he portrays a conqueror of nature who prioritizes his beloved endeavor above all else, while also being a young individual ready to take risks. It is important
to note that the scheme of creating the image of the pioneer hero and the artistic images used by Salmanov are still employed by other participants in the development of the oil frontier today.

The Pioneers of Virgin Oil Lands

The discovery of oil and the development of its deposits were often compared to virgin lands, and later they were called virgin oil lands. In 1965, Fabian Gurari and Gregory Ostryi, in their work “Virgin Oil Lands of Siberia,” wrote that “while we have virgin lands before us, everything is still young—from workers in the virgin lands to the first openwork towers, from the quarters of the first cities to the first heroes of the oil harvest” (Gurari and Ostryi 1965: 65).

In the case of such large socialist projects as the virgin lands (Mazur 2016) and the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) (Povoroznyuk 2019), we see fully formed images of the workers of the virgin lands and the BAM as pioneers and builders. In the northern regions of Western Siberia, oilmen became such pioneers. In this case, these people were not always the ones extracting the oil; rather, they could also be geologists, or civil engineers, or others related to the project in different ways. They were all united by the search for virgin oil and the quest for survival in the difficult climatic conditions of the north of Western Siberia.

In 1978, a monument to the Conquerors of Samotlor was unveiled in Nizhnevartovsk. It is located on the Mound of Glory, at the intersection of roads leading to Lake Samotlor and the Megionskoe field. The prototype for this figure of a young worker with a burning torch in his hand was Fedor Metrusenko, who worked as a drilling foreman. The monument is better known as “Alyosha.” It is believed that the head of the Oil and Gas Production Department “Nizhnevarovskneft imeni V. I. Lenina,” R. I. Kuzovatkin, based the nickname on a song with the lyrics “Alyosha is standing over the mountain, a Russian soldier in Bulgaria” (lyrics by K. Ia. Vanshenkin, music by E. S. Kolmanovsky). The song was dedicated to the monument to the Soviet soldier “Alyosha” (1957), that was installed in Bulgaria in Plovdiv in honor of deceased Soviet soldiers. Two other “Alyosha” monuments at the North Sea and in Murmansk were created shortly before the Nizhnevartovsk monument. On 10 June 1973, the grand unveiling of the monument to the Heroes of the North Sea, known as “Sailor” or “Alyosha,” took place in Severomorsk. The idea of creating a monument first occurred in 1945, but then the funds raised for the monument were redirected to the construction of housing.
for the military. The project was revived in the early 1970s and the
opening of the monument was timed to coincide with the fortieth anni-
versary of the Northern Fleet. The monument, titled “Defenders of the
Soviet Arctic during the Great Patriotic War,” is located on Primorskaia
Square in Severomorsk and was opened in 1974. This statue of “Alyosha”
is the second tallest in Russia after the Volgograd statue “Motherland”
(Vladimirov 2004). All four memorials of “Alyosha” are similar in their
compositional conception and implementation. The Nizhnevartovsk
“Alyosha” holds a hammer instead of a weapon, and instead of a mili-
tary uniform he wears a peacoat, tarpaulin boots, and a helmet—this is,
in fact, the uniform of the pioneers of the virgin oil lands.

It can be assumed that the commemorative practices of World War II
were used in the formation of the memory of the conquest of the virgin
oil lands. The enemy in this discourse is nature, from which territory
and resources must be reclaimed. This struggle is portrayed as being
just as dramatic as wartime activities, because during the conquest for
resources many discoverers suffered or perished in the harsh condi-
tions of the North. On the other hand, the Nizhnevartovsk “Alyosha”
monument can be considered as a continuation of the Bulgarian and
Murmansk concepts, reflecting the change in focus from military feats
to those related to labor.

In different parts of Yugra, the figure of the pioneer is seen dif-
differently. At the same time, similar symbols are used: an oil fountain,
a drilling rig, or a drop of oil. In Surgut, in 2016, a monument to the
“Labor Feats of Generations of Surgutneftegaz Oilmen” was opened,
the composition of which is based on a fountain of oil spouting from the
bowels of the earth. In the center of the composition there are 11 bronze
figures—a geologist, a surveyor, an engineer, drillers, an electrician, an
oil and gas production operator, a welder, a builder, a driver, and a cook.
In Nefteiugansk, the monument “Pioneers” (2012) commemorates the
legendary “troops” of geologists who began exploration of the subsoil
of the Ust'-Balykskoe oil field in 1961. The stele in the center resembles
an oil rig surrounded by three sculptural groups: builders, geologists,
and oilmen, alongside young families. Monuments dedicated to gas
production and gas workers are rarer. They are mainly concentrated in
Surgut near the Gazprom building. Their composition is similar to the
monuments to oilmen; key elements include a gas pipe, valves, and,
of course, a worker in overalls and a helmet, such as, for example, the
Surgut monument “Gas Worker.”

An important element in the historical memory of the north of
Western Siberia is the region’s museum complexes. Evgenii Rostovtsev
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and Il’ia Sidorchuk singled out four types of museums, depending on what type of memory they are dealing with (Rostovtsev and Sidorchuk 2014). For the region under consideration, museums of the second type are of interest, namely corporate museums, the purpose of which is to preserve corporate memory, as well as museums of the fourth type, which are dominated by the principle of commemoration—the mobilization of memory about specific historical events or characters.

The central museum preserving the memory of virgin oil lands development is the Museum of Geology, Oil, and Gas (established 2003 in Khanty-Mansiisk). In addition to a rich collection of minerals, its exposition presents materials on the history of the development of oil and gas fields in the north of Western Siberia. The museum organizes exhibitions dedicated to the oil and gas industry and outstanding figures in this industry. This museum is not the only one in Yugra, where the history of oil and gas production is the central focus; there is also a Museum of “Surgutneftegaz,” a Museum of the History of the Enterprise of the Joint-Stock Company “RN–Nyaganneshtegaz,” a Museum of the Oil and Gas Production Enterprise “Nizhnensortymskneft” of “Surgutneftegaz,” and others.

The museum should be considered, on the one hand, as a place of memory, and on the other, as an instrument of historical politics. For the north of Western Siberia, museums combine two tasks; they act both as corporate museums, maintaining the memory of corporations of the oil and gas complex, and as commemorations, mobilizing the memory of the development of oil and gas and its pioneers. It seems that we have an interesting case before us—one that showcases the penetration of corporate memory into the historical memory of the region.

A common way to commemorate socialist construction projects and war memorials has been to erect monuments that incorporate technology. For Yugra, these are airplanes and helicopters. In 2000, the Alley of Honor for Aviation was opened in Nizhnevartovsk. It presents the aircraft involved in the development of the territory in the mid-1960s: Mi-1, Mi-2, Mi-4, Mi-6, and Mi-8 helicopters, as well as the An-2 aircraft and others. An Mi-6 helicopter was installed near the Surgut airport in 2004; it was a gift from UTair Airlines for the fortieth anniversary of the united squadron for its contribution to the development of Western Siberia.

The use of technology as a symbol of victory over nature is typical of other socialist construction projects as well. The DT-54 tractor became the main symbol of the virgin lands. Three monuments with this tractor were erected on the former virgin lands in Borets (1975),
In the commemoration of the feats of the BAM builders, a leading role is given to the railway and railway equipment—for example, the Ea-4249 and P36-0098 steam locomotives at the Vikhorevka and Severobaikalsk stations.

The Joan of Arc of Virgin Oil Lands: Farman Salmanov, Discoverer of Virgin Oil Lands

Places of memory are not only geographic features on the map, but also “rituals of a society without rituals,” (Nora 1999: 27) such as stone gravestones, monuments, or national anthems. For example, Joan of Arc became a very vivid image in the memory of France, which has been discussed by Michel Winock (Winock 1999). Passing from memory to history, her figure changed, as did the actors who used her for their own purposes. The image of Alexander Nevsky was also transformed in the politics of memory (Schenk 2007). The Maid of Orleans and Nevsky are both part of the national myth, and similar places of memory may be present at the local level.

One of the central places in the pantheon of conquerors of the virgin oil lands is the figure of Salmanov. A talented geologist and organizer, he led the exploration and organization of oil production in the region as the head of the Surgut oil exploration expedition. Farman Kurban oglu Salmanov or Farman Kurbanovich Salmanov was born in 1931 in Azerbaijan. In 1954, after graduating from the geological exploration department of the Azerbaijan Industrial Institute, he was assigned to the Kuzbass to search for oil. In 1958, he headed the search for oil in the Surgut-Ob region. In 1961, one of the largest deposits was discovered in Megion under the leadership of Salmanov. During his work, he was a participant in the discovery of more than 130 oil fields. Salmanov was not only the discoverer of oil in the north of Western Siberia, but also an administrator and politician. Between 1987 and 1991 he was the head of “Glavtiumengeologia,” the first deputy minister of geology of the USSR. He acted as a people’s deputy of the RSFSR from Azerbaijan and passed away in Moscow in 2007 (Salmanov 2003).

The formation of the image of Salmanov, the pioneer of the virgin oil lands, began during his lifetime. In 1972, Vysotsky wrote the song “Tiumen’ Oil,” whose hero is a geologist who overcomes the skepticism of his superiors and colleagues in the search for oil. According to various versions, the prototype for Vysotsky was either Salmanov or Raul-Yuri Ervier (Kulagin 2018). Salmanov described in his mem-
oirs a meeting with Vysotsky at which the song was first performed (Salmanov 2003).

The creation of Andrei Konchalovsky’s film “Siberiada,” which won the Grand Prix at Cannes, began with the story of oil workers. According to the director, in 1974 the chairman of Goskino USSR, Fillip Ermash, suggested that he could make a film about Siberian oilmen for the Communist Party congress. It was supposed to be based on the history of the discovery of the Berezovskii gas field, but while preparing the script, Konchalovsky got acquainted with the biographies of the pioneers of the Tiumen’ oil fields: Rovnin, Ervier, and Salmanov. Konchalovsky used the figure of Salmanov in the film (Konchalovskii 1999), and while working on the script, he transformed “Siberiada” from a film about oil into a much broader history of Russia. Similarly, in 1978, the TV movie “Risk Strategy,” directed by Aleksandr Proshkin, was released in three episodes. The plot was based on the story of the innovator oilman Farid Kerimovich Askerov, whose clear prototype was Salmanov.

Salmanov took an active part in creating a myth around himself (Stafeev 2007). Already in 1988, he published his first memoirs about the search for oil in Western Siberia, writing Siberia is My Destiny (Salmanov 1988). His later revised memoirs formed the basis of the books Life as a Discovery (Salmanov 2003) and I Am a Politician: Reflections of One of the Founders of the Country’s Fuel and Energy Power (Salmanov 2006).

After Salmanov’s death in 2007, a new cycle of commemorative events began, most of which were dedicated to anniversaries. So, in 2007, in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the start of exploration work in Surgut, the F. Salmanov House was opened. The house where the museum is located was the geologist’s home from 1957 to 1961. The exhibition features Salmanov’s personal belongings, and on the veranda is a collection of drill bits, with samples of rocks and oil. In addition, on the grounds there are examples of equipment from the 1950s and 1960s and a trailer that housed geologists in the field. In 2009, a monument, a memorial plaque, and a commemorative sign in honor of Salmanov were erected on the grounds of the F. Salmanov House museum complex. Monuments to Salmanov have also been installed in Salekhard (2009), Khanty-Mansiisk (2010), and Gornopravdinsk (2014). Also, the name of the pioneer is immortalized in the names of streets in Tiumen’, Surgut, Nizhnevartovsk, and Pyt-Yakh.

In 2008, UTair airline named its Tu-154M aircraft after Salmanov. With the renewal of the aircraft fleet, the Boeing 737-800 was named after Salmanov. Aeroflot’s Airbus A321 also bears
Salmanov’s name (*LIUTnoe nebo UTair* 2015). A passenger cruise ship was named in honor of the pioneer, and it has been plying the Ob and Ob Bay since 2008. The vessel is part of the line Salekhard–Aksarka–Salemal–Panaevsk–Yar-Sale–Kutopiugan–Nyda.

In 2018, as part of the “Great Names of Russia” contest, the purpose of which was to assign the names of outstanding compatriots to Russian airports, a struggle broke out between Surgut and Nizhnevartovsk for Salmanov’s name. In the first round, primary lists were formed and both cities nominated the names F. Salmanov and A. Filipenko (the first governor of the Khanty-Mansiiskii autonomous district–Yugra. Nizhnevartovsk also put forward the name of the hero of the Soviet Union, pilot Nikolai Arkhangelskii, and Surgut suggested Yermak Timofeevich. According to the results of voting in the first round, the name of F. Salmanov was assigned to the international airport of Surgut. For the second tour for the Nizhnevartovsk airport, the short list included the name of V. I. Muravlenko (Kopylov 2001; Trapeznikov 2007), one of the organizers of the Soviet oil industry and the head of “Glavtiumennftegaz,” the largest enterprise in the USSR oil industry. In the oil industry, the name of Muravlenko, who won in the second round of voting for the Nizhnevartovsk airport, is most relevant for Tiumen’ and the Tiumen’ region. This is also indicated by the fact that Muravlenko’s name was announced in the first round of voting at the Tiumen’ airport, which in the end was named after D. Mendeleev. It is indicative that the names of prominent figures in the oil industry were submitted to the naming competition for airports in the oil target region. On the one hand, Salmanov acts as a place of memory in Surgut. On the other hand, the pioneer oilman is a place of memory for the entire virgin oil lands region.

**Smiling Fish and Yermak Timofeevich**

At the same time, the process of settling in the virgin oil lands continues. Severe climatic conditions and remoteness from the center determine the temporary nature of habitation in the region. The inclusion of the region in national memory projects indicates the gradual transformation of space and its patterns of habitation, as well as the process of lengthening history.

The historical memory of World War II in Yugra has been developing for a long time within the framework of a nationwide project. In 1945, an obelisk was erected on the grounds of the Surgut River station,
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dedicated to the citizens of Surgut who went to the front in 1941–1945. In 1995, the wooden obelisk was replaced by a white marble stele. As in many other regions, the monument was erected in a place that symbolizes the beginning of the road to the front (Konradova and Ryleeva 2005). Since the Ob was the only transport artery of the region, it was from this river port that the journey of Surgut dwellers to the front began.

In 1968, a memorial “Glory” was opened in Surgut, based on a wooden obelisk in honor of those who died during the kulak uprising of 1921. This example shows how the memory of the revolution has been absorbed by the Great Patriotic War at the local level (Boltunova 2017). The creation of a large complex was a characteristic feature of the 1960s; large monuments and memorial complexes were erected throughout the Soviet Union (Popov and Roman’ko 2019).

Together with the evacuees, and later the pioneer oilmen, the historical memory of the regions affected by the Great Patriotic War was brought to the north of Western Siberia. In 2018, a memorial sign “To the Residents of Besieged Leningrad”² was unveiled, which became part of the Memorial “Glory” in Khanty-Mansiisk. The initiative to create the monument came from the Khanty-Mansiisk city voluntary society, “Inhabitants of the Besieged Leningrad.”³ One of the organization’s goals is “the development of rituals associated with the beginning, breakthrough, and complete lifting of the blockade of Leningrad.” This creation of new places of memory of the siege of Leningrad outside St. Petersburg and its environs began relatively recently.

The North has been a place of exile for many years. The policy of creating a new memory of the region in connection with the need to attract specialists for oil exploration and production was an important part of creating a new image for the North. Commemorative practices related to the victims of repression are still taking shape. In 2018, a monument to the victims of the repressions of the 1930s and 1940s was unveiled on the Ob River embankment in Surgut.

Although the conquest of the virgin oil lands is the past being actualized, the discovery of Yugra by Yermak is gradually entering the agenda; the new challenge was to continue the story further back in time. The lengthening of the past should also contribute to the settlement of the region, where people will come not on a rotational basis, but for permanent residence. During the implementation of this project, the figure of Yermak and even the inhabitants of ancient Yugra again became relevant. In 2002, a monument “To the Founders of Surgut” was erected in Surgut, depicting Prince Fedor Boriatsinskii (who arrived
in Western Siberia together with the governor Vladimir Anichkov), a Cossack carpenter, and a priest. The concept of monuments reflecting the pioneers of different periods became more widespread. In Khanty-Mansiisk, two monuments “To the Pioneers of the Yugorskaia Land” (2004) and “The Bronze Symbol of Yugra” (2005) were erected, which depict three main periods of the development of the region: ancient Yugra; the time of the conquest of Siberia by Yermak; and the mass development of the oil and gas complex. In 2020, the “Embankment of Life” mural appeared on the embankment near the river port of Surgut, depicting important stages in the history of the city, thus changing the idea of the city as a purely oil-oriented space.

The Old Surgut Museum complex, which opened to visitors in 1999, occupies an important place in this process of memory lengthening. It consists of a complex of 14 wooden houses on the Saimaa River. Its purpose is to provide a visual representation of the historical appearance of Surgut in the nineteenth century. “Old Surgut” has become an artificially created place of memory (Berkut 2012), since the Surgut of the nineteenth century was located in a completely different place, and the buildings presented at the exposition are reconstructions. Since the opening of the complex, it has become a place of memory for many citizens, thanks to well-organized exhibition work.

The inhabited space indicates a gradual transformation of cities of temporary residence into permanent ones. Moreover, the space occupied by these cities is completely reclaimed from nature. For this, small sculptures or compositions are created and scattered around the city, creating a recreational area. These sculptures often claim to be the symbol of the city. For Surgut, these include numerous sculptures of a black fox, which are found primarily in “Old Surgut” and next to it. The black fox is the symbol of the city, placed on its emblem. A hotel and a cafe are named after him in the city. But near the building of the local history museum there is a sculpture of a smiling fish, which is also called a symbol of the city in many guidebooks—a city rich in both fish and cheerful people.

Conclusion

The conquest of the virgin oil lands and the appropriation of resources has become the main emphasis in the historical memory of the north of Western Siberia. The leading plot is the development of the oil and gas complex, and the central figure is a pioneer oilman. The history of
the conquest of the region begins in the sixteenth century, but historical memory is concentrated on the period of oil development and thus shows similarities to that of other young Soviet industrial cities.

Commemorative practices related to military conflicts are used in the formation of historical memory about the development of the north of Western Siberia. The creation of the oil and gas complex is presented as a victory over nature, and the oilmen act not only as pioneers who discovered the region, but also as soldiers. The figure of Farman Salmanov occupied a central place in the memory of the virgin oil lands. His image as a young active pioneer geologist began to take shape as early as the 1970s, and it can be assumed that Salmanov took an active part in creating the image of an oil discoverer and over the years rebuilt his autobiography in the context of the idea of pioneers.

Despite sharing similar mythologems with other major Soviet projects for the development of new territories, the commemorative practices of the virgin oil lands have proven to be more viable and continue to develop. Today, the continuation of the project focuses on the habitation of space and the extension of historical memory to the pioneers of Yermak’s time.

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**Notes**

1. Photos of this monument can be seen on the website of the city of Nezhnevartovsk: https://www.n-vartovsk.ru/town/gallery/place/168800.html (accessed 18 September 2023).


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