

En contraste con el terror Nazi que se caracterizaba por una clara línea divisoria entre víctimas y perpetradores, el terror soviético iba dirigido a muchos grupos étnicos, profesionales y territoriales. Lo más habitual, con pocas excepciones, era que los perpetradores de una oleada de terror se convirtieran en las víctimas de otra ola de terror. Si bien el holocausto nazi exterminada “al otro”, el terror soviético se asemejaba más a un suicidio.

Palabras Clave: Estalinismo. Terror. Arte visual. Memoria. Duelo.

Nazien izu edo terroreak oso muga garbia azaldu zuen biktimen eta gaizkileen artean; aitzitik, sobietarren izuak hainbat etnia, lanbide eta lurralde talde izan zituen helburu. Salbuespena ez baizik eta araua izan zen izualdi baten eragileak beste izualdi baten biktima bilakatzea. Nazien Holokaustoak Bestea suntsitu baldin bazuen, Sobietar izua suizidio edo bere buruaz beste egitearen antzekoa izan zen.

Giltza-Hitzak: Estalinismoa. Izua. Ikuste-arte. Oroimena. Duelua.

Contrairement à la terreur nazie qui traçait une limite nette entre victimes et bourreaux, la terreur soviétique visait de nombreux groupes ethniques, professionnels et territoriaux. Il était de règle, et non l'exception, que les bourreaux d'une vague de terreur deviennent les victimes de l'une des suivantes. Alors que l'Holocauste nazi visait l'extermination de l'Autre, la terreur soviétique évoquait davantage le suicide.

Mots-Clés : Stalinisme. Terreur. Art visuel. Mémoire. Deuil.

# Warped Memory: A History of Mourning for the soviet victims

**Etkind, Alexander**

Cambridge University, King's College. Dep. of Slavonic Studies.  
King's Parade. CB2 1ST Cambridge  
ae264@cam.ac.uk

BIBLID [ISBN: 978-84-8419-240-4 (2012); 8-16]

In contrast to the Nazi terror that featured a crystal-clear boundary between the victims and perpetrators, the Soviet terror targeted many ethnic, professional, and territorial groups. Though in some waves of terror the Poles, the Ukrainians, the Chechens, or the Jews suffered more than others, there were other waves when the terror chose the Russians. Some of these waves focused on the peasants and others targeted the intelligentsia, but there were also periods that extracted a particularly heavy toll from the state and party apparatus. It was a rule rather than exception that the perpetrators of one wave of terror became victims of another, with a lag that was measured in months or years. If the Nazi Holocaust exterminated the Other, the Soviet terror was similar to a suicide. But this is a sociological, bird-view picture of the events. In the actual moments of arrest, torture, or murder, the enormous distance separated victims and perpetrators. The largest in human world, this distance juxtaposed freedom and slavery, pride and shame, life and death.

In this lecture, I am going to show some mechanisms of the slow, insecure process of mourning for the victims of the Stalinist terror. I am writing a book about memory and mourning in various cultural genres, and I will start with an artist and survivor of the gulag in the 1950s, then I will switch to a filmmaker of the 1960s, and then I will turn to sculptors of the 1990s. But first, some basic information about the victims of the Soviet terror, who were quite different from the victims of the Nazi terror. In the USSR of the 1930s, most victims died from hunger and disease in the collective farms and the gulag, a system of concentration camps which functioned from 1930 to 1960, but actually even longer. A typical victim was called a “goner” or a “soon-to-be-dead”, a close analogy to *Muselmann*, as similar people were called in Auschwitz. Since the Soviet camps did not practice the Nazi procedures of “selection” which eliminated the sick and weak, many of those who perished in the gulag spent their last weeks and months as the goners.

Even though some Soviet camps had comprehensible functions such as production, military preparations, or internal colonization, most of them did not have any economic rationale. The reign of pure violence in the camps needs an expla-

nation. It was not the logic of production that organized the life and work in the gulag, but the logic of torture. As Elaine Scarry reveals in her classical analysis, “pain destroys a person’s world”, and torture consists of acts that magnify this destruction.<sup>1</sup> The gulag system profusely used physical and psychological torture both as the way to extract information from a person and much more often, as the way to force her to distort or falsify information, to agree with disinformation and perform it in action, giving false witnessing for example. If pain destroys the sufferer’s world, torture has an additional element: it expands the torturer’s self and its self-perceived power. The function of torture is the extension of power of the torturer.

The Soviet regime applied the investigative torture mostly in prisons rather than in camps, at the institutional gates of the gulag system rather than in its interior, where millions kept under a different kind of torture. There in the camps, the effects of hunger, manual work, uncured illnesses, low temperatures, separation from families, and violent conflicts with the peers combined in an overwhelming pain that, being purposefully inflicted by the regime, should also be considered as torture. If the need in information, as Scarry shows convincingly, is a false justification for investigative torture, the economic needs of the Soviet state is a similarly false justification for the torture of the camps. Curiously, the regime partially recognized this non-economic nature of the camps, when it talked about their ideological, educational, and psychological – in a word, transformative – functions. Used universally in the prisons and camps of the gulag era, the transformative torture turned citizens who were generously endowed with language and the world, into bare life, the soon-to-be-dead who were indifferent to everything but a piece of bread and a hateful neighbor. I guess that no other story of the gulag illustrates this method of transformative torture than Osip Mandelstam’s.

Poet and person of incredible courage, Mandelstam was arrested in 1934 after he wrote a satirical poem about Stalin. After investigation, he was punished by a relatively mild exile; his wife, Nadezhda, accompanied him. There in exile, he wrote an ode to Stalin, a complex piece of unusual and ambivalent power. Joseph Brodsky believed that this ode of 1937 was “the grandest poem Mandelstam ever wrote”. We do not know whether Stalin read Mandelstam’s “Ode” and if he did, how much did he understand there. We know only that Mandelstam was arrested again and subjected to a standard treatment of the gulag: separation from the family, transportation to Eastern Siberia, living with criminals, hard work, hunger, and lack of medical care. There was no information about him for about two decades, until after the collapse of the gulag system in the mid-fifties, random survivors returned from the camps to tell partially true, partially fantastic stories about their victims. Yulian Oksman, usually a smart and sober literary scholar who survived ten

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1. SCARRY Elaine. *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985; p. 56. The torturer usually perceives torture as a means and not an end, but the tortured, and her friends and descendants, may have the opposite opinion. My definition of torture camps attempts to formulate the victims’ perspective. It does not, however, deny the perpetrators’ perceptions of the economic, political, and psychological purposes of the gulag.

years in a camp also in Eastern Siberia though thousands of miles away from Mandelstam's, wrote in 1962 to an émigré colleague:

During the transportation, Mandelstam already demonstrated features of insanity. Suspecting that the officials of the camp [...] had received an order from Moscow to poison him, he rejected food that was given to him [...] Neighbors accused him of stealing their portions of bread and beat him brutally, until they found out that he was mad [...] He was thrown out of the barrack, lived near trash pits, and ate leftovers. Dirty, covered with grey hair, long-bearded, crazy – he turned into the camp's scarecrow.<sup>2</sup>

Seeking a philosophical means of representing the horror of the Nazi camps, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben developed the concept of *homo sacer*, defined as “life that may be killed but not sacrificed”.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, only life that has value may be sacrificed; losing those like Mandelstam – millions of them – was not a sacrifice for the Soviet sovereign, because they had negative value to start with, and were purposefully cleansed of any value by the transformative torture in the camps. Living in the zone of exception from the laws and customs of the state, *Homo sacer* is subject to the exclusive competence of the sovereign. He who can declare state of emergency can also define – and does it routinely though in a convenient secrecy – who of his subjects are “bare” and therefore could be wasted.

However, in Stalinist perspective, Agamben's analysis looks illuminating but insufficient. The idea of sacrifice relies on the religious concepts of the ancient Greeks and Romans for whom the idea of human sacrifice was accessible; for moderns, this is a very ambiguous concept. How to translate sacrifice into secular terms? One could define sacrifice – e.g. a loss of soldiers at war or firemen on duty – as based on the voluntary participation of the potential victims and the retroactive acknowledgment from the public sphere. In other words, sacrifice is voluntary, public, and meaningful to the public. In contrast, a mass murder in a gas chamber or in the Soviet camp does not comply with this definition, because it is not voluntary and not public. In the gulag, murders were routinely executed by guardsmen or fellow prisoners, but more often, victims died of disease or starvation. With no public participation, life in the camps could be only killed, not sacrificed. In other words, their life and death was not in a public domain of the law and court; it was a private affair of the sovereign.

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2. “Iz arkhiva Guverovskogo instituta. Pis'ma lu. G. Oksmanak G. P. Struve”, publication by Lazar Fleishman. *Stanford Slavic Studies*, v.1, Stanford 1987, 24. In a different letter, Oksman wrote about his sources as reliable: “I talked with the comrades who stayed with him to the end, I talked with the doctors who closed his eyes”.

3. AGAMBEN, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995; p. 83; AGAMBEN. *Remnants of Auschwitz, The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books, 1999; for criticisms of Agamben's analysis of the *Muselmann*, bare life and witnessing, see LACAPRA, Dominick. “Approaching Limit Events: Siting Agamben”. In: *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Steven De Caroli. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007; pp. 126-62; DAVIS, Colin. *Haunted Subjects. Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead*. New York: Palgrave, 2007; pp. 119-26; MAZOWER, Mark. “Foucault, Agamben: Theory and the Nazis.” In: *Boundary 2*, 35, no. 1. Spring 2008; pp. 23-34.

Agamben's sacrificial definition of "bare life" and his archaic concept of *homo sacer* need serious adjustment before they can be applied to the gulag. Revising Agamben, Eric Santner proposes the concept of "creaturely life", which reflects the "ontological vulnerability" of humans. According to Santner, those cultural institutions and human communities that attempt to shelter their members from various threats, often intensify their vulnerability by exploitation and tyranny.<sup>4</sup> Following both these authors and also Elaine Scarry, I would propose a more specific construction, "tortured life". This is life that has been stripped of meaning, speech, and memory by torture. Like creaturely life, tortured life is created by destitution, but this is a kind of destitution that is generated by the purposeful efforts of the state and its institutions. Like bare life, tortured life is situated in a direct relation to the sovereign, because it is the sovereign who tortures. Tortured life is a temporary condition, though if the torture is skillfully performed, it can be drawn out over a prolonged period of time. This life can survive and recover, but the post-traumatic consequences are unavoidable.

Soviet concentration camps were torture camps, not extermination camps, and if they produced extermination in high numbers it was a result of negligence rather than purpose. This extermination was easy to keep in secret. There are archives for all kinds of life but bare. Hardly self-conscious due to humiliation, hunger, and disease, the *goners* have been barely remembered. Still, millions of their victims have been commemorated in various cultural genres. In literature, the most important monument to them are stories by the gulag survivor, Varlam Shalamov. Minimalist and almost primitive, they show the camp as an entirely meaningless institution, the reign of pure violence with no purpose or justification.

These warped issues were central for the most important Russian artist of the gulag period, Boris Sveshnikov (1927-1998). During his eight-year long term in a labor camp in Northern Siberia from 1946 to the end of 1953, and then during his long life after his release from the camp, Sveshnikov created amazing works of art that throw a new light both on the gulag and more generally, on the Soviet experience. Getting in the camp when he was nineteen, he developed a surprisingly mature understanding of what happened to him and to his country. One of his camp drawings interprets power as a monstrous blade that shaves the town, an operation that is consistent with the narcissistic look of the sovereign at his own reflection, and with the treatment that the naked citizens – bare, tortured life – receive under his command. While sovereign's hand is still shaving the city, the citizens have already been undressed and prepared to the worst; to the left from them, a terminal broom is already cleaning their remains. Some of Sveshnikov's camp pictures emanate a pure horror, such as ratmen performing mysterious experiments on human females in a prison or a laboratory, a place that looks and works like the gulag. An analogy but also a contrast to Sveshnikov's drawing is the famous series by the American artist, Art Spiegelman, who rendered the horror of the holo-

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4. SANTNER, Eric L. *The Royal Remains. The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011; p. 6.

caust by showing its victims as mice and perpetrators as cats. In Sveshnikov, rats are perpetrators; in Spiegelman, mice are victims.

Another picture presents the camp experience in a strikingly unusual way. We see a dramatic confrontation between two men, one leading another to an unknown destination, a service, or maybe an experiment. The leader looks like a priest or monk. The movement of his hands, which we see but the other man does not, betrays the tension and doubts of this leader. With his twisted and restrained movement, the second man looks like a sacrifice of a ritual that the first man is performing despite his own insecurity. Is this an image of *homo sacer*? His face is calm, as if he accepts his destiny. He is dressed in a robe that leaves his back naked and defenseless; one can see some eroticism in this image. If to imagine that the first man's robe is of the same fashion, the second man looks at the naked bottom of the first man. They are looking at one another and we are looking at them trying to grasp what the hell is, literally, going on here. They appear against the background of a northern landscape that looks like Sveshnikov's camp, which he depicted in many drawings: the camp is cold, inhuman, and strangely elegant in these pictures.

Sveshnikov told the story of the gulag from the perspective of its victim, of a soon-to-be-dead. Later in 1961, Sveshnikov portrayed this figure as a man already in the coffin; praying to the heavens, in the same moment he enjoys his still erected penis, an only drop of color on his bloodless body. This is probably the best image of a soon-to-be-dead, to which only some Shalamov's stories can add a thing or two.

I want to share with you still another image of mourning, but this time it will come from a high achievement of the Soviet cinema. Grigorii Kozintsev is known mostly for his screen versions of *Hamlet* (1964) and *King Lear* (1970). These austere, black-and-white versions of Shakespeare in Boris Pasternak's translation and with Dmitrii Shostakovich's score, have been recognized as major cultural achievements of the Soviet period. In his writings on Shakespeare as well as in his films, Kozintsev insisted that his ideal was not historical accuracy but rather a self-conscious modernization of the classical text. *Hamlet* is a paradigm for mourning, and the film follows the play in analyzing the relations between memory, mourning, and revenge. Hamlet is unusually decisive in this film, and so is the ghost of his father. In his well-crafted book of Shakespearean scholarship, Kozintsev argued against many attempts to produce *Hamlet* without the ghost. Like Jacques Derrida but much earlier, Kozintsev connected the ghost of Hamlet's father with the specter from the *Communist Manifesto*. Like Derrida, Kozintsev found it important that the ghost came to Hamlet in his combat armor. For Kozintsev's film, historical armor was borrowed from a museum. It was so heavy that a champion wrestler was recruited to carry it. Moreover, Kozintsev chose an unusual helmet, with an open visor that had the shape of human face. Derrida wrote about the visor that "even when it is raised", it signifies "that someone, beneath the armor, can safely see without being seen", which for Derrida is "perhaps the supreme insignia of power". The visor that emulates a human face in Kozintsev's *Hamlet* deepens this paradoxical, prosthetic function of the ghost's armor even further.

This *Hamlet's* highest success, however, is a ceremonial, slow funeral, which takes about ten minutes at the end of the film. A product of Kozintsev's fantasy, this funeral is the central scene of the film (in Shakespeare's tragedy, it is described by one line). Fortinbras gives Hamlet military honors, as a soldier to a soldier, and then the funeral starts, scored with Shostakovich's music that reached the peak of its unbearable intensity in the last moments of the film. Kozintsev had in mind an even better story:

I had a good option for *Hamlet's* finale: the wall of Elsinore, slowly, the ghost of the father is walking along and after him, proceeds Hamlet, i.e. his ghost. The military patrols are saluting them.<sup>5</sup>

Even as staged, the final scene of Kozintsev's *Hamlet* was a powerful, sublime mourning ceremony. Posthumously, Hamlet completed his work of mourning, which had remained tragically unaccomplished while he was alive. In Kozintsev's film, it was a proper grieving for the unmourned Soviet dead, one generation deferred: arguably, the best memorial to the Soviet victims that has ever been produced.

According to the exhibition of monuments to the victims of the gulag in 2007, there were then 1140 such monuments and memorial plaques within the territory of the former Soviet Union. For their work of mourning, they employ stones, crosses, obelisks, bells, and other wide-spread symbols. Among these monuments to the victims of the gulag, there are very few realistic monuments that depict an actual prisoner in a moment of suffering. Interestingly, if anthropomorphic sculptures are found at all, they are usually erected in places like Ukraine or Kazakhstan, where a bare, senseless life in the camp is easier to re-imagine as a sacrifice to the nationalist cause. For example, in the Tuva republic in the South-Eastern Siberia, a huge bronze man in national clothing was erected in 1989 with the inscription, "The Untamed. To the victims of political repressions in Tuva". The general rule seems to be that guilt monuments are non-figurative, while pride monuments tend to depict people, on horseback or not. Mourning entails, among other things, the imagining of the suffering of the other, and in practice it often generates non-human and warped, abstract or monstrous symbols.

Characteristically, the most creative and also, the largest of these monuments present monsters:<sup>6</sup> a monument in Petersburg by Mikhail Shamiakin, which represents two sphinxes; "Molokh of the Totalitarianism" in Levashovo (N.Galitskaia, V.Gambarov) which shows a robotic cannibal who is devouring or raping a human figure; and what is probably the largest and most successful among the post-Soviet monuments, The "Mask of Death" in Magadan by Ernst Neizvestny, which rep-

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5. For details and references, see ETKIND, Alexander. "Mourning the Soviet Victims in Cosmopolitan Way: Hamlet from Kozintsev to Riazanov". In: *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, 2011, 5/3; pp. 389-409.

6. On monsters, monuments, and representation in broader contexts see COHEN, Jeffrey J. ed. *Monster Theory*. Minneapolis: 1996; GRANT, Bruce. "New Moscow monuments, or, States of innocence". In: *American Ethnologist*, 28/2, 2001; pp. 332-362; OUSHAKINE, Serguei. "We're nostalgic but not crazy!": Retrofitting the Past in Russia". In: *Russian Review* 66, July 2007; pp. 451-82.



resents a concrete Leviathan, composed of multiple human faces, with a cross in place of the nose.

Though Freud's ideas about trauma have been frequently employed in cultural studies, I propose to shift the focus to his work on mourning. In a post-catastrophic culture, the survivors who fight their traumas give the way to the descendants who mourn them and other victims of the catastrophe. For the reasons that are demographic rather than psychological, "postmemory" is about mourning and not about trauma or the post-traumatic. The logic of Freud's post-World War I works on repetition, mourning, and the uncanny, it can be formulated in a few simple words. If the suffering is not remembered, it would be repeated. If the loss is not recognized, it threatens to return in strange though not entirely new forms, as the uncanny. Presenting living and dead, human and animal parts in creative combinations is how people represent death and the world after it; Bakhtin described this method as "gothic realism". Freud's formulas defined the uncanny as a particular form of memory, one that is intimately connected to fear. The combination of memory and fear is, precisely, the uncanny. When the dead are not properly mourned, they turn into the undead. Visual art has a propensity to depict this creatures in striking ways that textual interpretations struggle to cope with.