

# Origins, Transformation and Memory of the Soviet Concentration Labour Camps System

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*To whom shall we tell what happened  
on earth, for whom shall we place everywhere  
huge mirrors, and hope they may reflect  
something that will not fade away?*

Czeslaw Milosz, *Annalena*

For many years GULag<sup>1</sup> history coincided with the memory of survivors. It was only in the last sixteen years, that is after 1992, with the opening of the former Soviet archives, that the first documentary collections<sup>2</sup> appeared, and historians – both Russian and non-Russian – began to reflect on a fundamental chapter of the Soviet Union’s history, unexplored until that time. The access to the documentary material has allowed a first reconstruction of GULag’s origins and of its evolution between the Thirties and the first Fifties, in relation with the power demands of the stalinist leadership and changes within the economic and political system in the USSR. Even today, however, the historiographic debate is still limited.

The system of forced labour camps, commonly known as GULag, was officially born on July 11, 1929, that is a few months after Stalin’s victory over the party internal oppositions. That day, the Sovnarkom of USSR approved a resolution “On the employment of prisoners work”. By this document, OGPU was assigned the task to elaborate a project for the creation of forced labour camps for the exploitation of prisoners’ manpower. The victory of socialism in one country and the consequent

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<sup>1</sup> The acronym GULag stays for the words Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei (Main Direction of Forced Work Camps). It is commonly used, however, as a synonym of the whole Soviet concentrationary system.

<sup>2</sup> N.G. Okhotin, A.B. Roginsky (eds), *Zven'ia. Istoricheskii al'manakh*, Moskva, Memorial, 1991-1992; N.G. Okhotin, A.B. Roginsky (eds), *Sistema ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei v SSSR, 1923-1960, Dokumenty. Spravochnik*, Moskva, Zven'ia, 1998; A.I. Kokurin, N.V. Perov (eds), *GULag (Glavnoe Upravlenie lagerei 1917-1960*, Moskva, Materik, 2000; *Politbiuro TsK RKP(b) – VKP(b): Katalog*, 3 vols., 1930-1939, Moskva, Rosspen, 2001; A. Artizov, Iu. Zigachev, I. Schevchuk, V. Khlopov, *Reabilitatsiia: kak eto bylo. Dokumenty Presidiuma TsK KPSS i drugie materialy, Mart 1953-Fevral' 1956*, Moskva, MFD, 2000; S.S. Vilensky, A.I. Kokurin, G.B. Atmashkina, I.Iu. Novichenko, *Deti GULAGA, 1918-1956*, Moskva, MFD, 2002; Cahier du Monde Russe, *La police politique en Union Soviétique, 1918-1953*, n. 42-34, Avril-Décembre 2002. Moreover, on the theme of repression, in general, of the various nationalities, see the volume by P. Polian, *Ne po svoei vole ... Istorii i geografiia prinuditel'nykh migratsii v SSSR*, O.G.I. – Memorial, Moskva, 2001 and T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2001.

launching of forced industrialization and collectivization of agriculture<sup>3</sup> urgently required the recruitment of manpower to be transferred mainly to the most distant and far-off places of the country, in order to exploit their raw materials and build industries and communication roads. In a few months, the OGPU elaborated a project that provided for the creation of approximately 100 camps in the remotest and deserted regions of Urss. With that resolution and with that project was born the soviet concentration system, commonly known as GULag. These events were taking place in a situation of increasing resort to the terror of state that had marked the new regime since the years of the bolshevik revolution<sup>4</sup>. The instruments by which the terror of state operated were mainly three: the GULag, the mass deportations amounting at approximately six million people (among these, particularly bloody were that against the kulakis, with the forced collectivization of 1930-1931, and that against the national minorities during World War II)<sup>5</sup>, and the summary shootings that mainly characterized the years of Great Terror when, just between July 1937 and August 1938 approximately 700.000 persons were executed. Since the Twenties, the regime had labelled as dangerous the people who, due to their social class or to their relations abroad, could represent a sort of internal “fifth column”<sup>6</sup>. However, especially after Hitler got to power and the international situation changed, the generalized suspicion against the “people enemies” and the xenophobia that in a more or less subtle way had always characterized the regime, did burst out violently. After 1933, in a constant crescendo, the persecution of state became more and more organized and between 1937 and 1938 reached levels of unprecedented violence.

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<sup>3</sup> A. Graziosi, *L'Urss di Lenin e di Stalin. Storia dell'Unione Sovietica*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> The theme of terror of state in Ussr, with special reference to the Great Terror, one of its most bloody periods, between 1937 and 1938, has been the object of study by many Russian and foreign researchers during the last ten years. The most recent historiography has clearly determined the two fundamental mechanisms through which, from 1918, up to Stalin's death, the soviet Terror took effect: the aprioristic creation of well defined “categories” of enemies allowing a “preventive” control over the actions that such enemies could carry out; the swinging recurrence, as Solzenycyn already observed, with which repression was activated, always coinciding with crucial moments when, either for internal reasons or for causes connected with changes in the international system, the regime felt its security threatened. The ultimate ratio of soviet terror has always been, in all its phases, the preventive individuation, in view of a possible repression, of all those people categories that might represent a threat to the internal or external security of the country, because of their political ideas, or due to their profession or their nationality. The postulate of the war inevitableness, of a clear marxist base, changed into an encirclement syndrome after the civil war experience and strongly conditioned the whole history of Ussr at least up to Chruscev. The search for a potential enemy within the country became an organized and pathologic obsession of state. On the Terror in Ussr, see O. Clevnjuk, *Stalin e la società sovietica negli anni del Terrore*, Perugia, Guerra, 1997 and O. Clevnjuk, *I nuovi dati* and T. Martin, *Un'interpretazione contestuale alla luce delle nuove ricerche*, in “Storica”, n.18, 2000, Roma, 2000, pp. 13-37. On the encirclement syndrome, see S. Pons, A. Romano (eds), *Russia in the Age of Wars 1917-1945*, Annali della Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, Anno trentaquattresimo, 1998, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Datum supplied by P.M Polian in the volume *Ne po svoei*, cit. p. 239. It refers to deportations within Soviet Union boundaries.

<sup>6</sup> T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, cit.

Among these three instruments of repression, the GULag was surely the most incisive for number of individuals affected, extension, complexity, influence over the whole civil society. To such degree that the reality outside the camps (defined as “malen’kaia zona” – small zone) at that time was not indicated by the term of “free” world, but rather by the expression “bol’shaia zona” (large zone), as though the concentration system were the very life essence of the whole country. Actually, it was from those first camps “born” on July 11, 1929, that between the Thirties and the Fifties originated a very complex structure based on distinct typologies of camps: the “camps of re-education through work” or *ITL (Ispravitel’no-trudovye lageria)*. Due to their economic function, these camps were initially created in the more peripheral regions of the country, and later on, starting by the end of 1931, also in the more central areas and in the suburbs of the large cities. The ITL were populated by political prisoners, common prisoners and criminals who, being condemned to at least three years imprisonment, were sent to camps far from the place where they lived before arrest. Beside ITL, another project was launched, concerning “settlements of re-education through work” or *ITK (Ispravitel’no-trudovye kolonii)*. At the beginning, these settlements were opened with the intent to lodge kulakis deported in the years of collectivization, with sentences of less than three years. In this case, the prisoners were serving their time in the same region where they used to live and they were employed in farming or in small local industries. After 1929, the “special settlements for peasants” or “*spetsposiolki*” were also created. Here, together with peasants, members of national minorities were also deported, especially after 1935 and during the years of World War II. These were common rural settlements, that is villages of small and medium sizes, where prisoners lived with their families, were subject to hard labour and could never go away. Most of the *spetsposiolki* were located in distant regions of Siberia and Kazakhstan, and many prisoners were dying due to the unbearable conditions of life and work.

During the Thirties, the camps became one of the fundamental structures of the soviet economic system. As N. Okhotin and A. Roginsky wrote in “Sistema ispravitel’no trudovykh lagerei v SSSR” (a fundamental work for the reconstruction of camps geography, their operation, their reorganization in the course of the years, the number of detainees, the quality and production level attained), the first camps were born after 1929 with the intent to colonize the deserted regions of the North and Siberia, of Kazakhstan and Kolyma, at the same time withstanding their maintenance. In the following months, new locations for the construction of camps were found also near the towns and the country’s production centres. For example, two camps were opened near Moscow and Leningrad (Svir’lag and Temlag) devoted to the production of timber to supply the two cities.

Having acknowledged their real economic potential, the stalinist leadership soon decided to exploit the camps for the construction of big fluvial canals, railways and roads, and also for the production of goods for exportation (among these, the timber produced in several camps, such as the Dal'ne-Vostochnyi ITL (Dal'lag) in the Khabarovsk area in Far East and the Sibirskiy ITL (Siblag) nearby Novosibirsk, that in those years was the most important product of Soviet Union for the foreign markets). Meanwhile, the first railway constructions were set up for the transport of materials needed for work in the ore bodies and oil fields, for the creation of *kombinat* (that is, of the big industrial parks) and the transport of their products. In 1931, the Ukhto-Pechora ITL was opened in Komi Republic, to exploit the region's oil, gas and coal. Due to the richness of that area, in a short time a big concentration area was developed, including five oil and gas fields, four coal mines, five transit camps, five sovkhozy and two villages for *spestopelentsy*<sup>7</sup>. That same year, Jagoda, head of the Soviet political police started the construction of Dal'stroi, another big concentration area for the industrial development of the whole Kolyma region, that would become the fundamental field for the mining of gold and other minerals along the homonymous river. The construction of internal communication roads was started, in order to transport all these products up to the port of Magadan, the ill-famed destination for thousands of prisoners who were then transferred to the camps of Kolyma region. To get an idea of the dimensions, in 1931 Dal'stroi controlled a territory of 3 million square kilometres.

In 1930, was started the construction of the canal between the White Sea and the Baltic Sea, a tremendous undertaking to which thousands of prisoners had to work under unbearable conditions and with death rates that, like those reached in the Kolyma, were among the highest of the whole concentration system. In 1932, when the works ended (the canal, however, was never utilized, as it was not deep enough to allow the transit of merchant ships) the construction of another canal was started. It was the Moscow-Volga canal, that was to be completed only five years later.

Between 1935 and 1937, the number of camps increased, as well as their productivity level, in spite of the many disfunctions of the system. On the other hand, the resort to more elaborate forms of terror, was the cause of an increased number of prisoners, that practically doubled in the years before World War II. A determining factor, in this sense, was the Nkvd 00477 decree of July 1937, by which the Great Terror had its official start and which provided for the "operations of repression of former kulaks, criminals and any other anti-soviet elements", with the addition, a few weeks later, of the various nationalities living in the USSR, and also the

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<sup>7</sup> N.G. Okhotin, A.B. Roginsky, *Sistema*, cit., p. 498.

wives<sup>8</sup> and sons of the “traitors of the country”. A real project for the purge of the whole Soviet society, including national minorities and foreign communities, that was brought to an end only after one year of arrests, condemnations and indiscriminate executions.

Besides the short and dramatic parenthesis of Great Terror, when the main function of camps seemed to be that of a mere place of political isolation for the regime opponents, the camps did never lose their character of forced production units. Beria's arrival at the head of Nkvd, in the place of Ezhov who had been arrested in 1938 and then executed, marked the beginning of a new development of the forced labour. The new Minister of the Interior aimed at a rationalization of the camp system, being aware that Nkvd was charged with more and more ambitious economic projects for which they did not have the economic resources nor the technical and skilled personnel. Thus, in order to increase the GULag's production level (during years 1936-1938 it had gone down by 13%, due to the sudden increase of prisoners and the consequent uncontrolled increase of the number of camps where in some cases the number of prisoners was ten times higher than their capacity) he adopted a set of measures to strengthen the internal discipline (increase of the production norms, abolition of the early release for good conduct, immediate execution for production saboteurs).

With the Great Terror and then with Beria's arrival, between 1936 and 1939, the prisoners' life conditions greatly worsened, and the war outbreak certainly did not improve the situation. The prisoners' life level that was already miserable became even worse, the death rate increased (in 1942, it reached the 17,5%)<sup>9</sup> and the camp productivity level went down.

Between 1939 and 1945, the system structure almost did not change: the existing ITL, ITK and spetsposiolki camps continued operative (except those evacuated from the regions occupied by Germans after June 1941). To support the system, the regime created the “labour armies and battalions” charged with the task of specific works of military importance and including both “convicts” and “internees” considered fit to heavy work. On the other hand, the social aspect of the camp population changed deeply in those years. In fact, from October 1939, the Soviet repression hit the populations of Ukraine and Western Bielorussia taken away from Poland in accordance with the Ribbentrop-Molotov Treaty, later followed by the deportations of Poles, Lithuanians, Estonians and Latvians. Mostly all these prisoners were confined in Kazakhstan, in Komi Republic

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<sup>8</sup> *Uznitsy ALZhIRA. Spisok zhenshchin-zakliuchennykh Akmolinskogo i drugikh otdelenii Karlag, Moskva, Zven'ia, 2003.*

<sup>9</sup> The death rate between 1934 and 1937 ranged between an yearly 2.5 and 5%. In 1938, it went up to 10%. In the following two years, it then reached the level of 17.5%, in 1942. According to V.N. Zemskov, between 1942 and 1943 only, half million prisoners died due to hunger and diseases, *Gulag*, in “Sociologicheskie issledovaniia”, n.6, 1991, pp. 14-15.

and in Siberia, but many were sent to work in the hard labour camps. Meanwhile, the repression was strongly resumed also in the Soviet Union when, after the summer of 1940, Stalin decided to adopt new punitive measures in order to increase the industry productivity and prepare the country for the war. In this case, the repression mainly hit a social category, that of workers, as this was considered the most useful and profitable for the camps work. After the German attack, also started the arrests of Soviet citizens native of countries at war with the Soviet Union (Germans, Finns, Rumanians and Italians). While this new forced manpower was pouring in the camps, other prisoners were leaving them, when considered guilty of minor crimes, to be sent to reinforce the ranks of the Red Army at the battle front. Between 1941 and 1944, 1.800.000 arrests were carried out, and 2.900.000 was the number of detainees sent to the front, died or released<sup>10</sup>.

After 1944, the camps were filled again with whole ethnic groups proceeding from territories occupied by the Red Army and later turned Soviet by the peace treaties, thousands of Soviet soldiers and civilians who had been taken prisoners by Germans, officers and soldiers of the Russian Liberation Army, and collaborationists in the occupied territories. Immediately after the war end, new repressive laws against the Soviet society were issued. The population's hopes for a loosening of the internal tension were deceived soon. To face the famine, particularly severe in central Russia, lower Volga, Moldavia and Ukraine in 1946, which caused the death of approximately 2 million people and diseases and sufferings due to malnutrition for more 100<sup>11</sup>, between 1946 and June 1947, a series of decrees were issued for the "defence of the cereals of state": in brief, they provided for a penalty from five to twentyfive years of hard labour for anybody attempting on the property of the state and of the kolkhozy, and from two to three years of penal settlement for anybody who, being aware of these crimes, did not denounce them<sup>12</sup>. According to Zemkov's data, between 1946 and 1952, 1.300.000 people were sentenced on the basis of these decrees, 75% of them to penalties of more than five years of ITL<sup>13</sup>.

The consequences of the war over GULag were contradictory: in fact, on one side, it brought a power strengthening of the Commission of Interior Affairs, with the availability of more manpower; on the other side, it involved the disclosure of the extreme economic weakness of the camps system. Such a weakness became more intense in the post-war years: the camp network was enlarged after 1946, but Nkvd organs could never reach

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<sup>10</sup> A.I. Kokurin, N.V. Petrov, *Rossija XX Vek*, cit., pp. 441-442.

<sup>11</sup> V.F. Zima, *Golod v SSSR: 1946-1947 godov: Proiskhozhdenie i posledstviia*, Moskva, 1996, p.11.

<sup>12</sup> V.F. Zima, *Poslevoennoe obshchestvo: golod i prestupnost' 1946-1947 gg.*, in "Otechestvennaia Istorii", n.5, 1995, p.45.

<sup>13</sup> V.N. Zemkov, *Gulag*, in "Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia", n.7, 1991, p.10.

the production quotas they were assigned. The Dal'stroi, for example, in 1947, was no more able to realize the plans and could mine only the 58.8% of the expected quantity of gold<sup>14</sup>. In 1951, none of the great industrial parks managed by the Ministry of the Interior was able to keep the productive plans. Such economic weakness was due to several causes, both of a socio-economic character and of a more socio-political nature: the very bad physical conditions of prisoners (only in 1947-48 the food rations went back to the pre-war level); the increased percentage, in the ITL and ITK, of women who were less fit for hard work and for the weary shifts usually imposed on prisoners; the government failure to invest in the industrial plants, infrastructures and transport to and from the camps since, in the stalinian leadership viewpoint, the system had to be viable; the social and national change of the camp population, a change that determined an increase of indiscipline and a growing number of resistance cases within the camps. In fact, the presence of the new "prisoners of war", who often solidarized being members of the same national group, had a disruptive effect on the structure and the productivity of the Soviet concentration system, especially after the creation, beginning from February 1948, of 12 new "special camps" for political prisoners, the "osoby Lageria", where they gathered the political detainees found guilty of "counter-revolutionary crimes". On one side, the creation of these new structures withdrew a considerable quantity of manpower from ordinary ITL<sup>15</sup>; on the other side, it facilitated the organization of rebellions which at times took the dimension of real mass insurrections of prisoners. The episodes of symbolic resistance, both economic and political<sup>16</sup>, became more frequent especially, at the beginning of the Fifties, with the very violent rebellions in Gorlag, Rechlag and Steplag. It was only after Stalin's death that the new leadership gave the prisoners a hearing. This took place in a context of overall reflection on the economic value and political convenience of the camps system. On March 25, 1953, the construction of a series of big plants was stopped. Two days later, on March 27, an amnesty decree brought about the liberation of more than one million prisoners. In 1953 alone, the number of operative camps went down by almost half. After the XX Congress of Pcus and Khrushchev's famous speech, on October 25, 1956, a resolution of the Central Committee of Pcus and of the Council of Ministers of USSR, defined as "inopportune the further existence of ITL".

A real historical vision of the GULag, and more in general of the Soviet past has never existed in USSR. Only the official vision imposed by

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<sup>14</sup> G.M. Ivanova, *Gulag v sisteme totalitarnogo gosudarstva*, cit., p.119.

<sup>15</sup> In the camps were left the prisoners sentenced for common crimes (that is, those sentenced on the basis of one of the many repressive laws of the soviet state, such as, for instance, a simple delay at work) and the criminals in the strict sense, who enjoyed, however, a special treatment and did not work.

<sup>16</sup> On these aspects, see the fundamental volume by M. Craveri, *Resistenza nel Gulag. Un capitolo inedito della destalinizzazione in Unione Sovietica*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2003.

the regime existed, a vision of an epic character, and the clandestine vision of a literary-memorialistic character. This is one of the dramatic inheritances of the stalinist era. If a writer was considered, as Stalin himself affirmed, an engineer of souls, an historian could only be considered an architect whose task was to take part in the construction of the system foundations through the legitimation of the myths created by ideology<sup>17</sup>. This process, started in the Thirties, was steadfast, although with different features, even in the years following the death of the great tyrant. Obviously, none of the Soviet élites that succeeded in power after 1953 was interested in promoting a free historical comparison on the events of a past identified by one of the most devastating experiences of Russian society, that of terror of state and of stalinian repressions<sup>18</sup>. History had to stay cautiously confined in the artful world of ideology.

If in the course of the long twenty four years of stalinian tyranny the memory had been strictly banned, something began to change after 1953, when the State, between the end of Fifties and the beginning of Sixties, granted for the first time a limited space to the publication and distribution of the first memorial works on Terror and GULag<sup>19</sup>. For the Soviet society, this has been one of the most important effects of the “destalinization” (otherwise quite ephemeral) fostered by Khrushchev. Starting from 1953, the progressive dismantlement of the concentration system, the first law for the rehabilitation of the victims of repression in 1956, the possibility for some deported population to return to their homes, led many people to break the silence and to tell their personal and family story. The stalinian terror was then the first ground of the Soviet historical memory. Officially, however, the “forbidden memory” of the previous years was replaced by another one: “untruthful”. The Khrushchev regime admitted the possibility to reckon with the past. However, as written by Arsenii Roginsky, now director of the Memorial Association in Moscow:

the one and only idea that was to get the “green light” was: the terror did exist, but was due to one individual, Stalin who made use of it to strike the best elements of the communist party. The terror was aimed at the Party. For anyone a little acquainted with the history of

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<sup>17</sup> On the myths created by soviet history, see G. Piretto, *Il radioso avvenire. Mitologie culturali sovietiche*, Einaudi, Torino, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> In more recent years, many works have been published in Russia and abroad, on the history of stalinism, terror of state and GULag. Among these - published in Italy or translated into Italian - we remember: A. Applebaum, *Gulag. Storia dei campi di concentramento sovietici*, Milano, Mondadori, 2004; I.V. Clevnjuk, *Storia del Gulag. Dalla collettivizzazione al Grande Terrore*, Torino, Einaudi, 2006; M. Craveri, *Resistenza nel Gulag*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2003; E. Dundovich, F. Gori, E. Guercetti, *Reflections on the Gulag. With a Documentary Appendix on the Italian Victims of the Repression in the USSR*, “Annali della Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, Anno XXXVII, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2003, now also in the Italian edition: *Gulag. Storia e Memoria*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> See E. Kaplan, “Aspetti e problemi della bibliografia del Gulag”, in E. Dundovich, F. Gori, E. Guercetti, *Gulag. Storia e Memoria*, cit. pp. 279-305.

soviet repressions, evidently this is a falsehood. The power had tried to rewrite history and to replace the absence of memory with a false memory. Afterwards, even this false memory was forbidden<sup>20</sup>.

In fact, Khrushchev's contradictory liberalism got exhausted in a short period of time, and things did not improve with the reinforcement of neostalinist trends following Brezhnev's nomination. After Stalin's death in March 1953, Soviet intellectuals were animated by contradictory sentiments.<sup>21</sup> One of the most remarkable effects of the "thaw" was the appearance of a novel that was considered absolutely heretical for those years, *Doctor Zhivago*. Discontent did not delay to spread over other social classes. On July 1958, in Moscow, on the occasion of the unveiling of Maiakovsky monument, after the official ceremony some young people had stayed there to exchange their opinions and to read their writings, and had decided to repeat those meetings almost every evening. Although the police did soon intervene to stop the initiative, it had been an important evidence of the new climate that was spreading across the country. In fact, in 1960, another small group of twenty-years-old students, had agreed to resume the readings under the monument. Among these students there were Yurii Galanskov, Vladimir Bukovsky and Aleksandr Ginzburg. That event had attracted a great number of people, especially youngs. That had been the first act of group civil disobedience, that is to say, the beginning of dissent in the strict sense of the word.

The change was pushed forward mainly in the literary milieu. However, it also developed in other surroundings: at the end of Fifties, for instance, a school was created in the house of the painters Evgenii and Lev Kropivnitsky, father and son, in Lianozovo near Moscow. Every Sunday, painters, poets and all kinds of intellectuals, met there to discuss about art and culture. A very popular form of communication was represented by the songwriters' music, that was recorded in cassettes and reproduced in thousands of copies as it happened with written texts, this time under the name of *magnitizdat*. In this way, the songs by Aleksandr Galich, Vladimir Vysotsky, Bulat Okudzhava, and many others, were spread.

In this climate of relative change, a former detenee of Soviet camps, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, wrote a tale entitled "One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich", published in the November 1962 issue of the "Novyi mir" magazine. The tale described in a detached way, the day of a prisoner in a Soviet hard labour camp. The publication had an explosive effect, and from

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<sup>20</sup> A. Roginsky, "Mantenere viva la memoria del Gulag nella Russia d'oggi", in G. Nissim (ed.), *Storie di uomini giusti nel Gulag*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2004, p. 314.

<sup>21</sup> On the transformations of soviet society after 1953 and the birth of dissent, see M. Clementi, *Storia del dissenso sovietico*, Roma, Odradek, 2007.

that moment on everybody felt the need to remember and to bear witness. Rather than a literary event, it was a moral and social event in the Soviet life, that produced a real opinion movement. In the same period in which Solzenitsyn published “One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich” and was starting to think about his next work “The Gulag Archipelago”, Varlam Shalamov was writing his “The Kolyma Tales”, Evgeniia Ginzburg was drawing up “Journey into the whirlwind”, Nadezhda Mandelstam entrusted to samizdat his memoirs, “Hope against hope”, Andrei Tarkovsky was writing the script of the movie “Rublev”. It was no more possible for the regime to tolerate all this: from 1964, the spaces opened in the official press were closed one after the other.

After Khrushchev’ defenestration, the situation got worse and worse. Brezhnev and Kosygin, respectively secretary of the party and president of the government, set to regain control over a society animated by protest sentiments. In the press, more and more frequent were the attempts to rehabilitate Stalin, the censure had a resumption. Memory was denied again, but this time with less impressive effects in comparison with the stalinian era. Thanks to *samizdat*, hundreds of copies of former prisoners’ memoirs were spreading around, as well as copies of great works such as “Requiem” by Anna Akhmatova. In this atmosphere, in Moscow and in Leningrad began the first political trials against dissidents. These trials were meant to be a sort of intimidation directed to intellectuals, but on the contrary they marked the regime’s first setback<sup>22</sup>.

In the course of the Sixties and Seventies, the clandestine process of construction of the Soviet historical memory found new energies thanks to the birth of the complex and articulated phenomenon of dissent. It is not by chance that many of the founders of Moscow Memorial Association – the first centre of research on the victims of stalinian terror, officially created in 1989 but operative as a movement since 1987 – had been among the actors of fights against the regime in those two decades. It is just about the reasons of that choice that Arsenii Roginsky talks in a long interview granted to Alessandra Rognoni in 2003:

Among others, there was a small group of young people that I joined. In the Seventies we collected materials on GULag, we recorded people’s recollections and memories, collected documents and studied family archives. Then we commented, we tried to comment

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<sup>22</sup> Among the famous trials of those years, we recall that against the young poet Iosif Brodsky, the favourite pupil of the great Russian poetess Anna Akhmatova, whose poems circulated since 1958, in form of samizdat. In March 1964, he was sentenced to five years, but during his trial even some of the official intelligentsia mobilized in his favour. We also recall the trial against two young Muscovite writers, Andrei Siniavsky and Julii Daniel’, guilty of publishing abroad their works for years, under a pseudonym. Their arrest was the first to be announced by western radios in Russian language, that had so many secret listeners in the Ussr.

on all this material in a scientific way, and then we published historical collections in samizdat, that were subsequently printed again abroad. [...] We realized that two generations were passing by and the memory of the present might be lost. It was a moral sense of responsibility towards our own country. Of course, we did not think, and I never believed that I would live after the communism. [...] However, we just could not give up with these things, it was merely a moral need. If I had not done it, I would have lost respect for myself. [...] I could also see that this material disappeared because people died. Documents would never leave the archives, I had this clear, but in people heads there is a huge and important memory. This is the memory to be saved. And this is what we tried to do.<sup>23</sup>

It was in this way that Pamiat' magazine was born in 1976, as a samizdat. Among its editors were Larisa Bogoraz, Aleksandr Daniel' and, of course, Arsenii Roginsky<sup>24</sup>.

Underground issues of Pamiat' kept on between 1976 and 1981, the year of Roginsky's arrest. A few years later, together with Daniel', he was to be one of the main founders of Memorial, to which both of them would give their precious experience in the field of historical research<sup>25</sup>. Other famous dissidents of that period will join the association: Sergei Kovalev, one of the founders in 1969 of the "Initiative group for the defence of civil rights in USSR", in 1989 became its co-president; Andrei Sakharov, at the time of its foundation, in 1989, agreed to join the board of directors and was its first honorary present<sup>26</sup>.

Actually, before being an officially recognized association, with its own statute and directive organs, for two years, that is between 1987 and 1989, Memorial had been a spontaneous movement of people and opinion. In the climate of relative opening started by Gorbachev, informal groups arose among people sharing the same interests. This fact was absolutely anomalous in Soviet people's habits. Among these, there was a club called "Democratic Perestroika", with an historical section that later took the name of Memorial. This section was concerned with stalinist era, and soon arose its intention to build a monument to remember the millions of repression victims and to create a real research centre on the history of repressions in USSR<sup>27</sup>. The activists (a group of well-known

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<sup>23</sup> Interview by Alessandra Rognoni to Arsenii Roginsky, Milan, November 2003.

<sup>24</sup> M. Clementi, *Storia del dissenso sovietico*, cit., p. 208; A. Rognoni, "L'Associazione Memorial di Mosca: storia e attività", tesi di laurea discussa presso l'Università Cattolica di Milano, anno 2003, relatore Prof. Dell'Asta, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> Ivi, p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> A. Sacharov, *Memorie*, Sugarco, Milano, 1990, p. 775. Sacharov himself had been the promoter, on October 30, 1974, of a press conference to support the "Day of the political prisoner in Ussr" organized by prisoners in Mordovia and Perm' camps, with a hunger strike to attract attention on their hard life conditions. This date will then become a symbol of Memorial fight for the historical truth up to 1991, when the Supreme Soviet will officially recognize it.

<sup>27</sup> N. Adler, *Victims of Soviet Terror. The story of the Memorial Movement*, Praeger Publishers West Port, Connecticut and London, 1993, pp. 45 and f.

intelligentsia members of the time)<sup>28</sup> who, along the typical lines of dissent, asserted to be in full agreement with the dictates of the Soviet Constitution, soon decided to look for people's help through a street subscription for the purpose to build the monument. At the same time, they tried to involve the interest of cultural institutions belonging to the reforming wing of soviet democratic intelligentsia, with the support of the editorial board of Ogoniok magazine<sup>29</sup>.

In the following months, also thanks to the support of distinguished members of democratic intelligentsia, such as the physicist Andrei Sakharov, the historian Yurii Afanas'ev, writers like Lev Razgon and Anatolii Rybakov, the poet Evgenii Evtushenko, the songwriter Bulat Okudzhava, the historian Roy Medvedev and Boris Eltsin himself, Memorial was collecting an increasing number of agreements. An enormous crowd attended, on October 19, 1988, at the MELZ Palace of Culture in Moscow, the "Week of Conscience", an exhibition promoted by various associations and newspapers, and also, for the first time, by Memorial. People were bringing letters, diaries, objects of the camp life, a patrimony that became the nucleus of museum, archives and library of the association's scientific centre. In spite of the threats coming from the authorities who deemed dangerous the renown that the movement was acquiring, the first founding congress<sup>30</sup> of the association was arranged for the end of October. Later, under the authorities' pressure, it was changed into the less engaging name of "preparatory conference", in view of the real foundation. On that occasion, Sacharov was indicated as a candidate for the Soviet Parliament<sup>31</sup>, and it was decided that Memorial would have a federative, rather than hierarchic, structure. The real founding congress would convene soon: 28 and 29 January of 1989 in two stages, first the Moscow section, then that of Memorial pansoviet Association. Delegates attended by the hundred, representing about 250 organizations and groups both Russian and of other Soviet republics such as Ukraine, Belorussia, Georgia, Kazakhstan. During the congress, the association guidelines and statute were drafted, the directive bodies and the scientific centre – constituted by a museum, an archive and a library - were created, with the task to promote researches and to publish books on the history of repressions in USSR<sup>32</sup>.

Before long, Memorial became a reference for all those who had known the violence of the terror of state, either directly or indirectly through the experience of their relatives. The association committed to a legal rehabilitation of the victims of political repressions and to grants for lodging, transport and free

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<sup>28</sup> Among them: Pavel Kudiukin and Aleksandr Vaisberg, the sociologist Galina Ratiskaia, the mathematicians Dimitrii Leonov and Elena Zhemkova, just to mention a few names that may be found in more details in M. Ferretti, *La memoria mutilata. La Russia ricorda*, Il Corbaccio, Milano, 1993, p. 346.

<sup>29</sup> A. Rognoni, "L'Associazione Memorial di Mosca", cit., pp. 43-49.

<sup>30</sup> Later transformed into a "preparatory conference" just to avoid arousing the authorities' anger.

<sup>31</sup> A possible hypothesis, since a recent change of the election law allowed associations such as Memorial to elect some candidates.

<sup>32</sup> The scientific centre continues to be the ineludible reference for whom intends to deal with the soviet history and especially of the history of repression. Among the others, were nominated as responsible of the scientific centre: Ales Adamovich, Yurii Afanas'ev, Mikhail Gefter, Marietta Chudakova, Nikita Okhotin, Arsenii Roginsky. An ample synthesis of the origins, of the history and of the activities of Memorial may be found in the site [www.memo.ru](http://www.memo.ru).

medical assistance<sup>33</sup>. In December 1989, on the occasion of the first voting of the new-born Congress of people representatives, Sergei Kovalev, an outstanding member of Memorial, was elected. When he was nominated president of the parliament Commission for the defence of human rights, Sergei Kovalev committed to fight for a rehabilitation law for the victims of repression, that should provide for the review of the cases up to the end of communist regime, and not only the cases between the Thirties and the Fifties. In 1991, the law was actually approved: for the first time it publicly acknowledged the crimes perpetrated by the Soviet state towards its citizens, beginning from 1917 up to the moment the law came into force. Finally, always in the same year, by another law of the state, October 30 was appointed “Day of the memory of victims of political repressions”. The choice was not casual: on October 30, 1989, a few hundreds people formed a chain around the Lubyanka palace – the former seat of Nkvd and later of Kgb – the place where thousands of people had been tortured. The following year, always on the same day, during a ceremony in a small park just a few metres from Lubyanka, a big stone was unveiled, in memory of all the victims of repression in USSR. The stone was taken from the Solovki Islands, in the Baltic sea, at 160 kilometres from the polar circle, seat of an old monastery that in the Twenties had been turned into the first special camp for political prisoners. The date had an extremely important symbolic value: on October 30, 1974, the prisoners of Mordovia and Perm’ camps, had gone on a hunger strike to protest against the life conditions and to obtain the status of “political prisoners”, marking that date as the “Day of the Political Prisoner”.

In 1992, the Memorial Association “pansoviet, historical, divulging and charitable” became “international”, since after 1991 the Soviet Union did not exist any more<sup>34</sup>. The associations of former USSR states, such as Kazakhstan and Latvia joined in, as well as around twenty organizations of Ukraine, Memorial Berlin and Memorial Russia<sup>35</sup>. Into the last one, are comprised the regional sections, that operate in conformity with the general statute of Memorial, and the member organizations (approximately seventy), with their own statute, that do not come directly under the association, but that work together with it and share its ethical principles. The regional sections are

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<sup>33</sup> In most of the cases, the life conditions of lager survivors were very difficult. The survivors, rehabilitated in accordance with the law of 1956, were getting very low pensions, as the years of camp forced work had not been calculated, and refunds granted for their property confiscation had been insignificant, M. Ferretti, *La memoria mutilata*, cit., p.370.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>35</sup> Into the last one, are comprised the regional sections, that operate in conformity with the general statute of Memorial, and the member organizations (approximately seventy), with their own statute, that do not come directly under the association, but that work together with it and share its ethical principles. The regional sections are organized in an autonomous way, they carry on various activities, and are coordinated by a common office located at the Memorial seat in Moscow. The task of this office is promoting common activities such as school competitions, exhibition organization, projects for historical research. In some cases, these activities are carried on by former prisoners and their relatives, in other cases also with the participation of younger generations. This is mainly due to the yearly competition on soviet history promoted by the Association in the schools, that has allowed many young people to discover the history of their own country and in some cases of their own families, making up for the lack of text-books adopted in schools in which stalinism and terror of state are entitled a few pages and no more than two hours in the course of the year.

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Since the Association's structure is dynamic rather than static, when new branches are born, other branches disappear. Among regional sessions, the most active are those of Riazan', St. Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, Ukhta and Perm'<sup>37</sup>. In Italy, Memorial Italia has been created in 2004, with the following purposes: to spread in Italy the cultural and scientific activities of Memorial Moscow; to promote researches on the history of political repressions in USSR in the XX century; to diffuse the knowledge of the USSR history in the XX century through exhibitions, seminars, lessons in schools and universities; to collect documentary material on the Italian victims of stalinian repressions; to keep the memory of Gulag and of its victims alive through the publication of diaries, letters and other materials; to strive to spread information, studies and researches concerning the themes of human rights and their violation and defence within Russia and the other states born from the dissolution of USSR<sup>38</sup>.

On October 18, 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the new-born Russian Federation passed the law on the rehabilitation of victims of political repressions, asserting that "are reinstated in their rights all the victims of the political terror starting from October 25, 1917, to the date the present law comes into force". In Russia many people thought that in the "war for history" the Soviet society had been fighting for many years, the historical truth and the memory of terror had prevailed at last<sup>39</sup>. Unfortunately, these expectations were let down by the involution of the Russian political situation, in particular after the second half of the Nineties, and even more after Putin came to power in 1999.

In general, during the two mandates of Eltsin, the president only recalled the crimes of the old regime at the time of elections, when he had to confront Ziuganov, leader of the communist Party. Then, once won the elections, a reconciliation and good will atmosphere was announced: mere rhetoric words without contents. In the chaos following the dissolution of USSR, already in

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<sup>36</sup> The first edition of the competition has been that of March 1999, with the title "The man of history. Russia in the XX century" open to students of the Russian Federation, aged 14 to 18 years. In the year 2003/2004, the competition was open to students of Chechnian schools aged 14-17 years: their compositions were so good to deserve publication, later translated in Italian under the title *La Cecenia dei bambini*, a cura di F. Gori, Einaudi, 2007. Winners are given the opportunity to visit Moscow and are offered computers, videocameras and books. In the last years, they are also given the opportunity to participate in an international summer camp for young historians taking place in Germany.

<sup>37</sup> A. Rognoni, "L'Associazione Memorial di Mosca", cit., pp. 67-68.

<sup>38</sup> For further information, see the site [www.memorial-italia.it](http://www.memorial-italia.it).

<sup>39</sup> A. Roginsky, "Mantenere viva la memoria del Gulag nella Russia d'oggi", cit., p.316.

1992, the former soviet archives opened up their misteries to Russian and foreign researchers, even before the issue of a proper law for the archives. This allowed Memorial researchers to launch inquiries of exceptional importance, especially on the funds of Garf (the State Central Archives in Moscow) on how the terror of state operated, on the dekulakization policies, on the concentration system, the history of “Great Terror”, the identity of political and non-political victims of the articulated campaigns of stalinian repression. Especially during the first Eltsin presidency, the political power did not facilitate, but neither hindered, Memorial’s activity. The new leading class was officially engaged to bridge the country to a democratic system and a free market, but actually in the sharing out of powers and privileges<sup>40</sup>. The Kremlin did not seem to give much importance to the activity of an association made by former dissidents with a project to recover historical skeletons in the cupboard. In the same way, in parallel, Russian public opinion seemed to be less and less interested in the “memory of terror”, being rather worried about unemployment, impoverishment of large strata of population, social differences, and lack of a welfare state system.

In the first half of the Nineties, the association acquired a permanent seat in the centre of Moscow, not far from the Kremlin, suitable for the scientific centre, that soon became well known at an international level. The centre included a museum, with collections of objects offered by former camp prisoners or found by Memorial researchers in the locations of some of the camps, a rich library, and also an archive with documents and data whose collection started in 1989. Since the time of the exhibition “The week of conscience”, questionnaires had been distributed to former detenees and their relatives. The data collected are analyzed and kept in personal files that today amount to more than 50.000. The same data are also available in elctronic form.

Since the beginning of the Nineties, started the publication of the “Books of Memory”, also called martyrologies, based on the documentation available after the opening of state archives and often thanks to the good will of the personnel of Memorial and of its branches. These volumes represent a sort of virtual cemetery of the victims of repression. The methodology followed for their compilation varies according to the cases: at times the chronological principle has been chosen, some other times the victims’ profession, in other cases the place of execution or burial. A glance through these pages is a most upsetting experience: hundreds of thousands names are succeeding one another, hundreds of thousands lives of innocent men and women killed with no guilt.

Besides these most valuable volumes rescuing from oblivion the existence of so many victims of repression, in 1998 a manual was published, with the first systematic description of networks, functions, number of prisoners of the camps of re-education through work, that is those camps that formed the complex system of GULag<sup>41</sup>. Moreover, many research projects have been launched, sometimes in cooperation with “institutes of the memory” of other countries. In 1998, for instance, the Memorial “Polish Program”<sup>42</sup> was launched. This program

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<sup>40</sup> F. Benvenuti, *La Russia dopo l'URSS. Dal 1985 a oggi*, Carocci, Roma, 2006.

<sup>41</sup> N. Okhotin, A. Roginsky, *Sistema ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagere v CCCR*, cit.

<sup>42</sup> See [www.memo.ru](http://www.memo.ru).

was based on hundreds of letters received by the association directly from Polish citizens, who were asking for help to reconstruct the destiny of their relatives who had moved to USSR (the Polish was among the largest foreign communities when Stalin came to power). Since 1996, with the coordination of “Karta” centre, Warsaw, and with the participation of groups and research centres of Azerbaidzhan, Albania, Belorussia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Russia, Ukraine and the Czech and Slovak Republics, Memorial has adhered to the international project that led to the publication, in 2008, of a dictionary of dissidents of central and eastern Europe<sup>43</sup>.

Finally, many exhibitions have been organized in the Nineties. Among these, we remember the photographic exhibition “The Solovki special camp, 1923-1939”, that took place at the Solovki monastery in 1989, the exhibition “Art in the camps” held in Moscow in 1990, the exhibition “Gulag. Il sistema dei lager in Urss”, held in Milan inside the Castello Sforzesco in 1999, in cooperation with the Feltrinelli Foundation of Milan whose Eastern Countries section was then directed by Francesca Gori. This exhibition is still itinerant in various Italian towns.

As years were passing by, however, these initiatives arouse less and less attention. Contrary to what occurred in the second half of the Eighties, in Russia the “memory of terror” has been replaced by a “nostalgic memory” of the past, an imagined past, cleared of the harsh aspects and so reassuring, the nostalgia of a regime that took away liberty, but that was granting security, work, health assistance, and, last but not least for the Russian national pride, respectability at international level.

In 2000, the country chose, of its own will, a new president, a former lieutenant-colonel of Kgb. Between 1993 and 2003, we assisted to a real decline of democratic parties, with less and less votes. As Roginsky observed, “with Putin’s accession an important event took place: this second memory, the myth of a normal past, has become a thesis of the state [...] With Putin, history seems to re-enter into the sphere of the state policy. It was so in the era of soviet power, and today it is so again”<sup>44</sup>.

Consequently, in an absolutely antithetic way compared to the intent of Memorial dissidents, the memory of terror remains not much tied to the real political processes of the country. The attempt, partially successful thanks to the control exerted by government organs on mass media, is precisely that of making it fall into oblivion, in the name of a past seen as a series of victories, of heroic deeds and great accomplishments, for which millions of happy people with a normal life were willing to pay a high price. As Putin said, before a public of

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<sup>43</sup> Since 1990, Memorial had launched a research project devoted to the activity of soviet dissidents and to the movement for human rights in the years from 1960 to 1980. The project, directed by A. Daniel’, will lead to the compilation of a biobibliographic dictionary of soviet dissidents. The preliminary work has consisted of the collection of texts, documents and samizdat publications that have been put together in an archive. This archive is, according to many experts, the richest collection on this theme after that of Radio Svoboda that is now kept at the centre “Open Society archives” in Budapest. The dictionary has not been completed yet, but a portion of materials already collected is now available on the site of Memorial, including all the issues of the samizdat bulletin “Chronicle of current events”.

<sup>44</sup> A. Roginsky, “Mantenere viva la memoria del Gulag nella Russia d’oggi”, cit., p. 320.

historians expressly convened at the end of November, 2003, “we must clear history of the trash. Our country was great. We must teach young people to be proud of our history”<sup>45</sup>. With a new patriotic pride, the country looks at these young people, that the President calls “nashi”. Then, since in the neocapitalist Russia of the Nineties, a true historical memory, shared by the state and the nation was not born, the memory of terror became once again, in many ways, a private or, at most, regional memory<sup>46</sup>.

Of little use are the voices rising at times against these restoring trends. Among these, we remember the journalist Anna Politovskaya, cruelly killed in Moscow on October 6, 2006: in her articles appeared on the independent journal “Novaya Gazeta”, and in her books (never published in Russia)<sup>47</sup> with great courage she denounced the continuity existing between the methods of power of the old soviet regime and those of the present government: the lack of independence of courts due to the connivance between public attorneys and politicians close to Putin; the lack of a real political confrontation due to the control exerted by the government on television and press; the privatistic administration of res publica by Putin’s entourage; the resort to violence, brutality and every sort of illegal acts in tackling the Chechnian question. Nor in more recent times things seem to have improved: on December 4, 2008, the police made a perquisition at the seat of Memorial in St.Petersburg, directed by Irina Flige, and confiscated all the computer materials of the Association. The reason for the search has been the Memorial’s alleged financing of “Novyi Peterburg”, an opposition newspaper, that had been closed by the government authorities in 2007, for “incitement to hatred” and support to “Marsh nesoglasnykh”, all the demonstrations against Putin, that saw the repression by the police special forces and the arrest of many participants. The materials, that until today have not been returned, include: biographical data concerning more than 50.000 victims of stalinian repressions; the results of a research on the places of execution and burial of repression victims (many hundreds places with descriptions and photos); the photographic collection (more than 10.000 photos) and the reference text of the “Virtual museum of Gulag”, an unique online resource gathering more than hundred Russian local museums on Gulag.

Silences and reticences on Gulag’s history did characterize not only the way in which the soviet memory before, and the post-Soviet memory after, were built or de-structured. The shadow of those silences and reticences, with its political and ideological implications, was thrown also on the debate in many countries of western Europe. In these countries, the very existence of “GULag” has often become the subject of disputes or, more often, the oblivion of large strata of western historiography.

In Italy, the history of Gulag and of the Italian victims of stalinism has been silenced and ignored for a long time, with the complicity of the Italian Communist Party, whose leaders were bearing the weight of a joint responsibility

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>46</sup> A good support is given, for example, to the Perm’ Museum by the local administration, as it represents a piece of the region memory. The same also happens in Komi Republic, *ivi*, p. 321.

<sup>47</sup> A. Politovskaja, *Cecenia. Il disonore russo*, Fandango; *La Russia di Putin*, Adelphi, Torino, 2005; *Diario russo, 2003-2005*, Torino, Adelphi, 2007.

in many of those deaths. They were responsible for collaboration with the soviet political police in the purge of the Italian community in Urss in the Thirties, and responsible for the conspiracy of silence in the post-war period when they pretended to ignore those events<sup>48</sup>.

This theme was tackled for the first time in the Sixties<sup>49</sup>. However, almost ten years went by before Dante Corneli, one of the few Italians to survive soviet camps and return to Italy, began to tell his own story and that of many other Italians who died in the Soviet Union<sup>50</sup>. In 1970, after twenty years of detention and confinement in Soviet Union, he returned to Italy. Corneli fought for a long time, with scanty means and with unbending will, against the conspiracy of silence surrounding the history of Italian migration in the Soviet Union. In his book “Il redivivo tiburtino”, Corneli told about the long years he spent in the Vorkuta camps, and then confined in Siberia. Besides, he employed all his resources to rescue from oblivion faces and names of many Italian comrades he left in the Soviet Union, and that did never come back to Italy. He contacted the families of the victims and the few survivors, he made inquiries in the State Central Archives, he searched his own memory. However, not many were those willing to listen such inconvenient truths. He published his books, that, in the free and democratic Italy of the Seventies, he bitterly defined *samizdat*, at his own cost since at the time no publishing house paid any attention to him. It was only with the “Redivivo tiburtino” that he found an anomalous communist publisher, “La Pietra”, who anyway made the spirit of the book

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<sup>48</sup> E. Dundovich, “*Tra esilio e castigo. Il Komintern, il PCI e la repressione degli antifascisti italiani in URSS (1936-1938)*”, Roma, Carocci, 1998.

<sup>49</sup> In 1961, three issues of “Settimana Incom Illustrata” were devoted to the theme of the Italian victims of stalinism (the research was published by Serra with the articles “*Si apre il processo a Togliatti: parlano le vittime del terrore stalinista*”, a. XIV, n. 45, 12 novembre 1961; “*Le confessioni degli innocenti strappate con la tortura nel carcere della Lubianka*”, a. XIV, n. 46, pp. 14-17, “*Una lagnanza perché il cibo era scarso bastava per provocare la deportazione*”, a. XIV, n. 47, pp. 48-53; three years later appeared the first two volumes: that by Guelfo Zaccaria “*200 comunisti italiani vittime dello stalinismo*”, Milano, 1964, and that by Renato Mieli, “*Togliatti 1937*”, Milano, Rizzoli, 1964. By the middle of the Seventies appeared on the review “Il Ponte” the short biographies of Rimola, Peluso, Ghezzi, Rossi e Baccalà written by Alfonso Leonetti, (*Italiani vittime dello stalinismo in URSS*, 2-3, 1976). Besides, a few years later, in 1985, Marcello Braccini began to publish, together with others, among them Roberto Gremmo, the review “La Fattoria degli Animali” with the contribution of Dante Corneli, Nella Masutti, widow of Emilio Guarnaschelli, Mario Guarnaschelli (brother of Emilio), Pia Piccioni, widow of Vincenzo Baccalà, and Vladimiro Bertazzoni. The review is still published today and is available for consultation at the Istituto Salvemini, Turin and at the Feltrinelli Foundation, Milan.

<sup>50</sup> On his experience in the Soviet Union, Corneli wrote many pages. Among these: D. Corneli, “*50 anni in URSS*”, Tivoli, edito in proprio, 1975; “*Stalin visto da una sua vittima italiana*”, Tivoli, edito in proprio, 1975; “*L’annientamento della guardia bolscevica*”, Tivoli, edito in proprio, 1975; *Vorkuta, un mondo esecrato da Dio e dagli uomini*, Tivoli, edito in proprio, 1975; “*Amare verità sulla guerra civile di Spagna*”, Tivoli, edito in proprio, 1979; “*Il dramma dell’emigrazione italiana in Unione Sovietica*”, Tivoli, edito in proprio, 1980; “*Due lettere aperte del ‘Redivivo tiburtino’*”, Tivoli, edito in proprio, 1973; “*Elenco delle vittime italiane dello stalinismo (dalla lettera A alla L)*”, Tivoli, edito in proprio, 1981; “*Elenco delle vittime italiane dello stalinismo (dalla lettera M alla Z)*”, Tivoli, edito in proprio, 1982; “*Rappresentanti del Comintern, dirigenti e funzionari. Persecutori e vittime*”, Tivoli, edito in proprio, 1979; “*Il redivivo tiburtino*”, Milano, La Pietra, 1977 and the new edition “*Il redivivo tiburtino. Un operaio italiano nei lager di Stalin*”, with an introduction by Antonio Carioti, Firenze, Liberal Libri, 2000; “*Lo stalinismo in Italia e nell’emigrazione antifascista*”, Tivoli, edito in proprio; “*Vivere in URSS (1922-1970). Frammenti e ricordi*”, Tivoli, edito in proprio, 1989.

conditional on an introductory note in the fourth cover that was altering the author's real intentions.

The truth that Corneli was telling revolutionized, paraphrasing Gramsci, beliefs and dogmas that in Italy were well rooted, and was inconvenient for many. Also inconvenient was his consistency that never failed even after his return to Italy, when he was left alone and betrayed by those communist comrades that after so many years still wanted to bury in oblivion the stories like his own. Umberto Terracini expressly asked him to forget the past and go back into the party, a compromise that Dante Corneli rejected once more.

In the last sixteen years<sup>51</sup>, the history of Italians in Soviet Union has been the object of a reconstruction founded, for the first time, on former soviet archival sources<sup>52</sup>. Thanks to the documents now available, it has been possible until today to give a face to 1028 Italians who suffered various forms of repression<sup>53</sup> in Soviet Union<sup>54</sup>, and to trace back to the reasons of the oblivion that not only in USSR but also in Italy has surrounded their memory for a long time.

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<sup>51</sup> It is not based on former soviet archival sources, but on a deep research on Italian documentary and printed sources, R. Caccavale, "*Comunisti italiani in Unione Sovietica*", Milano, Mursia, 1995. In this volume are reconstructed for the first time, even if partially, the biographies of many Italian antifascists.

<sup>52</sup> F. Bigazzi, G. Lehner, "*Dialoghi del Terrore*", Firenze, Ponte alle Grazie, 1991; G. Lehner, F. Bigazzi, *La tragedia dei comunisti italiani. Le vittime del PCI in Unione Sovietica*, Milano, Mondadori, 2000.

<sup>53</sup> Loss of civil rights, prison detention, deportation, exile, sentence to long detention in camps, shooting.

<sup>54</sup> Names and biographies of the 1028 Italians are reported in the volume "*Reflections on the Gulag*", cit pp. 325-470. They are also available on the internet site [www.gulag-italia.it](http://www.gulag-italia.it). For a general reconstruction of the vicissitudes of the Italian community in Ussr between 1917 and 1956, see also, in the above cited volume, the article by E. Dundovich, F. Gori, E. Guercetti, *Italian emigration in the USSR. History of a Repression*, pp. 139-186. Of the 1028 names, around 500 belong to members of the Italian community in Kerch, Crimea, who were deported to Kazakhstan in 1942. The remaining are mostly names of antifascist political exiles, often communist, who reached Ussr between the Twenties and the first half of the Thirties, following the persecutions by Mussolini's regime. 120 of them were shot, 128 died in soviet prisons and camps.