

The Living History of Gulag Structures: Past and Present (Abstract, With Full Text to Follow By Sept 22, 2022)

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Abstract

Some eighty years after the height of the Great Terror, the physical spaces of the former GULAG compounds are being re-conceptualized by those who encounter them on a daily basis. These spaces are now vested with memories and histories of their own, oftentimes remarkably distant from their original purposes. My field research conducted over a half dozen years in the Perm krai, central Siberian regions, Yakutia, Magadan, Kolyma, and the Russian Far East demonstrates this complexity. While some former camps only exist as ruins and others are used as prisons to the present day (and at least one, Perm-36, has been turned into a museum), many others became objects of desire and admiration, turning them into prime real estate. Structures erected by former special settlers are especially sought after for their craftsmanship, conveniences and size, but even barracks have acquired a new life. As such, my presentation will address the complexity of retaining Gulag memories in light of new public uses of structures associated with the experience. While relying on a broad body of scholarship on the interrelation of space and memory, the talk will also present a rich array of visual and oral history sources to demonstrate how pockets of memory appear when people choose to selectively dissociate the physical space from its prior meaning.

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