500 ruble note with Solovki monastery.
On the central square of the northern Russian city of Vologda are monuments to the Soviet heroes of the revolution, to the Soviet heroes of World War II, and to the Orthodox cathedral that was destroyed by those same Soviets. The fourth corner of this square is still empty, as if in anticipation of another monument: one to the victims of the Soviet terror. But for this special category Vologda prefers other forms of keeping memory. I was told this by Mr. Lukichev, the Speaker of the Vologda Municipal Council. His grandfather, a peasant, was accused in 1931 of anti-Soviet conspiracy and died in a labor camp. Concerned about his grandfather’s memory, Lukichev obtained unique archival documents to produce a book and a documentary film that tell the story of his grandfather. But creating a monument to the millions of other, similar cases is not on his agenda, Lukichev asserted. He advised me to visit a memorial stone on the place of a mass grave near the former KGB building, where relatives and descendants of the victims of Soviet murder on this and other sites gather once a year. There, on a piece of granite, one can read: “To the memory of the victims of political repressions. We love. We remember. We mourn.” No further information about the “political repressions” is available at the site. “How do people understand what it is all about?” I asked. “We know it from literature,” said Lukichev, using a term even more ambiguous than “political repressions.”

**Traumatic Realism**

In the twentieth century the total number of victims of internal violence (“democides,” as R.J. Rummel calls it) was larger than the number of victims of all international wars, including the two World Wars.¹ Though internal terror in Nazi Germany and Communist Russia both resulted in many millions of victims, the national memories of these victims are very different in the two countries. Whereas Holocaust studies of cultural memory boomed in the last years of the twentieth century, the history and
memory of the Soviet terror in the global arena has not advanced much since the times of the *Gulag Archipelago*. While Holocaust deniers have been purged from Western universities, the same universities might manifest tolerance toward a Gulag denier. A writer or professor who claimed that fighting the Nazis in World War II was unnecessary or harmful would be ostracized, while a similar attitude toward the Soviets during the Cold War is far from unusual. Symmetry of evil does not presume symmetry of memory. As the world is experiencing a new kind of terror, habitual distortions in the understanding of the terror of the past are dangerous. As the American journalist Anne Applebaum warns us forcefully, “If we go on forgetting half of Europe’s history, some of what we know about mankind itself will be distorted.”

It is a platitude that no cultural symbolism has the capacity to represent the suffering and absurdity of mass murder. Writing poetry after (and about) Auschwitz is a barbarity, as Adorno famously said. Others, such as the Holocaust survivor and writer Primo Levi, believe that whatever can be done to describe and memorialize a catastrophe of any scale should be done. As he put it, if he had been asked right after his emancipation what to do with the camp where he was imprisoned, he would have said, “Destroy it forever along with the Nazis and the Germans.” But now, forty years later, he would prefer to see on this place a “warning monument.” Alongside huge memorials on the sites of German concentration camps, the practice of memoir writing by the survivors of the Soviet Gulag testifies to the fact that representation of the unimaginable is an ordinary, indeed indispensable, human activity. From German monuments to Russian memoirs one can trace a continuum of the “work of mourning,” to use Freud’s classic formulation.

Psychoanalytic studies of post-traumatic syndromes in Germany suggest that traumatic experience transmits transgenerationally. The second, and even third, generations following a trauma manifest subnormal psychological health and social performance. Addressing the literary imagination of the Holocaust, Michael Rothberg coined the concept of “traumatic realism.” Such a realism does not reflect a traumatic past in the act of passive mimesis, but “produces” its events in order to transform a reader or a spectator, forcing him or her to develop his or her own attitude toward “post-traumatic culture.” As in many other cases, representations are endowed with social functions that shape political choices and real-life behavior. Time plays a crucial role in such responses. In Russia the descendants of the Stalinist regime held power for several generations longer than in Germany. Thus, one can anticipate that subsequent generations might experience their historical trauma for a significantly longer period, repressing its causes and denying its symptoms. Thus, the first
steps of the post-Soviet transition produced self-humiliating speculations about “Homo Sovieticus,” a creature supposedly incapable of moral and economic autonomy. Following an obvious analogy with Freudian neuroses, one can suggest that cultural representations of the traumatic past play a therapeutic role. Might this then be true of any such representation, including monuments, museums, memoirs, historical texts, fictional narratives?

The most arresting, if unlikely, of all post-Soviet monuments to the Gulag is the 500-ruble banknote (approximately twenty U.S. dollars), issued in the late 1990s and still in use. Until the introduction of the 1,000-ruble note in 2002, it was the largest note in circulation. On its face side it shows the Solovki monastery, a historical complex on an island in the extreme north of Russia. The local historians in Solovki believe that the atypical cupolas depicted on the note precisely date this picture to the end of 1920s, the time of the peak development of the Solovki camp, which was the earliest and one of the most important in the Gulag. While the design of the banknote testifies to the memorial forces of culture, it simultaneously provokes impossible new questions. Should we assert a conspiracy theory that ascribes a subversive intention to the officials of the Ministry of Finances? Does it make more sense to interpret such cultural forms as symptoms of traumatic experience, an unconscious but realistic manifestation of the work of mourning? Are we dealing with more prosaic processes of serendipity, only later interpreted by enthusiasts of memory? Can we even consider such a cultural product a monument when its historical content is unavailable to either its authors or its holders?

Whatever the case, the very act of interpretation here, as elsewhere, constitutes an act of memory as significant as carving a statue or writing a memoir.

**Hard and Soft**

The arts of memory are diverse. Awareness of the past can be achieved by the publication of a document or by the erection of a monument; by writing a memoir or by creating a memorial; by launching a discussion or by opening a museum. In culture, as in a computer, there are two forms of memory, which might be likened to hardware and software. *Soft memory* consists primarily of texts (including literary, historical, and other narratives), whereas *hard memory* consists primarily of monuments (and, sometimes, state laws and court decisions). Of course, the soft and the hard are interdependent. Museums, cemeteries, commemorative festivities, guided tours, and history textbooks are complicated systems that demonstrate permanent, multilevel interactions between the hardware
(sculptures, obelisks, memorials, historical places) and the software (guidebooks, directions, inscriptions, historical studies) of cultural memory. In memory, monuments without inscriptions are mute, whereas texts without monuments are ephemeral.

The hardware of historical memory—for example, monuments—stay mute and, practically speaking, invisible unless they are discussed, questioned, interpreted; in other words, unless they interact with software, which is the current intellectual and political discourse. On the other hand, the software—public opinions, historical debates, literary imagery—would pass away with every subsequent generation or even fashion if it were not embodied in and anchored by monuments, memorials, and museums. The hardening of memory is a cultural process with specific functions, conditions, and thresholds. It is not the mere existence of the hardware and the software but their interaction, transparency, and conduct that give cultural memory life.

In a work that has become exemplary, a group of French authors led by Pierre Nora produced an eight-volume study of French monuments and other sites of historical memory, Les lieux de mémoire (1984). Shifting the emphasis from the content and function of cultural memory to its forms and “sites,” Nora interpreted monuments belonging to several epochs of French history as representations of the changing national identity. Erecting these monuments, he argued, the state imprints its own self-representations as they were shaped in time and constructs its own grandeur. This is memory as pantheon: the selective representation of great personalities and events of the past. For a modern nation-state immortalizing the memory of its victories and great leaders becomes not only an indispensable instrument but, moreover, a part of its internal structure. Such monuments demonstrate the continuity of the political tradition of a nation-state from its great founding fathers. Looking at almost any monument in Washington, London, or St. Petersburg, we feel how, by celebrating the past, the state affirms its continuing connection with this past. Such monuments become the body of the nation on display. They represent the identity of the nation-state as a desired unity between the state, the people, and their common history. They produce “truth,” imposing it upon citizens as well as observers. They work as materialized forms of patriotic sentiment: sites of historical memory, of course, but first and foremost, visible and touchable bodies of nationalism, which has always created the future by distorting the past.

Imperial countries do not usually erect monuments that memorialize their guilt. Some of their crimes were committed in colonial territories, and nowadays the burden of memory is placed upon those former colonies. With some exceptions, such as Civil War memorials in the United States,
most monuments to revolutions and internal conflicts glorify those who won and tend to ignore those who lost. The memory of the collateral suffering that resulted from national glory is more often preserved in oral or written texts than in monuments. In times of revolution, grand monuments inevitably become one of the first, and certainly the most visible, targets for overthrow. Recently in the Iraq War we saw the monuments of Saddam Hussein become stages for the most dramatic shows. Foundational acts of revolutionary violence against monuments were equally important in the American, French, and Russian revolutions.9

History disrupts identity; memory constructs it. If history follows its subject’s multiple transformations (and usually consequent loss of identity), memory keeps identity continuous despite all disturbances. Political repentance makes this paradox apparent. By building monuments to its former victims, the state asserts its own transformation. Every such monument affirms the difference between the current state and the former one. This function of historical memory opposes the more customary use of monuments. By building monuments to its former leaders, the state affirms the continuity of its political tradition. By building monuments to its former (real or imaginary) enemies and (very real) victims, the state demonstrates the disruption of its political tradition.

As I see it, a political theory of memory might be based upon the famous dictum of Edmund Burke, who in his polemics against the ideas of the French Revolution claimed that the social contract “becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.” Different generations, living and dead, are partners in this contract, which links “lower with higher natures, . . . the visible and invisible world.” This idea of a “great primeval contract” was conservative but at the same time innovative and globalizing. A nation-state in this contract, Burke wrote, is “not but a clause.”10 These concerns with the past and the dead, more common in mystical or theological contexts than in political ones, were partially theorized by Walter Benjamin, who wrote, “There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one.”11 Disappointed with the revolution in Russia and practicing his “art of citation without quotation marks,” Benjamin revived the ideas of Burke in a manner that remains unnoted. Citations and monuments express precisely that secret agreement between generations to which Burke and Benjamin referred. Citations are intertextual monuments; monuments are transhistorical citations.

Such ideas are typical for postrevolutionary eras. Veniamin Iofe, the late chairman of the St. Petersburg “Memorial Society” used to repeat: “Our electorate is there, in the graves.”12 Iofe was a physicist by training
and probably never read Burke, but he knew the relevance of the “primeval contract with the dead.” A Soviet-era dissident, he also knew the affinity between memory and power.

From Khrushchev’s Speech to the Volkswagen Beetle
Russia’s infamous history of political revelations started with the famous 1956 Khrushchev speech, which began to reveal Stalin’s crimes, and ended with the Presidential Committee on the Rehabilitation of the Victims of Political Persecutions in the USSR, chaired by Aleksandr Yakovlev. “Rehabilitation” is the legal process in which a survivor of the Gulag or his or her heirs can prove innocence against the accusations that led to his or her imprisonment. A former member of the Politburo, Yakovlev today characterizes the Soviet regime with a reference to the German example: “It was a full-scale fascism of the Russian type. Our tragedy is that we have not repented.” The Presidential Committee already “rehabilitated” 1.2 to 4.5 million victims out of a total number of twenty to thirty million. As practiced, “rehabilitation” is not accompanied by the legal, systematic work of desovietization, which included the trials of those Soviet officials and executioners who were responsible for mass murder. Although Nikolai Bukharin was “rehabilitated,” Lev Trotsky was denied “rehabilitation.”

No professional ban was ever instated for former leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (as was the case with former Nazi officers in Germany), not to speak of its members. In contrast with other countries of Eastern Europe, there is no law in Russia that allows victims of political persecution to view their KGB files. In contrast to the contemporary and ongoing international efforts to obtain restitution for victims/survivors of the Holocaust and their descendants, only negligible compensation has been provided to those who were officially “rehabilitated” (in St. Petersburg, $50 a month). Many more of those who were robbed by the Bolsheviks (e.g., millions of collective farmers whose conditions were not much different from those in the Gulag) will never get any compensation. This unfinished business is one of the reasons for the obsessive return of history in contemporary Russian culture and politics.

The most important monument to the many millions of victims of the Soviet regime is Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, which is arguably also the most influential book of the twentieth century. Every subsequent generation rewrites history. Selected pieces of the past function as metaphors for the present. For example, Solzhenitsyn’s history of the Gulag was read as an accusation against the Brezhnev regime. This does not mean that it is not a true history. Only professional historians, those *virtuosi of memory*, are trained to deal with a past unconnected to
their present situation. This usually means that their contribution will be read by only their close colleagues. There are many true stories, but few have the impact of *Archipelago*.

Solzhenitzyn’s book was followed by other literary works that embodied the labor of mourning, such as the poetic “Requiem” by Anna Akhmatova, the magisterial novel *Life and Fate* by Vasilii Grossman, the Gulag stories by Vasilii Shalamov, and the enormously popular novels of Anatolii Rybakov. All of these authors were either Gulag survivors or had their close relatives incarcerated. Their works were followed by a long series of memoirs, oral history collections, and miscellaneous documentary publications. In the late 1980s and early 1990s mainstream journals reproduced these impressive documents in millions of copies. Imaginative writers of the most fashionable and sometimes scandalous prose, such as Vladimir Sorokin, Vladimir Sharov, or Valerii Peleven, are concerned with the national trauma of the Soviet era. Highly successful post-Soviet movies have been based on this historical material as well: *Repentance* by Tengiz Abuladze, *The Cold Summer of 1953* by Alexandr Proshkin, *Burnt by the Sun* by Nikita Mikhalkov, and *Khrustalev, My Car!* by Alexei German. More scholarly collections of oral history and regional “Books of Memory,” composed and published by Memorial Society, list thousands of victims along with those pieces of documentary information about their lives and deaths that are available. Hundreds of memoirs and autobiographies published in the 1990s deal with the sufferings of the authors and/or their parents under the Soviet regime. In 1993 the literary historian Marietta Chudakova, an adviser to President Yeltsin, wrote that such writing would realize the function of the “Russian Nuremberg,” which would therefore occur not in the courtroom as in Germany, but on the pages of memoirs.\(^{14}\)

In the absence of widespread public monuments, the most important forms of cultural memory in Russia belong to the textual domain. They include poetry, imaginative literature, popular history, biographies, memoirs, historical studies, and political debates. Many Russian novels (and even some memoirs) seek to imagine an alter ego that the author could have become were it not for revolution and terror. The central subject of these fantasies is history itself. These novels suggest that there is no way to imagine how identity might be changed in a desirable manner, in order to reconstruct oneself into a happier being, and instead imagine a transformation of the whole of society and its very history. In my own attempts at theorizing Russian historical novels from Bulgakov to Nabokov...
to Pelevin, I have introduced the notion of *magic historicism* to connote
those bizarre manipulations of history that are designed by these authors
as experimental settings, transforming the identities of their characters
and, implicitly, themselves into an alternative cast of historical prod-
tects. Despite the wild flow of fantasy involved in these texts, identity
is—in a Marxian way—invariably construed as the outcome of historical
circumstances. In such texts people are perceived as incapable of chang-
ing their lives by their own will. The only way to change life is to imagine
an alternative historical trajectory, projected backward and reshaped by
magical means. It is not just authorial identity under interrogation but
also Soviet memory and, finally, Russian history.

In contrast to Germany or France there has been no serious philo-
sophical debate, secular or religious, in Russia over problems of collec-
tive guilt, memory, and identity. Despite an attempt in the early 1990s
to initiate such a debate by the historian and Gulag survivor Dmitrii
Likhachev, Russian intellectuals have not produced anything compar-
able to the great book by Karl Jaspers, *The Problem of Guilt*. In contrast
to Germany or France, where a denial of the Holocaust is a crime, in Russia
a politician or professor can make propaganda for the Soviet past and
ignore its crimes without subjecting him- or herself to the slightest risk.
No higher authority, such as an occupational force or an international
court, can resolve the controversy. Nostalgia has become a fashionable
word and an important element of post-Soviet culture. Allusions to the
past form an important part of the political present. Political opponents in
Russia differ most dramatically not in their understanding of economic
reforms or international relations but in their interpretations of history.
Discussions of current policy issues rarely go without reference to his-
torical experience. Such concepts as “Stalinism,” “cult of personality,”
and “political repressions” are rhetorically employed as often as modern
legal or economic terms. The events of the mid-twentieth century still
make a fresh, living, contentious experience that uncannily threatens to
return again. Like contemporary Russian literature, Russian politics is
still saturated with intellectual and emotional debates about the historical
past. The present is oversaturated with the past, and this solution refuses
to produce any sediment. As the historian Tony Judt put it, “If the prob-
lem in Western Europe has been a shortage of memory, in the continent’s
other half the problem is reversed. Here there is too much memory, too
many pasts on which people can draw, usually as a weapon against the
past of someone else.”

This is something about which German authors, who complain of
“Holocaust fatigue,” might be envious. Their concern is that the German
audience is growing immune to Holocaust monuments, even to the new
ones, and that without social debate these monuments fail to realize their supposed functions. This was the point of an important discussion launched in the late 1990s by the writer Martin Walser, who blamed the German state for the “instrumentalization” of the Holocaust. According to Walser, it is senseless to repeat the same project of memory, converting it into a “compulsory exercise,” while the public progressively loses interest. One can suggest that the only way to return the intrinsic value to the monuments would be to initiate a political debate that would split society, polarize opinions, and make political symbols of these monuments once again. In an unexpected way Walser’s controversy produced such a result, which renewed public interest in the problem.  

The Russian public has lived through something resembling Walser’s controversy for decades. Historical memory here operates as a living combination of various symbols, periods, and judgments, which are experienced simultaneously. By analogy and in contrast to the American notion of multiculturalism, the Russian oversaturation with history could be called multihistoricism. Because of the decentered nature of this construction, deprived of consensual anchors or reference points, the public does not perceive the inconsistencies or logical conflicts between the different parts. Therefore, the whole construction is liable to be shaken by slight, random influences. Of course, Russian historical memory is easily available to Western-style postmodernist mockery. For instance, a fancy St. Petersburg restaurant called Russian Kitsch: Café of the Transitional Period features frescos in which Soviet kolkhozniki socialize with American Indians, while Leonid Brezhnev, looking like Frank Sinatra, gives a speech to a stone-age tribe. To give a similar example from political life, President Yeltsin had a Kremlin nickname, “The Tsar.” It was only logical that his financier and adviser Boris Berezovsky was regularly compared to Rasputin. All this might sound postmodern, but postmodernism assumes an ironic self-awareness of the situation, whereas in Russian cases this is not always true.

The largest manifestation of such an attitude toward history—multihistorical though definitely not postmodern and arguably antimodern—is the Moscow cathedral of Christ the Savior. In 1929 the original cathedral was exploded to make the site free for an ambitious construction, the House of Soviets, which was never realized. The restoration of the cathedral, initiated by the Moscow mayor Jurii Luzhkov, symbolized a complete reversal of history and the restoration of the historical past. Actually, it works for the obliteration of the Soviet era. Instead of resurrecting history, it kills memory. The cathedral is a remake of the historical model in new materials and with new functions, something similar to the new Volkswagen Beetle. Berlin’s architectural analogy is the Palace
of the Republic, which was successfully constructed on the site of the old Berlin City Palace and now, perhaps, will cede its place to a restored copy of the old Palace.

A similar but lesser known problem is that of Kaliningrad (Königsberg), where the grandiose castle in the center of the city was damaged by British bombs during the war and destroyed by the Soviets well after it. In the 1970s a huge and hideous Soviet construction was started on this site, but to this day it has not been completed. For the last decade, this unfinished construction has been left untouched for economic reasons. Unintentionally, it works magnificently as a huge, expressive monument to the whole Soviet project, equally unaccomplished. In this case a remake of the castle is not being considered, but the city’s public places—museums, restaurants, and even grocery stores—are so obsessively decorated with images of the castle that in some places they replace windows through which one could see the actual Soviet construction site.

In reality, of course, the reconstructions of old cities that have been completed in Moscow, Dresden, or Warsaw produce eclectic, multi-historical “remakes” of old structures. There is no logic in metaphors, of course. What is the designation of the contemporary Russian parliament, the Duma, if not a historical metaphor? And what is the current designation of its Communist Party, if not a historical metaphor as well?

Memorials, Crystals of Memory
Entering the territory of a memorial complex, a visitor typically sees the monument first and then walks through the museum. This double structure is visible in various memorials created by different cultures: on the sites of Nazi camps in Germany and Poland; on the battlefields of the Civil War and on the sites of black slave rebellions in America; on the Russian battlefields of 1812 and 1941–1945. This structural pattern is a transcultural form of memorial practice that finds possible answers to
even the most impossible questions, such as the representation of events that go beyond the limits of representation.

In the western part of Germany the processes of memorialization first began under the occupying regime right after the end of the war. The Allies preserved the concentration camps and quite soon opened them to the public. Two functions were intertwined in this process. First, the opening of a camp, making it a safe and transparent place, demonstrated that horrors were no longer taking place there. Second, the preservation and later the restoration of the camps along with all the remains of the past demonstrated that horrors, indeed, had taken place there.

Memorials on the sites of mass terror usually consist of two parts, a museum and a monument. The museum tells the story and shows the remains of the events. Producing a coherent narrative, a museum is available to discursive analysis and rational criticism, like a lecture or a book. In contrast to a historical museum, a monument is not available to criteria of rationality. Producing an emotional response, monuments are close to rituals. After all, they are pieces of art, that descendant of the sacred. The typical monument is usually a tower, obelisk, or another secular, abstract symbol, visible from all around. In contrast to the museum component, the monument usually does not have any figurative, historical meaning. In the museum portion, reconstructions of a gas chamber, a barrack, or a cell refer to their historical prototypes and aspire to reproduce them as closely as possible. In contrast, memorial obelisks were not present in the camps during the Nazi reign. They do not reproduce the historical reality but rather comment upon it, emotionally and judgmentally. Perhaps a way to interpret such a monument’s vertical shape and central location is to imagine a wooden stake nailing a mythological vampire to the ground.

In Russia such stakes do not nail, and vampires are always ready to fly. One who is not dedicated to pursuing the issue will be hard pressed to find a monument, a cemetery, or a museum devoted to the memory of the Soviet terror. To use a different series of metaphors: oversaturated solutions of historical memory tend to produce “crystals,” which are historical monuments. Blocking the process of monument building means that the solution remains oversaturated and volatile. Crystallization is blocked because of the lack of social consensus. Left in solution (or locked in software), memory creates virtual circles with no exit into historical life. The crystallization of memory means its transfiguration from public debates into memorial complexes. Relative consensus works like the concentration of solution. A threshold level of consensus, at which the crystallization processes begin and memory hardens into monuments, is mediated or catalyzed by such factors as private initiative, social activism, and political will.
In Germany the first monuments to the dead were erected inside the

camps right after the victims’ liberation. The conversion of camp into
museum sent an important political message; namely, the indictment of
the defeated regime and the demonstration that the new power was dif-
ferent. This process was initiated by the former prisoners, who erected
the first primitive signs of their mourning right after their emancipation
in the form of wooden obelisks, grave markers, and so on. In different
sectors of the occupation the processes of memorialization developed in
different ways. In the Eastern sector the management of the camps was
led by the changing ideological prescriptions of the Communist Party,
which controlled the USSR and the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Ten former Nazi camps on the territory of the GDR were used by the NKVD
(the forerunner of the KGB) from 1945 to 1951, thereby illustrating the
affinities and reciprocal transformations of totalitarian states. Later some
of these sites were transformed into museums, but the Soviet part of camp
history was carefully omitted. In the Western sectors the initiatives of
memory belonged to private citizens, such as the former prisoners and
their relatives. Newer and more impressive memorials were constructed.
Currently they include the Jewish Museum in Berlin, with its vertiginous
architecture and its Holocaust Tower, inconspicuous from outside, terri-
fying from inside. Soon it will be joined by a huge and controversial
memorial in the very center of Berlin near the Reichstag.

As stated earlier, by erecting monuments to their former victims, soci-
ety and the state seek to disrupt their continuity from those who were
their murderers. In Moscow one of the very first acts of the post-Soviet
era was the removal in 1991 of the monument to Feliks Dzherzhinskii,
the founder of the Gulag, which was replaced by a stone from Solovki
Island, a monument to its victims. This change was a foundational act for
post-totalitarian, democratic Russia. Understanding its meaning all too
well, Jurii Luzhkov, the current mayor of Moscow, is now officially plan-
ing to reinstate the gigantic statue to Dzherzhinskii. Various compro-
mises are being discussed, one of them being the replacement of the
Solovki stone by water watches, a politically faceless symbol of time. It
is so difficult to make a choice between the two Moscow monuments, to the
executioner or to his victims, because it actually means making a choice
between vastly different historical genealogies and political identities.
For a political regime whose origins are complex and murky, like the ori-
gins of so many regimes, such a choice profoundly shapes its identity. In
postwar Germany, which was under military occupation and forced to
change regimes, such a choice was more straightforward and irreversible
than in the recent history of Russia, which has featured a painful and slow,
but autonomous, evolution of political ideas and historical identities.
The databases of the Memorial Society list five hundred monuments, plaques, and commemorative inscriptions at various sites of the Soviet terror. According to the same sources, the Gulag system comprised about four hundred fully deployed camps. Such memorialization is obviously inadequate in scale. More important, it is inadequate in quality. At only two of the Gulag sites, in Solovki and Perm, are there small museums that show the conditions in the camps, the techniques of torture and murder, the documents, and the portraits. These two camps mark the very beginning (Solovki) and the very end (Perm) of the system of the Gulag. The most significant camps, which contained hundreds of thousands of prisoners during the Great Terror of the late 1930s, are not memorialized at all.

Interestingly, the most important monuments are erected not on the sites of the former camps, as is true in many German cases, but near them. In Petersburg, for example, is a prison called Kresty, which was famous as one of the filtration centers of the Great Terror and is still used now as a prison. Across the Neva River two sphinxes erected by the Russian-American sculptor Mikhail Shemiakin are supposed to memorialize the victims of this prison. Another such monument, a granite stone, is set near the walls of the Peter and Paul Fortress, which was historically the first site of the Bolshevik terror in the city. This pattern demonstrates not the replacement of the old regime by a new one but rather manifests their quiet coexistence. In a comparative perspective such localization is not necessarily exceptional. The obvious analogy is the Berlin Holocaust Memorial near the Reichstag. On the other hand, even such proximate location of memory is far from being the rule in Russia. Near the horrifying building of the Leningrad KGB not a single monument, plaque, or inscription commemorates the millions of its victims. Such a monument is notably absent from the vicinity of the Kremlin as well.

Even Solovki Island, the most popular site of Gulag memory and a busy tourist destination, does not have a single barrack that is fully converted into a museum. This is striking, given the fact that it was the first and “model” camp, that it functioned for more than twenty years, and that about one million people were incarcerated there. The buildings of the monastery, which housed many of these people, are now returned to the Orthodox Church and used according to their original functions. It is these buildings that were memorialized on the 500 ruble banknote. Of the buildings that surround this enormous site of mass murder, only one bears a memorial plaque. Heartbreakingly simple, it reads, “The Children’s Barrack of the Solovki Camp.” More ordinary initiatives of memory are being launched at Solovki, including a project for a private museum in one of the former barracks. The most successful project is, predictably,
a book. Recently composed by the local historian and photographer Jurii Brodski, it proves one of the most important “software” monuments to the victims of the Gulag since Solzhenitsyn’s *Archipelago*.²¹

In other local centers of the northern Gulag the modest objects on display at local museums are truly fascinating. In a small exhibit in the Kargopol’ museum is a clay pitcher. As the detailed plaque explains, this pitcher was presented to the museum by the descendants of a guardsman, who sometime in the 1930s appropriated a package that had been sent to a prisoner: a pitcher full of honey. The family of the guardsman preserved the legend of this pitcher, which it used for decades. In such exhibits, however, it is practically impossible to find answers to the most obvious questions: How many prisoners went through this camp? How many died here, and when? Who were the founders of this camp, its administrators, guardsmen, executioners?

The monument in the Perm camp consists of a concrete construction resembling an observation tower. It does not carry a machine gun, that central attribute in the time of the Gulag, but instead supports two objects that are rarely combined, a church bell and a hunk of barbed wire. This monument is located on the only Gulag site that has been converted into a museum. One can visit barracks and the administration building, look at many historical exponents, and even have authentic prisoner fare in the prison eatery. Sometimes visitors have asked to spend the night in one of the prison cells, but such a service is not provided. However, the creators of the museum do hope to attract tourists. One advertisement specifically says that the museum is attractive to “children and foreigners.” The success of this particular project of museification can be partially attributed to the fact that this site contained the last Soviet camp for
political prisoners, among whom were people who today are quite influential, including some recent deputies of the Duma.

In Novgorod, not far from the ancient city wall, is a Soviet-looking park, which was founded by the “veterans of the Communist Party for the sake of the 60th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution” (this is what is written on the park’s monument, which shows two hands clutching a globe). A hundred meters from this monument to the revolution is a monument to its victims. It depicts a candle made of granite, with a metallic wick at the top. The inscription says on behalf of the victims of the Soviet terror, “Do not allow our fate to become your fate.” As in so many other cases, texts prove stronger than monuments.

**Stones and Crosses**

In Solovki the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexei II erected a cross at the entrance to Sekirnaia Hill, the infamous site of mass murders in the 1920s. The cross bears a long, elaborate text devoted to the memory of the victims, formulated in archaic but strong and clear language. While the cross itself is noticeable from far away, the inscription can be found and read from only the closest proximity. Numerous tourists overlook this inscription, perceiving this monument to be just a cross, one of many in the monastery. On a mass grave on Solovki two monuments visibly compete with each other: an Orthodox cross and a granite stone erected by the Memorial Society. Neither contains information about those who are buried there. In 2002 the Moscow Academy of Art, Sculpture, and Architecture, in collaboration with the Memorial Society, held a competition of projects for the future monument “to the victims of political repressions” on Solovki Island. Twenty out of fifty projects propose Orthodox chapels as monuments. Crosses, angels, and bells play the central part in nine projects. In eleven, memory is represented by secular symbols such as obelisks or ruins. Seriously developed museum space is proposed in only five of the projects. And only two propose to reconstruct parts of the camp.

In the case of the Gulag the return to religious symbolism of memory creates two kinds of problems. The first is the religious experience of the victims (including atheism); the second is the nonreligious character of...
the sacrifice. As in the German case the secular and political character of the Soviet terror makes its religious and, even more so, its unreligious interpretation highly questionable. The emancipation of the arts of memory from their religious roots is not easy. The Christian cross as the symbol of suffering, humiliation, and death serves in many Russian monuments to the Soviet victims and, to an even greater extent, in the contemporary projects of the new monuments. But in the Orthodox Church crosses make an appropriate monument to anyone who was a believer. The erection of a cross does not distinguish the particular situation of the state terror from any other death. Therefore, such symbolism denies the historical specificity of the losses in the Gulag. Many of those who perished there were not Christians but Jews or Muslims. The majority perhaps were atheists. Orthodox crosses are different in shape from Catholic and Lutheran crosses. Moreover, Old-Believer crosses are different in shape from canonical Orthodox crosses. Therefore, in some sites one can see a number of different crosses, erected by religious minorities, near the large Orthodox cross. Religious symbolism does not seem an adequate reflection of the political and historical nature of the state terror.

Close to the Belomor Canal, which was one of the major construction sites of the Gulag, enthusiasts of the local Memorial Society found one of the largest mass graves in northwestern Russia. This part of the pine forest
near an old highway is distinguished by small, regular depressions in the earth, which are characteristic of such graves. As part of their meticulous work the local Memorial Society compares the archeological findings with “shooting protocols” kept in the archives of the KGB. The protocols never mention names but do give the number of those who were shot on a specific date, classified by gender (for example, twenty men, seven women). By assessing the number of skeletons and their gender, every “shooting protocol” was correlated with a certain grave, thus proving that about 9,000 people—peasants, military, clergy, and members of the local administration—were shot near the Canal in 1937 and 1938. More than a thousand prisoners, including some Soviet-era celebrities, were delivered from the Solovki camp and also shot on this site. In 1997 the memorial complex Sandarmokh was founded here. Today this is one of the most important, and best developed, Russian sites of memory. Its major element consists of wooden “poles,” which mark every mass grave. Specially designed as a local symbol of mourning, these poles, with their sharply angled roofs, vaguely remind the viewer of either a peasant cross or a human figure with hands raised in prayer. Dozens of these poles, scattered around the pine forests on the sites of the horrible depressions in the earth, make an impressive image. The complex also includes a figurative sculpture that represents the falling prisoners, as well as an angel who protects them with his wings. The inscription says, “People, do not kill each other.” After the memorial was opened, different religious communities erected their specific crosses here, and now they compete with the “poles” and with one another. The Russian Orthodox Church built a chapel nearby. The visual structure of the Sandarmokh memorial is effective, but information is completely absent from the site. There is no museum or information board, and even the directions on the highway indicate “The Sandarmokh Cemetery” rather than a historical memorial. As in other cases this lack of public information cannot be explained by political censorship. The authors of the memorial published a fascinating “Karelian Book of Memory,” which lists thousands of victims of terror. Once again the books are doing better than the monuments.

Writing at the cozy beginning of the twentieth century, Robert Musil famously said that there is nothing on earth less conspicuous than monuments. Post-Soviet monuments are conspicuously less conspicuous than others. On a highway from St. Petersburg to Pskov is a small café,
which has on its wall a memorial board, carefully crafted in metal. It says that here victims of the Stalinist repressions were murdered. It does not say who the victims were, and it also does not say who hung the board. The current owners of the café know nothing. On the gates of the monastery on Lake Seliger, between St. Petersburg and Moscow, are two identical boards that say in Russian and Polish that in this monastery many thousands of Polish soldiers died (during World War II they fled from the Germans to Russia, only to perish inside these walls). No information is provided about the Soviet citizens who also died here. The two boards were put here by Poles; it is nice that they made the effort to translate the text into Russian.

Secular multicultural society needs and produces common symbols, which by their very nature become culturally thin. When trying to create a monument to the victims of the Great Terror, Russian artists produce anthropomorphic or zoomorphic images, such as a crying woman (the monument in Abakan), a man on his knees (Tver), a wounded bird (Astrakhan), and sphinxes (St. Petersburg). None seems to work well. In almost all the projects, “victims” are represented as passive sufferers, deprived of any capacity for resistance; “political repressions” are assumed to be as unavoidable as death. This imagery is very different from contemporary German and, especially, Israeli representations of the Holocaust, which are searching for heroes of the resistance rather than for passive sufferers. Russian monuments do not give any hint of the solidarity of political prisoners, their fights with criminals and with the administration, or the numerous camp rebellions and escapes. Other than the usual image of grids and barbed iron, these monuments do not tell much about techniques of torture, incarceration, or execution. These depoliticized images avoid Soviet emblems and tell nothing about the ideology that required all of these murders. The lack of information is typical for all of these monuments, including the most sophisticated. Information boards and historical explications seem more vulnerable to criticism than highly
abstract monuments, and the initiators of memory reserve their knowledge for their books. According to the director of the local museum in Medvezhiegorsk, it is easier to open a whole exhibition of “political repressions” inside museum walls than to put an information board on the site of mass murders.

The lack of social consensus and the incomplete rupture of political continuity add to the cultural problems of historical representation. The solution offered by some artists and activists is a kind of aesthetic minimalism, usually represented by a huge, raw stone. After crosses, granite stones make the second most common type of historical monument in Russia. Their abstract symbolism provides a compromise between the need for memory and the dangers of political confrontation. The two main memorials in Moscow and St. Petersburg consist of granite stones taken from one camp, Solovki. In St. Petersburg this stone is complemented with strong inscriptions, such as “To the victims of Communism.” Words are crucially important for such monuments; without words, the meaning of this stone would be undecipherable. The Solovki stone was placed on its site in August 2002. In the subsequent four months it was vandalized twice. In the last attempt the unknown vandals wrote on the stone in red oil, “Too few were shot.” This is just one example of the war over monuments, part of a cultural war that is intensifying under the current Russian administration.

The German art of memory is richer with experiments, both successful and failed. Among the successes is the Monument to the Burned Books on Bebelplatz in Berlin. Created in 1996, the monument is a semitransparent window in the pavement, through which pedestrians can see many empty bookshelves, an underground library without books. Another interesting example is the “Warm Monument” in Buchenwald, erected in 1995 on the site where, fifty years before, the prisoners had erected the first monument to the murdered. The sculptor put on this place a rectangular stone that keeps the temperature of a human body. Tourists love to touch it in the wintertime. Another example is a Holocaust Monument on the outskirts of Hamburg; it consisted of a thirteen-meter-high concrete column, an easy target for graffiti. The trick was that the column slowly sank into the earth. In seven years it disappeared completely, along with thousands of signatures.

The sculpture of previous ages had greater narrative capacity. Russian monuments of the nineteenth century told long, complex narratives that are comparable today, perhaps, only to comics. Russian monuments to victories and victims of World War II were also multfigured and descriptive. Traveling in northwestern Russia today, one cannot miss the huge memorial complexes to the “Great Patriotic War” with narrative monu-

Sandarmokh sites of mass graves with “poles” and Orthodox Crosses.
ments showing armed soldiers in the moment of self-sacrifice. They contain lists of the heroes and the ubiquitous but not always true inscription “Nothing is forgotten, nobody is forgotten.”

Almost all projects of memorialization in Russia, the soft and the hard, have been initiated by private persons. Without private initiative no book and no monument in Russia would describe the Great Terror, and our knowledge of Soviet history would remain at the level of Khrushchev’s speeches. These initiatives are undertaken by enthusiasts of vastly different background. Among those whom I have interviewed were a physicist, a plumber, a former army officer, and a museum director. On the other hand, private individuals and voluntary associations cannot erect monuments without the collaboration of the state. Access to archives is controlled by the state (specifically the FSB, the descendant of the KGB), and this access has been diminishing throughout the last decade. Financial resources and land property, which are required for any memorial, are also controlled by the state. If writing memoirs is predominantly an individual activity, constructing memorials is a collective one. Moreover, because of its large scale and public nature, it generally requires the participation of the state. Hard memory is usually the responsibility of the state, while soft memory is the domain of society.

The atrocities of German Nazism and Soviet Communism, though comparable in scope, have left profoundly different memories in their respective countries. Due to unique combinations of political circumstances, the German and Russian cultures elaborated different forms of dealing with the past. German memory crystallized in “hardware” monuments (for example, museums), with a consequent cultural debate regarding the means to revive and reinspire it, to escape memory’s complete petrification. Russian memory is pervaded with “software” texts and “immediate” experiences, which do not fix into stable, indisputable, monumental forms. Though the Russian development of memory is slow and painful, it is more autonomous than the German development, which was partially induced by foreign pressures. The hardening of memory is a cultural process with specific functions, conditions, and thresholds. It promises that the events themselves will not return, that the demons of the past are exorcised, that the present exists and prevails. In a democratic society, it requires relative consensus in the public sphere. Such consensus follows after, and because, the intensity of the “soft” debates reaches a certain threshold. If this does not happen, memory without monuments is vulnerable to a cyclical, recurrent process of refutations and denials. Guilt feelings can be consoled with new voices, and even the most influential texts can be challenged by new texts.

Cultural memory is an important part of the public sphere (as defined
though it is structured by different principles. Though two different opinions on the same historical subject are perfectly legitimate, there cannot be two monuments on the same spot. Intellectual debate about the past is pluralistic, but monuments are singular. A historical debate cannot provide a final conclusion to the question of memory—a monument does. But no memory is absolutely hard: monuments can be removed, and capitals can be transferred. St. Petersburg was renamed four times in one century. Monuments can move back and forth, not big news for Russians, who have seen many bronze Tsars removed and then returned. Even mummies are mobile. In 1961 the Soviet public watched on their recently produced TV sets the ceremonial removal of the mummy of Stalin from the Mausoleum. Lenin’s corpse is still there, but we expect him to depart pretty soon.
Notes
This study was supported by the Open Society Archives, Central European University, Budapest. The impetus for this work was my fellowship in Wissenschaftskolleg, Berlin, and my talks there with Aleida Assmann, the leading German expert on historical memory. Sandra Evans acquainted me with the recent German debates. My thanks to Elizabeth R. Moore for all kinds of help.

8. Contemporary theorists of nationalism are more interested in other forms of memory and imagination—such as newspapers (Benedict Anderson), education (Ernest Gellner), invented traditions (Eric Hobsbaum)—and their roles in the construction of national identities. More sensitive to monuments is M. Hroch’s classic work, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
9. As the *New York Times* duly reminded readers after the completion of major combat phase of the Iraqi war (see Richard M. Ketchum, “The Day New York Declared Its Independence,” *New York Times*, 4 July 2003, A21), when George Washington read to his troops the Declaration of Independence on July 9, 1776, a disorderly crowd demolished the equestrian statue of King George III in New York in a gesture similar to those that the readers of the *Times* had seen so recently.


19. In the fall of 1998 Walser gave a notorious speech in Frankfurt, where he advocated that Germans should be released from the moral yardstick provided by Auschwitz. This speech produced numerous responses, now collectively known as “Walser’s controversy.”

