

Culture as Resistance: the Case of the Solovki Prison Camp and of its inmates

Research on Stalinism¹ has described a coercive system that is shocking in its definition and “perfection”. By the end of the Thirties, almost all of the real and hypothetical opponents to power in the Soviet Union had been eliminated, both physically and mentally. A system based on fear and informing was able to disintegrate human society’s most common values, including friendship, love and family. As with every historical phenomenon, the creation of this system did not follow a single path – although there were obviously some “guidelines” that existed from the beginning and which changed over time. Many special conditions created a unique episode in a field fundamental to Stalinism, which is that of repression and in particular the creation of the Gulag system²: blood and art, killers and intellectuals, tortures and theatre were simultaneously co-protagonists during the making of the Gulag system, in what represented the first step towards it – the Gulag of Solovki³.

Established in 1923⁴ on a stunning archipelago close to the Arctic Circle, which had hosted one of the most prestigious monasteries of the Russian Orthodox Church⁵ since the Fifteenth century, the camp of the Solovki was created in order to solve one of the many problems for the newborn Soviet state. A large number of prisoners, arrested in an ever increasing quantity since 1917, were being kept in improvised prisons. Therefore, the Sovnarkom⁶ decided to create a Special Purpose Camp on the Solovki islands, on the model of already existing Special Purpose Prisons in the North of Russia⁷. The aim was to isolate certain categories of prisoners and, as a second goal⁸, to use them as forced labour. This way,

1 Many books have been written on the topic of Stalinism. Fundamental works include Robert Conquest's biography of Stalin, as well as his history of the Great Terror; Andrea Graziosi's recent “History of the Soviet Union”; Sheila Fitzpatrick's “Stalinism”; and also recent works, such as Orlando Figes's “The whisperers” and Gian Piero Piretto's “The eyes of Stalin”. In addition to that, literary works have contributed in understanding the constraints of Stalinism: Anna Akhmatova's poems, Lidia Chukovskaia's “Sofia Petrovna” and Vassily Grossman's last novels.

2 On the topic of the Gulag system, see Anne Applebaum's magnificent work “Gulag: a history”.

3 On the Solovki prison camp, see Yuri Brodsky's “Solovki. Twenty years of special purpose”.

4 See “Postanovlenie Sovieta Narodnykh Kommissarov SSSR ot 23-go oktjabrja 1923 goda” [Sovnarkom's resolution of 23/10/1923], GARF 5446/1/2.

5 The history of the archipelago, from prehistoric times up to today, has been described in Roy Robson's precious book “Solovki. The story of Russia told through its most remarkable islands”.

6 Soviet Narodnykh Kommissarov [Council of People's Commissars]. It was the central organ of the party that made the most important decisions. It can be compared to the western idea of national governments.

7 The most important were those of Cholmogory and Petrominsk, both organized in abandoned monasteries in order to contain political prisoners. The “Special Purpose” - translated in English also as “Special assignment” - consisted in the selection of some categories of prisoners, mainly political prisoners and “counter-revolutionary” ones.

8 Decisive in the industrialization of the Gulag system and in the use of forced labour in order to expand the industrial strength of the Soviet Union was the role of Naftaly Frenkel (1883-1960), former prisoner of the Solovki, who became one of the main figures in the building of the Gulag system thanks to his unscrupulous

the camp could earn a profit to cover all its expenses.

Even though this second intention never became a reality⁹, the Special Purpose Camp of the Solovki (known as SLON¹⁰) represented the base of the Gulag system for many other aspects. It was in the SLON that the techniques of exploitation of prisoners became more and more refined; it was here that the terrifying relationship between work done and food received by each prisoner was forged, causing the death of thousands of people; it was the administration of the SLON that understood how forced labour could be used to build roads and to become the base of an industrial system¹¹. At the same time, horrible crimes and torturing of prisoners were committed in the Solovki camp: in the forests of the archipelago, starving prisoners had to work in the Arctic cold for hours. They would cut trees and bring enormous pieces of wood on their backs under the eyes of cruel guards, whose main amusement was to shoot prisoners or to torture them by making them stand on a post for hours or, in the summer, by exposing their naked bodies to thousands of ravenous mosquitoes that populated the 500 lakes of the archipelago¹².

While the system of violence and exploitation was forming, something absolutely unexpected was happening in the same place. The mass of intellectuals sent to the camp to be eliminated or “re-educated”¹³ managed to have a space for their activities. From the early days of the camp’s existence, in fact, a theatre was established¹⁴. The SLON was full of actors, directors, set designers – many of whom came straight from the main theatres of the Soviet Union. The administration of the camp let them rehearse after 10 hours of forced labour. They had no scripts, so they had to depend on their memory¹⁵. As time passed, their performances convinced the administration to give them more space: in the long, dark Arctic night, the theatre for the guards was not only part of the “re-education” work, but also a wonderful amusement. Later, the employees of the theatre were freed from forced labour, and

method of exploitation of the prisoners.

9 The administration of the camp sent continuous requests to Moscow in order to obtain funding. The balance of the camp was constantly in red: see GARF 5446/5a/720, 5446/7a/537, 5446/8a/365, 5446/9a/444.

10 SLON is the acronym of Solovetsky Lager Osobogo Naznachenia [Special Purpose Camp of Solovki]. The acronym means also “elephant” in Russian: for this reason one of the symbols of the camp was an elephant.

11 This aspect was fundamental in the building of the Soviet Gulag system. In the late Twenties, the administration of the camp started to use forced labour to build the main road system of Northern European Russia. Following this example, the Soviet state built many roads and railways in the coldest region of the North. In Kizny's book “Gulag” it is possible to see the photographs of the remains of “The dead way”, a railway never finished and never used that killed a high number of prisoners.

12 These horrible forms of torture are described in almost all the memoirs written by former prisoners of the camp. Particularly vivid are the descriptions in Ivan Zaitsev's memoirs.

13 I will explain the concept of “re-education” later.

14 The opening of the theatre happened even before the writing of the *Postanovlenie* (see note 4) that officially created the camp (on the islands a prison was already active). On the 23rd September 1923, a comedy of Miasnitsky was performed by some inmates. The history of the theatre of SLON is described in Natalia Kuziakina's superb book “Theatre in the Solovki prison camp”.

15 One of the protagonists of the scene of the Solovki camp, Boris Shiryayev (1889-1959), dedicated many of the pages of his literary book based on his experience in the SLON, “The inextinguishable icon-lamp” (1952).

they were given books and costumes¹⁶. Their success was amazing: they could produce up to two premières a month, they started to write plays themselves, soon they were given premises to rehearse and, eventually, they would even go on tour in other prisons.

While the theatre was gaining more and more respect, another “intellectual miracle” was happening in the camp. Wanting to demonstrate their re-educational work¹⁷, the OGPU leaders decided to release a camp press organ at the suggestion of some intellectuals who had already gained the trust of the administration. Initially printed with rudimentary means¹⁸ and full of political articles, the journal called *SLON* nevertheless gave some intellectuals the opportunity to publish poems or tales. When the technical means improved with the arrival of an American typographic machine on the eve of 1925, the administration decided to improve the content as well. *SLON* was renamed *Solovetskie ostrova* [Solovki islands] and contained an increasing amount of verses, essays and tales. A weekly newspaper entitled *Novye Solovki* [The New Solovki] had both political articles and texts linked to the productivity of the camp. It became the main source where the everyday cultural life of the camp was displayed. Theatre reviews, reflections on art and show programs were published in *The New Solovki*. Most of the authors were prisoners.

Following the example of the theatre, the camp press also was a huge success. In addition to the journal and the weekly newspaper, the camp printers produced many other newspapers to be hung on the walls, the famous “*stengazety*”¹⁹. The Society of Ethnography of the Solovki, a section of the Society of Ethnography of Arkhangelsk, gave many academics and professors the opportunity to continue their intellectual activity in the *SLON* by publishing their work on psychology, biology, history, anthropology and many other subjects²⁰. Some of those studies, for instance those by Nikolai Vinogradov on the prehistoric labyrinths on Zaiatskie islands²¹, are still considered today as fundamental works by the international scientific community.

The success of the press was the base on which an incredibly active publishing scene was created. For this reason, prisoners would spend some of the money received from home

16 Fundamental, for that, was the role of Makar Borin (1871-1938), an actor who was very popular in the south of the Soviet Union until his arrest in 1924. In the camp, he became the director of the theatre and managed to obtain many privileges for all the employees.

17 The main protagonist of this act was Nikolai Litvin (1890-?), a Ukrainian journalist who was the “soul” of the publishing life of the camp.

18 *SLON* was printed on a lithographic stone, the only thing remained of the glorious typography of the monastery after a devastating fire in May 1923. The typography of the monastery of the Solovki was one of the most important of all Russia: unfortunately, most of the ancient books produced by it were lost in the fire.

19 In the article written by N. Stogov (real name Aleksandr Dobkin) in 1978 on the press of the Gulag, are listed 14 *stengazety* published in the Solovki. See N. Stogov “Prison press of the years 1921-1935”.

20 The “SOK” (Solovetskoe Obschestvo Kraevedenia) published in total 23 issues from 1926 up to 1929.

21 See the issues n° 4 (The labyrinths of the Solovki) and 12 (New labyrinths of the Solovki archipelago), both published in 1927.

to buy a journal rather than more food. Moreover, the journal *Solovki islands* was sent to the mainland and even abroad: anyone could subscribe to it and receive it at home. It could even be purchased in some kiosks in the main cities of the Soviet Union²². As a result, the journal reached, in 1930, the remarkable run of 3000 copies.

In addition to the theatre and the press, other cultural phenomena in the Solovki prison camp allowed intellectuals to avoid death and, at the same time, to continue their cultural activity. In 1925, an “anti-religious” museum was opened that, despite its name, was able to save many treasures of the monastery from destruction²³. Not far from the museum there was the camp’s library, where a few prisoners worked and many other inmates went to get books or to read newspapers and magazines²⁴. In 1930, the library had a collection of more than 30.000 books, mainly taken from collections confiscated during arrests in Moscow. Moreover, in the camp’s club and in the theatre, many intellectuals held seminars and lessons on a great variety of topics of human culture, including sociology, for which a special office was created, the “Office of criminology”²⁵.

Why were all these cultural activities allowed in a concentration camp? The reason for this is the previously cited concept of “re-education”, an idea established since the very first moment of existence of the Soviet state. It often constituted vile revenge against the formerly rich. All counter-revolutionary inmates²⁶ in all prisons and camps of the Soviet Union had to be re-educated in order to accept the ideals of the newborn Bolshevik state and, eventually, to help the state in the work of education²⁷ of the mass of proletarians who did not have any culture. Therefore, in many camps and prisons, there were theatre groups, press organs and libraries, all organized by the Cultural-Educational Section of each place of detention.

The Solovki case is unique in the big picture of the Soviet Gulag because the SLON mainly produced not proletarian culture, but that of the *intelligentsia*. In other camps’ journals, one could read only poems written by prisoners about Lenin's greatness or on the

22 Most of the buyers were relatives of the inmates, that this way could have news of the place where they were kept.

23 In the museum, aside real anti-religious personalities such as Aleksandr Ivanov (we have no details about his biography), worked people like the already mentioned Nikolai Vinogradov (1876-1938) that, thanks to his incredible diplomatic skills, managed to save a great part of the treasure of the monastery. His work was successful only for short time: by the end of the Thirties all the icons and the other sacred objects were destroyed.

24 The monastery used to have a prestigious library: its patrimony burned out completely in the 1923 fire.

25 The Kriminologichesky Kabinet, known as Krimkab, had the task of studying the attitudes of the criminals. A group of selected intellectuals studied their habits, their language, their traditions. In this office worked some extraordinary intellectuals, such as the philosopher Aleksandr Mejer (1874-1939), the actor and poet Boris Glubokovsky (1895-1932?) and the future famous scholar Dmitri Likhachev (1906-1999).

26 I.e. representatives of other political branches opposed to the Bolsheviks, people linked to the Tsarist regime such as the nobility, soldiers of the White Army, the religious, *intelligent* and representatives of the "bourgeoisie" – as far as this word can be applied to the Russian case.

27 I am referring only to cultural education: the political education was firmly in the hands of the party and of its representatives.

miracle-working power of the party in the destiny of the authors. In theatres, one could watch plays ordered by the party and produced following the strict directives of the GUMZ (Chief Administration of the Prisons) or attend seminars by minor members of the party on the “construction of life”²⁸. Indeed, plays prohibited in the rest of the Soviet Union (such as some of Dostoevsky's adaptations) or plays written by writers already victims of denigrative campaigns (i.e. Zamiatin²⁹) regularly appeared in the playbill of Solovki's theatre, while the journal published literary works that would certainly have been rejected by censors in every other organ of the nation. The library had thousands of prohibited books, which all prisoners could borrow and read³⁰.

The concentration of a huge mass of intellectuals created an historical paradox: employed in all the administration offices because of their culture and honesty, these *intelligenty* gained an important position in the camp and therefore managed to have privileges and cultural leadership. They could “save” other intellectuals from manual labour, assigning them to office work that helped them survive³¹. At the same time, they could create a sort of “intellectual village” where they could produce their culture, in opposition to the proletarian one that they never accepted. The seminars they held were more on astronomy, psychology or Shakespearean theatre than on ideological or political subjects, such as occurred in other camps. Moreover, they could express their point of view, sometimes evidently in opposition to the administration, as happened in this case with an ironic remark about the ignorance of the “anti-religious” guides of the museum.

I was one day at the museum. There was a group of people standing close to many holy relics. They listened to the guide who explained:

- So, the monks used to say that they suffered for people; whereas, obviously, they didn't suffer for the peasants, but for the nobles because, as you all know, before there were two parties: one peasant party, and one of *poprichniki*, that is the monarchists(?!).

What a good explanation!³²

Another type of freedom given to the intellectuals of the SLON was a formal one. At a time when futurism was becoming part of the literary periphery of Soviet Union, due to

28 See *Golos Zakliuchennogo* [The voice of the inmate], n°3 of 1925; GARF 4042/63/118; GARF 4042/63/79.

29 Yevgeny Zamyatin (1884-1937) was an outstanding writer whose works were heavily criticized in the mainstream Soviet press and in literary circles close to the Soviet regime. He was exiled in 1931 and lived a poor life in Paris.

30 In the other camps, books sent from Moscow to the libraries were controlled. There were lists of prohibited books.

31 This fact is largely described in Likhachev's memoirs. See D.S. Likhachev, *Vospominania* [Memoir], Logos, Spb, 1995.

32 Lagkor Zorky [“Watchful” lager correspondent], *The New Solovki*, n° 37, 12/9/1925, p.4. The guide says “*poprichniki*” instead of “*oprichniki*”, members of an elite of nobles close to the Tsar Ivan the Terrible, known for their violence and strong power. The category of “*oprichniki*” was eliminated by the same Ivan the Terrible in 1572, seven years after its creation.

political reasons, one could see some typical futuristic expressions, such as the graphical experiments of Aleksandr Peshkovsky in the Solovki journal. (image)³³ It is incredible to see how many texts contained desperate descriptions of the condition of the prisoners, as in Kemetsky's poems:

In other lands the earth turns crazy,
And the hands of the girls are full of flowers,
And the sun pours lavish flashes
on verdant poplars...

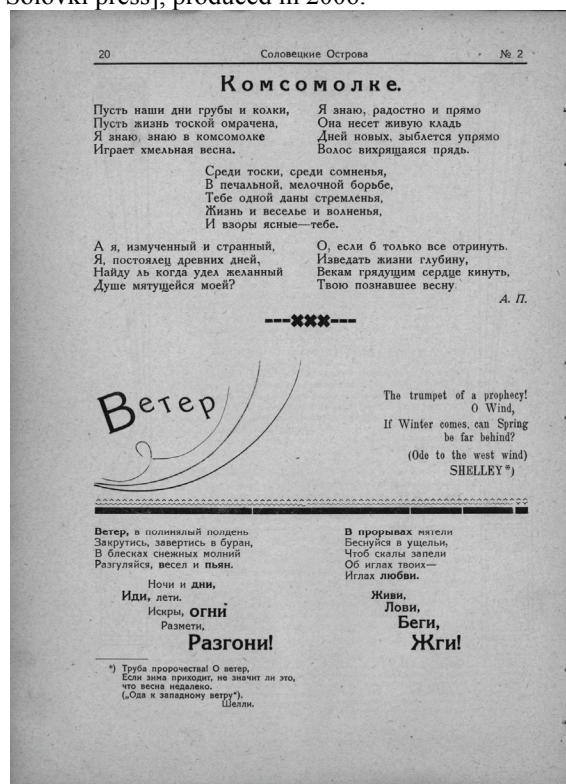
Still the fruitless snow kills the fields,
The wind has no hurry to part from the ice,
And the wind walks with his cutting steps
Along the rusty walls of the gloomy Cremlin.

In the short but sleepless
pale green night, how often
was I ready to hear, exhausted by silence,

The whistle long desired by us
bringing the news of our liberation, maybe...
But all is silent. Only the seagull annoys the mist.³⁴

Obviously, this situation was not as simple as it may sound. These intellectuals were

33 A. Peshkovsky (1905-?), Veter [Wind], Solovki islands, n°2, 1929, p. 20. The image is taken from the DVD Solovetskaia pechat [The Solovki press], produced in 2006.



34 Vladimir Sveshnikov-Kemetsky (1902-1938), Pered navigatsiei [Before navigation], Solovki islands, n°2-3, 1930, p. 54. These remarks are surprising if compared to the ones of joy present in the publications of other camps.

constantly exposed on two fronts: on one side, the other inmates, suffering and dying, considered them as privileged prisoners and collaborators of the killers; on the other side, some of the chekists³⁵ were against them, considering their success as a threat. Those chekists tried to support the growth of proletarian art inside the camp by sponsoring proletarian artistic collectives and by promoting some “typical” re-educational activities³⁶. This conflict was evident in the pages of *The New Solovki*, where intellectuals and proletarians had an open debate on the role of art inside the camp.

Not all of the chekists, though, were against the intellectuals. It is a documented fact that some of them helped the intellectuals’ activity. One of the chiefs of the camp’s administration, Fiodor Eikhmans, protected them when the editorial circuit of the SLON was under attack by the central authorities³⁷. Moreover, he created the Society of Ethnography and gave many intellectuals special duties and tasks, saving them from a sure death – as happened with Vladimir Krivosh-Nemanich, a Serbian professor who was appointed head of the camp’s meteorological station, (Shiriaev 1952, 125).

With the protection of Eikhmans and other chekists, those intellectuals, part of a class – the *intelligentsia* – sent to the Solovki to die together with other classes, managed to fight their last battle with the only weapons they had in their hands: the weapons of creation, the weapons of culture, the weapons of art. In this battle, destined to a sure defeat, they could give their best: in their last, desperate whisper before death, they would write poems and essays, stage plays or paint in watercolours³⁸. It was their form of resistance, as explained by Dmitri Likhachev:

[We all tried] to overcome the horrors of the field by devoting ourselves to literature. It was indeed a form of non-armed resistance: we resisted by creating, a capacity that they wanted to kill in us.(Likhachev 1995, 253).

While they were fighting this battle inside the camp, some of their comrades who

35 The term refers generically to the guards, although the Cheka [Extraordinary commission for combating counter-revolution and sabotage, Chrezvychainaia komissia po bor'bye s kontr-revoljutsiyei i sabotazhem] disappeared early and its acronym changed first into GPU and then in OGPU.

36 They promoted the collective Svoi [Our folks], in opposition to the one of ChLAM [Trash] created by the intellectuals detained in the camp.

37 Fiodor Eikhmans (1897-1938) was from 1923 to 1929 the vice director of the SLON. He was then sent to Moscow, and was appointed first chief of the newborn GULag [Chief administration of the camps, Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerej]. He was repressed in 1938. During his years on the Solovki, he defended the intellectuals and most probably was the one who chose the cultural policy that allowed freedom for the *intelligenty*. When authorities from Moscow started questioning the administration of the camp about the contents of the publications, Eikhmans wrote a long letter in defence of the political culture of the SLON and, therefore, of the intellectuals. See GARF, 4042/126/28.

38 A few of those watercolours have remained. The ones by Osip Braz (1873-1936) are a wonderful example of transfiguration of reality: the scenery depicted by the painter inspires a sense of peace, even when they represent some of the places where the life was hard, such as the former monastery that was turned into a prison. The real heart of the camp, it was painted by the artist in bright colours.

managed to escape from the SLON were publishing books of memoirs in the West, trying to open the eyes of Western governments on the real situation of the Soviet prisons and camps³⁹. Their fight, in the end, had no result. Western countries did not follow through on a proposal to stop the importation of timber coming from the SLON, therefore acting as silent partners in the extermination of thousands of prisoners in the forests of Solovki and surrounding areas⁴⁰.

Once the terrifying structure of Stalinism became more and more defined, this battle came to its obvious end. With the first five-year plan and the building of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, most of the prisoners were moved from the Solovki and sent to die on the construction of the world's goriest waterway⁴¹. The typesetting equipment was moved as well and the press organs of the camp were closed down. Those on the Canal were already propagandist means, celebrating Stalin's greatness. The same happened to the camp's theatre; what was once Solovki's troupe became an agitation brigade⁴². The concept of re-education [Perevospitanie] was changed into the more aggressive concept of "reforging" [Perekovka]. Between 1930 and 1939, the Society of Ethnography was closed down, the icons were destroyed after the museum was closed, and the library's collection was forever lost when the SLON itself closed down in 1939⁴³. Almost all of the intellectuals of the Solovki died or were shot in the following years, including amazing personalities such as Pavel Florensky⁴⁴. With them, the old Russia, with its values, its quality, its talent, was executed.

Today, the memory of those extraordinary people, who managed to react to the repressive system before it fully strangled intellectuals⁴⁵, is in danger. Professors, painters and directors whose only fault was to live in an environment that wanted them dead; poets

39 The first book of an escapee of the SLON published in the West was Soserko Malsagov's "An Island Hell", which came out in London (and in English) in 1926. Soon after that (1928), Yuri Bessonov's "My 26 prisons" (in French) and Anton Klinger's "Solovetskaia katorga" (in Russian, but published in Berlin) managed to raise a scandal in Western public opinion about the conditions of prisoners in the Soviet camps.

40 This proposal, which was made at the end of the Twenties, vanished completely. The West sent several commissions which did not change the situation. The "rumours" coming from the West convinced Moscow to organize some actions to save "the good name" of their camps. In 1928, a film representing the life of the SLON was produced. The next year, the famous writer Maksim Gorky visited the islands, writing afterwards a report that supported the action of the Cheka (OGPU).

41 The Belomorkanal was a canal that united the two seas, running for 227 kilometres through the forests of Northern Russia. It was the first major project completed using forced labour. It was finished in only 20 months (1931-1933). In order to complete the work following Stalin's order, no pity was given to the inmates. Many scholars number the victims at 100,000.

42 A little troupe remained on the Solovki. It was active until 1937.

43 The reason why the camp closed in October 1939, on the eve of the war between Soviet Union and Finland, is most probably the close distance of the archipelago to the Finnish border.

44 Pavel Florensky (1882-1937), philosopher, writer, scientist and mathematician, was also known as "The Russian Leonardo Da Vinci". Arrested and taken to the Solovki in 1934, he was shot in Levashovo, near Leningrad, in December 1937.

45 After 1929 and above all by the end of the thirties, these forms of resistance were basically non-existent, despite the presence of many intellectuals in the camps. Varlam Shalamov, in his tales about the Kolyma camps, described perfectly how the only thought of the prisoners was for food, for survival.

that were part of the “generation that squandered its poets”, to use Roman Jakobson's words⁴⁶; intellectuals whose tragic fate has denied them the right to glory: their lives are falling into oblivion, victims for a second time of new Russia's silencing of the past, which is more and more supported by Russians central institutions⁴⁷. Most young Russians are ignorant of Soviet repressions, although their families may have been involved in it. Through amazing work, many associations and research centres are trying to break this wall of indifference. At the same time, Western scholars and associations attempt to spread knowledge about the victims of Soviet regime.

Such is the case of the memory of the victims of SLON. Every year Memorial of Saint Petersburg organizes “days of memory”⁴⁸ on the archipelago, while a few scholars have published some books on the topic in recent years. Through their work, a ray of light continues to be shed over the destinies of the victims and of those intellectuals who used art to resist. The meaning of their fight was explained by another prisoner, Nina Gagen-Torn, who did not spend her detention in Solovki but who lived for many years in the terrible Kolyma camps,⁴⁹:

Poetry in prison is a necessity: it harmonizes the conscience in time. Man escapes from prison, seizing time as if it was space. Those who dig into their conscience to the very deepness of rhythm and give themselves up to it, do not lose their minds. Even the snowflakes dance rhythmically in the light of a lamp, white against a black sky. The conquest of rhythm is liberation... They will never hurt me...⁵⁰

Andrea Gullotta

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46 This is the title of a famous book by Jakobson about the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and his generation.

47 As a symbol of this silencing, in December 2008 the office of Memorial in Saint Petersburg was victim of a raid ordered by St. Petersburg's Public Prosecutor's Office. All the hard disks, containing 20 years of work on memory, were sequestered. They were returned only in May 2009. In the provinces the situation is different. On the Solovki, for instance, the local museum continues to work on the subject and helps all researchers who visit their archive – in addition to having a permanent exhibition on the SLON. Their help was fundamental for my research. I would like to thank them for that and for the permission of using their materials for the “Youshare” International Forum, held in Faenza on the days 27th-29th September 2010.

48 See http://memorial-nic.org/dni_pamyati.html (Russian). Last visited 10th of October 2010.

49 Nina Gagen-Torn (1901-1986) was a poet, writer and ethnographer that spent 12 years between camps in Kolyma and exile in Mordovia.

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