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SLAVIC & EAST EUROPEAN JOURNAL

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**PERPETRATORS,  
COLLABORATORS, AND  
IMPLICATED SUBJECTS**

# PORTRAYING PERPETRATION, VICTIMHOOD, AND IMPLICATION AT SITES OF SOVIET REPRESSION IN MOSCOW

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The dilemma of how to remember past violence—including issues of perpetration, victimhood, bystanding, and complicity—confronts all post-atrocity and post-repression societies.<sup>1</sup> This article will examine portrayals of victims, perpetrators, “implicated subjects” (as theorized by Michael Rothberg), and “implicated victims” (my own contribution) at sites related to Soviet repression in contemporary Moscow, Russia. It will analyze how and why a failure to reckon, on an official and institutional level, with the fact that Soviet citizens perpetrated crimes against their fellow citizens, with perpetrators and implicated subjects even becoming victims of the same regime of violence, has led to memory discourses that are being used to justify the current war in Ukraine. Before I explain and contextualize the main theories through which I analyze the case studies below, I will briefly position this work at the intersection of genocide studies, perpetrator studies, and heritage and memory studies.

Post-World War II Germany engaged in the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a process of facing the past and making tangible and intangible reparations to the victims of Nazi violence that has come to represent a sort of “standard” to which other post-repressive societies should aspire (McCarthy; but see below for criticisms of this “German model”). From 1996–2003, post-apartheid

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1. This article is the product of work undertaken as part of “Translating Memories: The Eastern European Past in the Global Arena,” which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant agreement No. 853385). The fieldwork data analyzed here was collected during my PhD at the University of Cambridge. This was funded by the Gates Cambridge Trust as well as smaller grants from the Jesus College Doctoral Research Fund, the Dorothy Garrod Memorial Trust, Banco Santander, and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Thank you very much to all the attendees of the workshop “Victims, Perpetrators, Implicated Subjects in Central and Eastern Europe,” held at Tallinn University in June 2021, and the related panel at the Memory Studies Association Conference, held in July 2021; I benefited greatly from all your comments and discussion. I especially thank Eneken Laanes and Ljiljana Radonić, as well as the anonymous reviewers, for their insightful suggestions.

South Africa engaged in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whose activities have been both praised for unifying society and avoiding bloodshed (Allan and Allan; Gibson) and criticized for a perceived lack of impact on the actual, systemic legacies of apartheid (Clark; Gobodo-Madikizela). The “duty to remember” past atrocities and repression at an official (i.e., state) level has thereby been expounded upon, analyzed, and problematized in the context of many different post-atrocity societies (Blustein; Campisi; Meral). In addition, on the topic of post-violence accountability, Margaret Urban Walker asserts that “a distinctive duty to remember can only reasonably fall upon *societies* as continuing historical entities who exercise agency through their governing institutions” (167, emphasis added). In the cases presented here, we will examine a perceived lack of reckoning with the Soviet past on the levels of the state and of “society” writ large, which has had serious repercussions for how Russian society views past and contemporary mass violence, despite many actors, individuals, and NGOs working to combat such historical distortions.

Turning to theoretical and analytical works on the issue of perpetration, many of the foundational theories are based on the Holocaust. One chain of thought has produced theories such as the “banality of evil” (Arendt) and “ordinary men” (Browning), which attempt to explain how “normal” people knowingly (or, perhaps, remaining “willfully” ignorant to a greater or lesser extent) carried out acts of violence against the Jews, Roma, Sinti, the mentally ill, and other groups targeted by the Nazis. Another strand of thinking considers complications to the perpetrator/victim binary: the “gray zone” (Levi) focuses on the impossibility of categorizing or judging the actions in which concentration camp prisoners engaged in order to stay alive, while the triad of “perpetrator/victim/bystander” (Hilberg) outlines the many ways in which even those who did not openly engage in violence may have been aiding and abetting the regime to carry out its genocidal intent. Turning to theorizations of this problem across the globe, scholars have enumerated different typologies of perpetrators (Smeulers; Williams) as well as investigated the social, political, and psychosocial factors that turn an “ordinary person” into a perpetrator of genocide or mass repression (Sémelin; Waller).

Other recent works have specifically focused on the politics of memorialization of Soviet repression in contemporary Russia, whether this be memory of the Gulag at former camp sites (Bogumił), within museums (Khlevnyuk; Zavadski and Dubina), or within government-supported expositions (Klimenko); still others have investigated differing depictions and perceptions of Soviet perpetrators, across the post-Soviet sphere, in history (Viola), oral history (Mattingly), and public discourse (Khapaeva; Nelson). Some scholars have concluded that the “German model” for dealing with a post-authoritarian, post-atrocity society is not suitable to the post-Soviet situation in Russia, especially due to the widespread “blurring” of boundaries between victims and perpetrators (Etkind, *Post-Soviet Hauntology*; Gabowitsch). This article

builds upon these works to examine the possible political and societal effects of identifying (or not identifying) the implicated subject and the implicated victim in narratives and memorializations of Soviet repression within Russia.

As Russia increasingly positions itself as the “inheritor” of Soviet military strength (Malinova), other scholars have incisively analyzed the concurrent lack of interest in facing up to the “dark” side of these legacies (Bækken and Enstad; Sherlock). In this article, I will explain how “warped” (Etkind, *Warped Mourning*) reckoning with the Soviet past on an institutional level and officially-stymied efforts on the part of NGOs enable Russian memory discourses that erase Russian perpetration from the past, which are being used in support of the current war. I will connect these broader patterns at sites of past violence to current memory discourses that legitimize and justify contemporary violence and aggression.

The lack of an official model and vocabulary for acknowledging implication—let alone perpetration—in mass violence of the twentieth century has strengthened a weaponized sense of eternal victimhood that justifies any action taken against Russia’s enemies, again perceived to be “encircling” the country as they (according to the propaganda that justified the Great Terror and other acts of mass violence) did during Joseph Stalin’s reign. This return to a sense of encirclement and embattlement from enemies within and without was noted as far back as the mid-2000s (Shlapentokh). However, such discourse has dramatically increased since the war in Ukraine began in 2014 (McGlynn) and has appeared repeatedly since the war’s intensification, in numerous references to “containment,” “false values” pressed upon Russia from the West, and control of the former Eastern Bloc from “outside” (Western) forces, notably in Vladimir Putin’s speech on February 24, 2022 (President of Russia, “Address by the President”).

### **The Implicated Subject, Grievability and Blameability**

Rothberg’s “implicated subject” serves as a figure to think through issues of intertwined victimhood and perpetration. He goes beyond a binary conceptualization of perpetrators and victims to theorize the existence of the implicated subject, who is not directly involved in a regime of oppression as a perpetrator but still benefits from the unresolved inequalities that stem from that system of oppression. In “synchronic implication,” an implicated subject is not a perpetrator of a regime of inequality but is still partly responsible for its continuation and may somehow benefit from it anyway; in “diachronic implication,” a contemporary subject is implicated in past injustices via an inherited responsibility for the past, either genealogical or structural, and may benefit from, for example, institutionalized inequality based in past repression (Rothberg 8–9). Rothberg also identifies how a failure to recognize diachronic implication can lead to carrying out and justifying new atrocities (10–12). In his words:

it is best to think of the implicated subject (not to mention the victim and the perpetrator) as a position that we occupy in particular, dynamic, and at times clashing structures and histories of power; it is not an ontological identity that freezes us forever in proximity to power and privilege. In other contexts—with respect to other histories and other structures—we might also (or instead) be perpetrators or victims or descendants of victims. (8)

Where the phenomenon of the implicated subject also deals with complicity, Rothberg elaborates:

complicity works best as a term linked to unfolding processes and completed actions (such as the perpetration of a crime), but it works less well for describing the relationship of the past to the present. We are implicated in the past, I argue throughout this book, but we cannot be complicit in crimes that took place before our birth. (14)

Several major factors differentiate Rothberg's case study of American slavery and that of Soviet repression within Russia. In the Russian situation, although there were repressive campaigns against specific nationalities, the "enemy" class as a whole was constructed out of "hidden enemies" who were mostly identified by their allegedly anti-Soviet behavior (Fitzpatrick; Ryan). Further, many perpetrators of NKVD violence, especially during the Great Terror, later became victims of the same regime (Conquest 278–79). These factors make it difficult to construct or coalesce around group identities of either victims or perpetrators; coupled with the lack of a transitional justice movement in post-Soviet Russia, this means that the categories of victim and perpetrator continue to have murky boundaries, which is reflected in the ambivalent (or absent) characterizations of different actors found at memorial sites. Unlike the situation in other post-Soviet countries, where the experience of Soviet repression has often been depicted as an occupation in which the local populations were only victims (Mälksoo 663), Russia cannot put the onus of accountability or blame for Soviet repression on a foreign invader.

Here, I will introduce a complementary concept of the "implicated victim" that encompasses the complex situations in which former perpetrators and/or implicated subjects themselves became victims of the *very same* mechanisms of Soviet repression. Considering the turn towards an "era of victimhood" (Lerner 63–64) as a foundational part of group identities, as well as the fact that many Eastern and Central European inhabitants can plausibly claim to have been victims of state-sponsored violence over the past 150 years, it is useful to use a term that acknowledges victimhood status as well as the possibility of different forms of perpetration, complicity, and/or implication at the hands of a single regime.

In *The Implicated Subject*, Rothberg theorizes complex implication—"the experience of occupying positions that align one both to histories of victimization and to histories of perpetration" (91)—through many real-life scenarios, including his exploration of responses to Israeli human rights abuses directed at Palestinians. However, the subject who is both implicated in atrocity and victimized by it *within a specific regime of repression* remains under-the-

orized; perhaps Rothberg would conceptualize such a situation as closer to “complicity” on the part of victims. In a section unpacking Simona Forti’s “Dostoevsky paradigm” of “absolutely diabolical perpetrators and absolutely innocent victims” (Forti, paraphrased in Rothberg 53) and drawing further on Primo Levi’s “gray zone,” inhabited by victims cooperating with a system of death in order to survive (54), Rothberg concludes, “Emerging from a densely woven zone of interaction, the implicated subject is a “support of domination” that cannot simply be identified as a bearer of wickedness or an agent of violence” (55). Yet, I think the situation of the Soviet Union during the Great Terror, which encompassed wildly varying individual degrees of perpetration, complicity, bystanding, and victimhood, deserves a more finely grained analysis if we are to truly understand what happened and the ramifications of this period of violent action, inaction, and reaction in the present and future.

In my previous work (Comer 172), I drew on Judith Butler’s theorization of *grievability* to devise categories of grievability as it is applied to victims of mass repression in memorialization at sites of remembrance (Table 1). While “public” grievability grieves the victim, not just as a person, but as a symbol of a broader identity or ideology, “private” grievability focuses on returning personhood and dignity to people deprived of these before, at, and after death. In some cases, a person can be considered “ungrievable” due to the perceived severity of their misdeeds during life. Surmising that the other side of the theoretical coin would be “blameability,” I also theorized categories of blameability as it is applied to different actors at these same sites of remembrance (Comer 182; Table 2). These range from “abdication,” which leaves questions of justice to another, spiritual realm; to “authoritarian,” which pins blame on a select few high-authority, usually dead, individuals, such as Stalin or heads of the NKVD; to “complicit,” which identifies leaders as well as rank-and-file perpetrators as the actors to blame for past violence, sometimes examining other forms of complicity, too. Looking at the ways in which different memorial sites portray different groups and individuals as variously grievable and blameable can help us identify patterns regarding which types of sites choose which models of portraying victimhood and perpetration. Analyzing these patterns can further facilitate understanding the sociocultural and political phenomena underlying these choices.

Below, I show categories of grievability and blameability as they are evidenced at different types of memorial sites within Russia.<sup>2</sup>

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2. The data on which these charts are based, as well as the data from case study sites reviewed below, were gathered during a series of fieldwork visits, utilizing interdisciplinary heritage studies methods. When ceremonies or activities were taking place, participant-observer ethnographic techniques were used. Otherwise, text panels, exhibits, plaques, and memorials were photographed and recorded so that they could be critically analyzed later in depth. This work was complemented by archival research on Internet databases and secondary readings.

Table 1: A Preliminary Typology of Grievability (Comer 172).

Type	Interpretative Characteristics	Heritage Manifestations	Exemplars
<i>Public</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grieves and/or venerates victims in overtly religious or ideological manner</li> <li>Victims symbolize a larger entity that has been “lost”</li> <li>Sites usually well-appointed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discourse that explicitly identifies victims’ loss with broader loss</li> <li>Plaques, statues, and memorials emphasizing victims’ heroic and martyr-like qualities</li> <li>Tangible heritage sites in good repair</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Church on Blood, Yekaterinburg</li> <li>Ganina Yama, Yekaterinburg</li> <li>Dzerzhinsky plaque, Moscow</li> </ul>
<i>Private</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Victims grieved as individuals</li> <li>Range of mourning discourses and caretaking organizations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasis on photographs and biographical data of victims</li> <li>Cyclical events that focus on returning identity to victims and remembrance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Return of Names ceremony, Moscow</li> <li>Butovo, Moscow</li> <li>Gulag Museum, Moscow</li> </ul>
<i>Ungrievable</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Singles out particular people or groups as “ungrievable”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Manifests in absence or controversy over inclusion in heritage “hardware,” and/or interpretation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yagoda and other NKVD workers on Kommunarka plaques, Moscow</li> </ul>

Table 2: A Preliminary Typology of Blameability (Comer 182).

Type	Interpretive Characteristics	Heritage Manifestations	Exemplars
<i>Abdication</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoids placing blame on people (individual or group)</li> <li>• Religious overtones and management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language of martyrdom on plaques, memorial walls, and other interpretation</li> <li>• Material evidence and/or portrayals of violence, but no mention of perpetrators</li> <li>• Martyr-like displays of victims' photos and objects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Butovo firing range, Moscow</li> <li>• Kommunarka firing range Moscow</li> </ul>
<i>Authoritarian</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Places blame on government leaders and NKVD officers</li> <li>• “Totalitarian” view of the causes of repression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpretation that “proves” culpability through visuals or “original” documents</li> <li>• Emphasis on personal actions and personalities of “culpable” leaders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gulag Museum, Moscow</li> <li>• Perm-36, Perm (1995–2014)</li> </ul>
<i>Complicit</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Places blame on leaders as well as “ordinary” collaborators</li> <li>• Uses open-ended questions or short biographies to illustrate different measures of complicity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Text panels or oral interpretation that focus on individual biographies and reasons behind a decision to perpetrate or collaborate</li> <li>• “Topography of Terror”-type landscape-based mapping and interpretation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital efforts by International Memorial et al.</li> <li>• Current lack of such heritage “hardware” in Russia</li> </ul>

These tables evidence a stark difference in the ways that various types of sites remember the victims and perpetrators of Soviet repression. At sites affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church, a public model of grievability is combined with an abdication model of blameability. Victims are explicitly mourned, but the issue of who the perpetrators were is silenced. At other sites, such as the Gulag Museum, public grievability is combined with an authoritarian model of blameability, but holding Stalin and his Politburo culpable does not address the issue (and thorny ethical ramifications) of rank-and-file perpetration. Although some NGOs attempt to introduce the issue of perpetrators who later became victims into their programming, these groups lack the financial and political resources to widely disseminate these narratives and reflections. Below, I analyze several sites across the Moscow region where different models of grievability, blameability, and implication are communicated by various sets of actors, each with different motivations and aims.

### **Kommunarka Shooting and Burial Ground**

Kommunarka, located in a southern suburb of Moscow, was used as a shooting site and mass grave from 1937–41, during and immediately after the Great Terror. Approximately ten thousand people were shot and buried there by the NKVD during that time. Now, the area is encircled by a fence and kept as a memorial site, managed by the Russian Orthodox Church. If Butovo, another shooting and mass grave site also in Moscow's southern suburbs, is known as the "Russian Golgotha" for the high concentration of Russian Orthodox clergy, believers, and leaders among the victims of repression buried there, Kommunarka is known for the many high-profile (as well as rank-and-file) political figures among its victims. Since the early 1990s, people representing different groups of victims (e.g., Mongolian or Iranian nationals) have paid for their own small memorials, which were then installed on the grounds. Additionally, family members of victims have left smaller, more individualized memorial signs around the site, such as little plastic markers bearing the name or photograph of the deceased or, even, laminated sheets of paper with a biography and photograph, each nailed to a tree. Monks care for a wooden church on-site and carry out frequent religious memorialization rituals.

In late October 2018, the site installed a series of memorial boards that list the names of 6,609 people known to have been executed and buried at Kommunarka between September 2, 1937, and November 24, 1941. These had been compiled and designed by International Memorial, a civil society organization that has worked to help victims of Soviet repression, conduct research, and protect victims' identities and memories since the mid-1980s. The most controversial name on this list is undoubtedly that of Genrikh Grigoryevich Yagoda, the leader of the NKVD from July 1934 to September 1936. Under his leadership, the NKVD carried out numerous atrocities and human rights abuses.

Jan Rachinsky, of International Memorial, explained the logic behind listing all the names of the deceased on the memorial boards thus:

The most debated variant was obviously to separate the victims and the executioners.

Why did we refuse from it?

Not because “everyone is a victim here” – although this is true to some extent [sic]: very few were sentenced according to standard legal procedures and it is unlikely that any one of them might have had an attorney.

Not because in our history it is often a difficult task to tell the difference between a victim and an executioner, although this is also true: an ex-convicted could turn into an executioner, and vice versa. The Holocaust history is different from this point of view – the victims and executioners did not change places there. (Rachinsky)

Rachinsky went on to explain that the lack of any single organized and reliably consistent legal rehabilitation program over the years meant that official decisions to rehabilitate or not did not necessarily correlate with whether a given person had participated in and/or encouraged violence and purging in the past (Rachinsky). Therefore, the staff at International Memorial had no systematic way of knowing whether a given person had “actually” perpetrated violence in one or more waves of repression. In most cases, assigning them to a category of either “victim” or “executioner” was basically impossible with the information at hand.

At Kommunarka, victims are being grieved via a private model of grievability, while the issue of perpetration is mostly abdicated on-site. In the realm of social media and commentary, however, as well as in the offices of International Memorial, the issue of blameability is a subject of debate and consideration; we could also say that, in all these places, the figure of “the implicated subject,” especially the implicated victim, who was both a perpetrator and a victim of the very same repressive system, looms large, even if it is not officially interpreted or presented.

### **“Last Address” Plaques**

Across Moscow, one can find hundreds of little metal plaques with a square blank space cut out of each adorning many building facades. These contain skeleton biographies of a person for whom that building was their “last address” before they were arrested by the secret police and either shot or sent into the gulag system, where they died. The plaques have been organized and placed by Last Address, an NGO that aims to memorialize the victims of Soviet repression as distinct individuals, regardless of their high or low status in life. Their motto, underlining this, is “One name, one life, one sign.” This is a clear example of restoring private grievability to these victims at their former homes: family members or other interested parties can apply for a certain person’s plaque to be installed at their “last address.” Afterwards, the NGO helps the applicant receive permission from the owner(s) of the building, whoever they may be. According to the NGO, they cross-reference these

claims with “the database of the Memorial Society, which contains archival information from regional books of memory about almost 4.5 million citizens of the USSR who were subjected to political repression” (*Last Address*).

*Last Address* officially does not make any judgements about the guilt or innocence of any victim whose name appears in the Memorial Society’s database. There have been fairly high-profile controversies stemming from this practice; one example is the installation of a plaque dedicated to Red Army commander Ieronim Uborevich, who was killed during the Great Terror but had himself bloodily repressed a peasant uprising in the Tambov province in the 1920s.<sup>3</sup> Echoing the position of International Memorial in regards to the Kommunarika memorial plaques, *Last Address* founder Sergei Parkhomenko has been repeatedly quoted as saying that *Last Address* plaques provide a “non-judgmental reminder” of each person’s fate.

The organization’s entire mission is based around memorializing individual victims in a public manner. Thus, it fits neatly into the category of communicating private grievability. On the plaques themselves, there is no communication of blameability attached to individuals; this could be deemed an abdication model. However, since the plaques, unlike a memorial museum, do not claim to serve an educational purpose beyond reminding people that real people lived in a certain place before dying a violent death, this silence is somewhat predictable. Similarly, although the implicated subject, as well as the implicated victim, lurks in debates surrounding specific plaques, these figures are absent from the actual memorial interventions.

### **The GULAG History Museum**

The GULAG History Museum inhabits a large brick building just to the north of Moscow’s city center, in an area with many ties to the Russian military. Originally, it was founded by Anton Vladimirovich Antonov-Ovseenko, a survivor of Stalinist repression whom Gilly Carr would term a “guardian of memory”; over decades, this man and his colleagues collected and archived thousands of life stories, documents, and artifacts. Before 2015, when the museum was located in a small building close to Red Square, volunteers, including some victims of repression themselves, led tours and made themselves available for conversation and discussion. Now, with the support of private as well as government funding, the museum has metamorphosed into a multi-pronged organization, with a high-tech and museologically cutting-edge set of exhibitions, as well as many public outreach and living history projects. According to its website, it is now subordinate to the Moscow Department of Culture. Unfortunately, I have not been able to visit the museum since the revamped permanent exhibition reopened in December 2018; the descriptions

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3. I lived in this same building, which bears the name “Dom Voennykh” on a plaque on the façade, while studying abroad in Moscow in 2010. You can read about Uborevich’s plaque and those of two other residents here: <https://www.poslednyadres.ru/news/news195.htm>.

of the exhibition below refer to the previous permanent exhibition as well as content available on the museum's website.<sup>4</sup>

The previous permanent exhibition began with the Solovetsky Islands, the site of the first labor camp in what expanded to become the full gulag system. There were several points at which the museum focused on individual faces of victims and their fates. One was a video display that continually scrolled through a long list of victims of the Great Terror's shooting campaigns, while an adjacent screen showed photographs and short biographies of these victims. Another area showed personal items of gulag inmates in separate display cases, lit up from below as if they were artifacts or gems. These items, such as a mug or a piece of cross-stitch embroidery, were often hand-crafted out of scrap material by inmates. Another section highlighted Soviet writers who were repressed, making works by these authors available for visitors to peruse.

Of the online exhibits available via the website, several focus on the experience of children in the gulag system. During the Great Terror, it was not uncommon for the wives and children of already-arrested (and most often executed) "enemies of the people" to also be arrested and sent into exile or to gulag labor camps, for women, or orphanages, for children. As opposed to the stories of former NKVD workers or Party functionaries, for example, the stories of these wives and children provide narratives that focus totally on victimhood, as their only "crime" was relational.

The GULAG History Museum made a deliberate point of "proving" the guilt of Stalin and his Politburo members. From displaying the numbers of shooting lists that each leader had personally signed, to dedicating a whole section to Soviet citizens' reaction to Stalin's death, there is great emphasis placed on ensuring that visitors learn (or are reminded) that Stalin not only knew about the repression, but he actively helped to mastermind it. The museum sees this emphasis as fulfilling a pressing societal need; according to staff giving tours, many visitors are still unaware that Stalin did know, preferring to blame his Politburo members. However, there is no space given over to examination of rank-and-file perpetrators and their motives. Thus, we can say that the GULAG History Museum's exhibition displays private grievability and authoritarian blameability. The complicit, let alone implicated, subject or victim is nowhere to be found; the relative emphasis placed on "absolute" innocent victims, such as wives and children of arrestees, may reflect a reluctance to engage at length with life narratives that would lead to considerations of complicity and implicated subjectivity.

### **Lubyanka Plaza and "It's Right Here"**

In central Moscow, the yellow façade of the Lubyanka building rises over a small plaza, with an eponymous Metro station underneath. The building,

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4. See the museum website at: <http://gmig.ru/>.

seized by the Bolsheviks in 1917 and used as the headquarters for the successive Cheka, NKVD, and KGB, is still owned by the FSB. It is not clear what the building's current use is; at some point in the 2000s, a small museum dedicated to the security services was located inside, but this is now closed. If it was anything like the Museum of the History of Russian Political Police in Saint Petersburg, which is managed by the FSB, we can extrapolate that it would have focused on the uniforms, technology, and daring exploits of the security officers, not on their role in carrying out a murderous repression. (In that museum, in fact, the years of the Great Terror are simply skipped, as if nothing worth mentioning happened during that time). There is no memorial, plaque, or acknowledgment of the Great Terror or other aspects of Soviet repression anywhere on the building's façade or grounds. This dark history and the possible blameability or accountability for it, which (along with a certain degree of implication) the FSB could be seen as having inherited, is nowhere to be found on FSB property. However, the Lubyanka's mnemonic status as the center of repression in Russia remains (Makhov). Numerous protests over myriad contemporary human rights issues take place in front of the building each year.

Further, a tangible challenge to this erasure of history is visible right in front of the Lubyanka. In the small plaza facing the façade, one can see a large boulder. This was brought from the site of the first Soviet gulag labor camps, the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea, and placed in the little park by International Memorial in 1990. Year-round, it stands as a direct challenge to the illusion of unblemished power projected by the yellow façade. On certain days of the year, it is filled with people participating in in-person memorialization events that make the legacy of Soviet repression seem personal and present.

The largest of these is the Return of Names, which took place on October 29 every year.<sup>5</sup> For twelve hours, a line of Muscovites waited to step up to a microphone and read a skeleton biography of a victim of the Great Terror in the Moscow area. Many people added the names and biographical information of their own repressed relatives, as well. The names taken from the database include NKVD workers, and these are also represented among participants' own relations. Since the event was set up not to include any commentary in addition to the names, beyond a short phrase of memory or mourning, there was no time for nuanced discussions of individual acts of perpetration, collaboration, or bystanding. The focus was very much on restoring personhood and, thereby,

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5. International Memorial was legally "liquidated" on April 4, 2022 (discussed further below). Holding the Return of Names as before became impossible. Instead, in October 2022 and 2023, supporters around the world were invited to send videos of themselves reading out loud the names of victims of Soviet repression; on October 29, these videos were streamed live on rebranded social media channels. The "It's Right Here" website is still active as of October 31, 2023 (see footnote 6).

assigning a measure of private grievability to the thousands of people whose names are recited. Many people ended their recitations with a version of “eternal memory to the victims”; some add “eternal damnation to the executioners.” Thus, the existence of perpetrators is popularly acknowledged, though they remain nebulous and unidentified. However, in light of the event’s brief temporal nature and emphasis on memorializing victims, “to remember [the victims of repression] publicly” (“Ob aktsii”), it is understandable that there is no effort to explore perpetration or implicated subjectivity in more detail.

On the other hand, one of International Memorial’s other projects, “It’s Right Here,”<sup>6</sup> deals with victimhood and perpetration in a more detailed and nuanced manner. “It’s Right Here” consists of a digital mapping project, complemented by occasional live walking tours and a downloadable version of these tours. On the online version, one can click on a place and see its connections to the organs and institutions of Soviet repression; each place’s profile includes photographs and written historical information. Different themed itineraries are available, including examples dedicated to gulag writer Varlam Shalamov and places associated with protests in 1968. Some of the stops on various walking tours discuss specific, individual perpetrators or victims; for example, at the site of a garage where Cheka operatives shot people between 1918 and 1948, under the sound cover of trucks left with their engines running all night.<sup>7</sup> On the walking tours and on the associated website, the interpretation names some individual perpetrators specifically. One man whose testimony about killing activity at this site is featured is also specially mentioned on the website as being both a victim and a perpetrator; Lev Wlodzimirski, who held a series of leadership roles in the Soviet state security apparatus, was himself arrested and shot in 1953 (“Tiur'ma i rasstrel'noe pomeschenie”). However, although these biographical facts about him are mentioned, which could lead one to conclude that the figure of the implicated victim, as well as the implicated subject, could be detected at this site, there is no investigation or analysis of his choices and motivations.

### **The Implicated Subject in the Heritagization of Soviet Repression**

The memorial efforts of the groups and institutions listed above mourn the victims of Soviet repression, but they take different tactics when addressing the subject of perpetration, including omitting that topic entirely. Since there is no unified public, state-supported memory discourse about perpetration of Soviet repression, there is no cohesive group identification of victims or perpetrators (let alone an identity that encompasses both positions), making it difficult for survivors, descendants, and activists to organize and push for change on a unified scale. On a synchronic level, the hegemonic idea of Rus-

6. See the project website at: <https://topos.memo.ru/> (“Èto priamo zdes”).

7. You can read about it here: <https://topos.memo.ru/article/356+3> (“Tiur'ma i rasstrel'noe pomeschenie”).

sia's past (and present) victimhood at the hands of hostile foreign powers and internal "hidden enemies" allows the state and individuals to absolve themselves of present-day crimes and abuses, as these are carried out in the defense of the "holy" nation (Suslov). This does not just apply to the war in Ukraine, but also to recent military actions in Chechnya and Syria, among others, as well as the domestic erasure of civil rights. On a diachronic level, a vision of the past that omits the violence of the Great Terror and Soviet (especially Stalinist) repression lends itself well to the instrumentalization of the past, especially the cult of the Great Patriotic War, in order to justify the war in Ukraine. Since the war began in 2014, and especially since the new phase of aggression was launched in 2022, we see the intersection of past victimhood and past heroism unite to construct a vision of a nation that always defends itself and its people and only perpetrates justified crimes against state-defined enemies.

Because much of Soviet repression within Russia consisted of committing crimes against "its own" people, the Russian people have today inherited legacies of both victimhood and perpetration—a situation that Rothberg anticipates in the very definition of an implicated subject, although not, perhaps, that a single group of people could inherit legacies of victimhood and perpetration from the same historical atrocity. We could perhaps term these people "implicated victims"—but it is important to keep in mind that not all people who could be thus characterized were implicated and/or victimized to the same degree.

Under President Putin, Russia has gone to great lengths to position itself as an inheritor of Soviet power, especially in the spheres of international relations and military power (Staar and Tacosa). In the memory field, this is most evident in the ways in which the Putin government has attempted to bolster narratives of victory and heroism in the Great Patriotic War while simultaneously downplaying the crimes of Soviet repression under Stalin (Khlevnyuk; Malinova). Yet this has not been matched with an effort to examine the darker legacies of power that Russia may be seen to have inherited, too; although government-funded and -supported memory initiatives acknowledge that many victims exist and mourn these losses, they do not engage with the question of perpetration in an in-depth fashion; sometimes, they eschew the question of perpetration at all. This is starkly illustrated through the remarks President Putin gave at the 2018 inauguration of the Wall of Sorrow, Russia's first national monument to victims of Soviet repression. In these, he affirmed that the type of violence and loss experienced in Russia through repression should never happen again, but he omitted any mention of Stalin or any perpetrator (group or individual) whatsoever, stating instead, "Indeed, we and our descendants must remember the tragedy of repression and what caused it. However, this does not mean settling scores. We cannot push society to a dangerous line of confrontation yet again" (President of Russia, "Opening

of the Wall of Sorrow”).<sup>8</sup> Therefore, we see, as I have previously argued (Comer 203), that most Russian memorials or museums to mass victims of Soviet repression that have official ties to either Russian state/metropolitan funding or the Russian Orthodox Church combine private grievability with either abdication or authoritarian models of blameability.

This issue is made urgent by the contemporary Russian situation, especially the intensified war of aggression in Ukraine. The evidence of human rights abuses, crimes against humanity, and genocide committed by Russian forces in Ukraine is echoed within Russia itself, where many contemporary dissidents as well as regular citizens argue that they are being subjected to repressive measures by the current government. Since, as discussed above, the FSB and Russian government actively align themselves with the “glorious” heritage of their Soviet counterparts while distancing themselves from any accountability for those institutional predecessors’ crimes, it can be argued that there is a measure of conceptual continuity between the atrocities of the past and the atrocities of today.

Through this article’s case studies, we see many ways in which subjects—perpetrator, victim, and bystander alike—are variously characterized, portrayed, and memorialized at sites related to Soviet repression. One aspect that immediately stands out is the lack of a consistent, cohesive identity narrative applied to any of these categories. Different actors in the memorial sphere do not universally agree on who “counts” as a victim or perpetrator. Some groups, such as the previously-discussed children or wives of arrested individuals, themselves arrested solely on the basis of family ties, are universally seen as victims; no one objects to their inclusion on lists of victims, and their narratives are picked out of potentially millions of possible exemplars to illustrate victimhood under Soviet repression. Focusing on such “absolute” innocents, as is done in the GULAG History Museum’s exhibitions, absolves the curators of having to grapple with thorny questions of different measures of individual culpability and victimhood. However, for other actors, the line is not so clear. Members of the public contest Last Address over what level of perpetration makes a victim of repression ineligible for memorialization, while International Memorial’s decision to list all NKVD shooting victims on its memorial boards was met with fierce public opposition. The implicated subject within these sites of memory is everywhere but is rarely explicitly named or explicated. In Etkind’s vocabulary, this subject could be said to “haunt” other sites and places of memory (*Warped Mourning* 246). When individual people are recognized as “implicated,” the language and underlying assumptions surrounding them also vary widely.

I have discussed the example of Yagoda, a well-known perpetrator whose

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8. It is worth noting that the Wall of Sorrow’s fundraising and the competition for its design were run through the Memorial Fund, an NGO with strong ties to the Gulag Museum.

inclusion on the memorial lists of victims at Kommunarka garnered such controversy, above. If we turn instead to the subject of Nikolai Bukharin, we see a more nuanced view of an implicated subject. Bukharin, one of the “Old Bolsheviks” who played a leading role in the years leading up to the 1917 Revolutions and the early years of the Soviet Union, was not a War Commissar or leader of the Cheka/NKVD. Yet his influential writings, it can be argued, incited myriad people to engage in acts of ideologically and politically motivated violence. He does not seem to be a “perpetrator”; that categorization seems too crude. But he is certainly implicated in bringing about the very regime of state violence that led to his own demise: he was arrested in February 1937 and, after a show trial, executed less than a month later at Kommunarka. In this, I would argue, he also fulfills the role of an implicated victim.

Therefore, the “implicated victim” seems to be a useful subcategory of the “implicated subject” in Russian memory culture, one through which we can think through and analyze situations in which perpetrators and implicated subjects of repressive, institutionalized violence later become victims of those very same organs of repression. This is not an attempt to say that some victims deserved hardship or punishment; rather, it is an attempt to grasp the nuances of experience and societal ramifications that come in the wake of an atrocity in which many thousands of perpetrators became victims of *their own* repressive machine. Viewing actors through this lens has several salient implications for memory studies and memorial sites, in particular memorial museums:

1. It further erodes the victim/perpetrator binary, illustrating the complex relations that undergird any system of repression or atrocity;
2. It makes clear that participating in or collaborating with a repressive regime will not save anyone, even if such actions provide a temporary sense of security or other benefits.

What else is valuable about the implicated victim as a figure in places of dark memory? As we have seen, the implicated subject and implicated victim could be seen as specters that are “haunting” sites of memory across Moscow. But in-depth considerations of their lives and motivations are absent on-site, although the figures of the implicated subject and the implicated victim are valuable ones to think through and with as memorial sites and society at large grapple with the aftermath of mass repression. These potential benefits are not limited to Russia; these issues have clear possibilities of application to various post-repression societies around the world in which individual people perpetrated crimes against “their own” people and then became victims themselves.

But, in Russia, chances for NGOs and individuals to bring these histories to light, in ways that the state and its organs refuse to do, have been severely curtailed. Even before the liquidation of International Memorial in April 2022, the NGO had been attacked, especially under the “foreign agent” law of 2012, by the state for, among other reasons, researching both Soviet and contemporary

Russian human rights abuses and connecting the former's institutional legacies to present-day repressive activities. These windows of opportunity that existed, albeit in an embattled fashion, have closed, although International Memorial's research, documentation, and commemorative activities continue in "unofficial" forms. Concurrently, we see the reanimation of discourse and ideology from the Stalinist era and a militarized, heroic "national history" that has no space for a reckoning with a dark past of intertwined perpetration, victimhood, and implication, let alone how these unaddressed legacies might morph into support for contemporary violent aggression.

The current war in Ukraine is partially justified by Russia on the basis of state-supported memory discourses. The deliberate identification of the war of aggression as a "denazification" process harkens back to the post-World War II "denazification" campaigns that the Soviets led in many territories that had been occupied by the Nazis. Although many anti-Soviet nationalist groups had collaborated with the Nazis and even carried out atrocities, in that post-war period, "Whether or not a person had committed war crimes often mattered less in the Soviet judicial system than membership in or support of an anti-Soviet movement" (Rossoliński-Liebe and Willems 3). In other words, simply being anti-Soviet (or anti-Russian) could be seen as a "fascist" or "Nazi" act. According to linguist Egbert Fortuin, in contemporary Russia, "any perceived enemy of Russia, including NATO, is portrayed as a fascist or Nazi force that aims to destroy Russia and Russian culture. The frame builds on World War II, associating the Nazis with the West and drawing upon deep emotions in Russian society related to World War II" (Fortuin 339). At the same time, over the past decade, Putin and his inner circle have been steadily invoking the presence of "fifth columns" and other "hidden" foes within Russia, especially those who are allegedly dedicated to bringing down the country with Western support (Kragh et al. 342–45). In the reuse of these words, used to tremendous and horrible effect during the Soviet Great Terror, the Russian government signals a deliberate unwillingness to reckon with that violent past; in fact, it prefers to turn mid-century conceptions of enemies and traitors to new, contemporarily violent ends.

The lack of official, state-supported narratives that acknowledge the Soviet perpetration of crimes against the state's own people has meant that much of the country has not had to confront that history of inextricably linked perpetration, victimhood, and implication—and this is all exacerbated by the persecution of memorial NGOs and individual memory activists alike, in tandem with severe state repression and censorship of the media. Thus, there is no strong model, now, of conceiving the Russian people as both victims of an authoritarian regime and subjects implicated in the regime's violence, at home and abroad (not to mention the existence of perpetrators of this violence). In this way, we see clearly how disjointed, denialist, or revisionist

hegemonic memorializations of the violent past act to block recognition of and resistance against contemporary regimes of violence.

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#### ABSTRACT

This article will consider the possible resonances of Michael Rothberg’s “implicated subject” at memorials, memorial museums, and museums related to historic violence and oppression. It will conceptualize this figure’s respective absences and presences at sites dealing with victims of Soviet political repression in contemporary Moscow, Russia. The nature of Soviet repression, especially in the Great Terror era, meant that former perpetrators at all levels of power often later became victims of the same systems of repression. Debate over who “counts” as a victim—e.g., whether previous work for the secret police disqualifies one from being considered a victim of a later wave of repression—is ongoing. Using case studies such as the controversy over the list of names of victims at the Kommunarka shooting ground, a site of NKVD mass killings, and the itineraries of digital tours of sites related to repression in Moscow, this article will examine whether and how different historic actors are considered

through the lens of implication at and across sites. It will identify places where a discourse of implication could be presented but is instead absent and will further consider the societal and political implications of not officially reckoning with a past of perpetration, especially as these denials can be used to justify contemporary violence. The article will also introduce a complementary subcategory, the “implicated victim,” in order to better conceptualize the shifting boundaries between perpetration, victimhood, and bystanding, as these apply to the case of Soviet repression and its contemporary memorialization.