



## VICTIMS OF POLITICAL REPRESSION STATUE

Tayshet, Irkutsk Oblast, Russia

55.9321, 98.0106



### Executive Summary

In the summer of 2020, a monument to the victims of Stalinist political repression was unveiled in the city of Tayshet in Irkutsk Oblast, Russia. On July 4 2020, the monument was vandalised and defaced, making the inscription illegible. During Soviet rule, the Gulag camp Taishetlag was located near the city, making Tayshet a stop which all prisoners made on their journey to the Gulag. In the twenty-first century, President Vladimir Putin's reconstruction of Stalin's figure and Soviet patriotism provoked the emergence of many new monuments to Stalin and the vandalism of those commemorating victims. Monuments remembering the victims of the Stalinist era provide a physical and spatial rebuttal to heroic memories of Stalinism. This case analyses the ongoing clash between the unofficial rehabilitation of Stalin and the commemoration of victims of the Soviet system of repression, taking the monument in Tayshet as an example.

## Introduction

The Tayshet monument to Victims of Political Repression is placed within a continuing dispute concerning the legacy of Stalinism, the Soviet system and political repression. In the aftermath of 1989, many Russian citizens attempted to reconcile memories of a Stalinist past, hoping to encourage the memory of Stalin's victims. In particular, President Vladimir Putin's encouragement of 'visions of a 'heroic' Soviet past,' exemplified by the growing number of monuments dedicated to Stalin, has produced a conflict of memory surrounding the era of Stalinism.<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting here that Stalinism is not to be defined as the person of Stalin as an individual, but as a larger phenomenon of the system.<sup>2</sup>

The competing memories of Soviet days and Stalinism are encapsulated in the contestation of monuments to victims of political repression. The defacing and vandalism of the monument in Tayshet, a city connected to the Gulag system, in July 2020 reflects these contesting memories. The monument remains, though partially destroyed, a reminder of the victims of Stalinist political repression, and also the contested, incomplete and conflicting memory of Soviet history.

## Background

### *The Soviet Union and Political Repression*

Stalin's campaigns were targeted against 'kulaks,' political opponents, Ukrainian peasants and the 'socially harmful,' and aimed at retribution for their supposed lack of understanding of, and opposition to, his policies, most specifically collectivisation.<sup>3</sup> Citizens under the repression of the Soviet system were silenced in their expression of political opinions, ethnic and religious beliefs, and social engagements as a result of the censorship and punishments of the Stalinist system.

'Kulaks,' purportedly rich peasants, were accused of sabotaging the efforts of Stalin's collectivisation policies.<sup>4</sup> 'Kulaks' were considered class enemies and a hindrance to Stalin's soviet system, and the label came to be applied pejoratively to any peasants who owned land. Under Stalin's leadership, from 1924 to 1953, some 30,000 'kulaks' were shot, 10 million forced from their homes and perhaps 2 million exiled.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Soviet Union suffered from severe shortages of grain, which was blamed on Ukrainian peasants, who in turn faced draconian Stalinist measures, which sparked a mass famine, known as the Holodomor.<sup>6</sup> Stalinism also targeted the Chechens-Ingush and Crimean Tatars, both distinct ethnic groups, by deporting and

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<sup>1</sup> Irina Sherbakova, "Vladimir Putin's Russia is rehabilitating Stalin", *The Guardian*, July 10, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Anton Weiss-Wendt and Nanci Adler, eds, *The Future of the Soviet Past: The Politics of History in Putin's Russia.*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Naimark, *Genocide: A World History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 86-87.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89.

expelling these groups, and placing them into the Gulag system of prisons and forced labour camps.<sup>7</sup>

Memories of the Gulag system, Stalinist political repression and Soviet surveillance were much more publicly discussed, expressed, and criticised following the Fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. However, the recent glorification of Stalin and communist nostalgia has begun reversing the commemoration of Stalin's victims. Greater stress is being placed in contemporary Russia on Stalin as the premier who led the Soviet Union to victory in the Second World War and accelerated the process of the USSR becoming a superpower, rather than the persecutor of 'kulaks,' Ukrainian peasants and ethnic, social and political opponents.

### *The Gulag System and Tayshet*

The Gulag system of labour camps in the Soviet Union held millions of political prisoners and criminals during Stalin's regime, from the 1920s to the mid-1950s. Over time, the word 'Gulag,' has in fact come to signify not only the administration of camps, but also the system of Soviet slave labour.<sup>8</sup> The term is now used to denote the Soviet regressive system itself.<sup>9</sup> Between 1929 and 1953, it is estimated that approximately eighteen million people passed through the system, while more people were exiled to the Kazakh deserts and the Siberian forests and became forced labourers.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, an estimated 750,000 people were executed during the height of the Great Terror, in 1937 and 1938, but the victims number in the millions when the Gulag system, forced collectivisation and famine are taken into account.<sup>11</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 enabled the creation of social, political and cultural conditions in which discourses of memory could begin. However, the contestation of Tayshet's monument demonstrates that the conditions in which the monument was erected in 2020 reflect the continued variation of memories and different attitudes towards Russia's Soviet past.



**Figure 1:** Map of Gulag camps. A cluster surrounded Tayshet, in southeastern Siberia. Image by Isaac Don Levine via Flickr CC BY 2.0

Tayshet was part of the Gulag network of labour camps and infrastructure. The Bratsk camp, which contained up to 11,800 people, was located near Tayshet, with its administration working in the city.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, a section of the Western Railway from Tayshet to Bratsk was constructed

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 91-92.

<sup>8</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> Neil, MacFarquhar, "Critics Scoff as Kremlin Erects Monument to the Repressed", *New York Times*, October 30, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Dmitri Shkapov, "Bratsker ITL and Tayshet Construction", Memorial Germany.

by up to 16,700 prisoners from the camp.<sup>13</sup> The locality of Tayshet has a history strongly connected to the Gulag system, including transportation, camps and construction, evident in Figure 1.

### *Victims of Political Repression Monument, Tayshet*

The Victims of Political Repression Monument in Tayshet, inaugurated in June 2020, is located in the centre of a small public green space, with walkways leading to it from four directions.<sup>14</sup> The monument, a large dark grey rock, sits on a small black platform and has a black plaque commemorating the victims of Stalinism and political repression.<sup>15</sup> The monument is simplistic in its design, avoiding distinct symbolism, iconography or emblems. Nevertheless, the monument and its meaning have an intimate connection with its locality. The local significance of the monument is its proximity to several sites of the Gulag system, including the railway constructions of prisoners and various camps across Irkutsk Oblast. Thus, the Victims of Political Repression Monument in Tayshet connects a local memory and history of political repression and the Gulag to a wider, national narrative of Stalinism.

The monument, with its intent to commemorate the victims of Stalinist repression, has nonetheless become contentious. Among the victims were high-ranking officials and security officers who suffered from political downfall later in life.<sup>16</sup> The monument to victims of political repression, therefore paradoxically, also honours those who facilitated and perpetrated the oppression. In essence, the monument commemorating the victims of Stalin's terror is also a monument dedicated to political oppression. Furthermore, the contestation of this monument, and the subsequent damage to it, illustrates the contested memories and histories of Stalinism, particularly following Putin's reforming and utilising of Stalin's figure and Soviet patriotism.

## History of the Contestation

A week after being erected, it was reported on July 5 2020, that the monument had been defaced with paint, which happened late in the previous day, making the inscription illegible.<sup>17</sup> It is not yet known who vandalised the monument. The monument itself is understated in its symbolism and iconography; thus, the damaging of the inscription makes the monument's meaning much more ambiguous. The immediacy of the contestation also demonstrates the absence of a status quo, as the monument was almost immediately contested, damaged and disrupted. Since the damage to the statue, there have been no further updates regarding the statue, its vandalism or repair. A decision-making process, therefore, remains absent, and the monument is likely to continue to impact the local and national debates surrounding an uncomfortable Soviet history.

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<sup>13</sup> Dmitri Shkapov, "Western Railroad IRL", Memorial Germany.

<sup>14</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Monument to Stalin's Victims Vandalised in Siberia", *RFE/RL*, July 5 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Coalson, 'Russian Monument To Stalin's Victims Highlights Fate Of Executioner', *Radio Free Europe*, May 26, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

## Impact

The vandalising of the Victims of Political Repression Monument had both local and national significance. Locally, the monument recognised and commemorated the history of Tayshet, and Irkutsk Oblast, particularly the role of the region in the Gulag system, but also the people lost from these communities due to the wider system of repression. Furthermore, the contestation of the monument and its subsequent damage reflect a wider national narrative and contestation regarding Soviet history and the impact of this period.

In particular, the monument reflects a contemporary Russian debate between the need for either re-Stalinisation or de-Stalinisation.<sup>18</sup> Many of those who support the former participate in the 'sacralised memory of the Great Patriotic War,' support the erection of statues of Stalin and justify the actions of Stalinism.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, those who support de-Stalinisation have called for a greater criticism of Soviet history, for instance, through the issue of new school textbooks in summer 2015, the opening of the Gulag Museum and the building of monuments to memorialise the victims of Soviet repression.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the Gulag history museum itself avoided mentioning that the system of repression beyond the Gulag was the *modus operandi* of Soviet rule.<sup>21</sup>

The Tayshet Monument is firmly situated in this tension between memorialising Stalin's victims whilst reconciling this more critical perspective of Soviet history with the supposed successes of his regime, including the Great Patriotic War and industrialisation. This contested Soviet history must be considered in order for a decision to be made regarding not only the specific case of the Tayshet monument but also the continued establishment, destruction and criticism of statues which reflect both interpretations of Soviet history and Stalinism.

## Decision-Making Processes

The lack of decision-making reflects the difficulty in constructing a national narrative of the Soviet past, and the strain between de-Stalinisation and re-Stalinisation. Despite there being a lack of action surrounding the Tayshet monument, there have been wider national developments in the memorialisation of victims and the criticism of the Soviet past. This is exemplified by the decision in 2009 to criticise Stalin through mandating that sections of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* be a required reading in Russian high schools.<sup>22</sup> Several acts and programmes also intended to memorialise Stalin's victims, such as the Concept of State Policy to Perpetuate the Memory of the Victims of Political Repression, signed on August 15 2015, by Prime Minister Medvedev and developed at the order of Putin and his administration.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Sherlock, 'Russian Politics and the Soviet Past: Reassessing Stalin and Stalinism under Vladimir Putin,' *Communist and post-communist studies*, vol. 49, (1) (2016), 46.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 46, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Anton Weiss-Wendt and Nanci Adler, eds, *The Future of the Soviet Past: The Politics of History in Putin's Russia.*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Sherlock, 'Russian Politics and the Soviet Past: Reassessing Stalin and Stalinism under Vladimir Putin,' *Communist and post-communist studies*, vol. 49, (1) (2016), 50.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 54.

This was a balanced and calculated position, aiming to construct a narrative incorporating diverse interpretations, and not wholly rejecting Stalinism or the rehabilitation of Stalin.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, criticisms were often made in the interest of maintaining legitimacy. Russia's position was that of the legal successor to the Soviet state, and censuring the Soviet period could lead to the undermining of historical myths, most significantly those surrounding the Great Patriotic War.<sup>25</sup> Those celebrate not the everyday victims of Stalinist terror, but high-ranking ones, especially those serving in the security apparatus (i.e. mourning the victims of political terror by highlighting the fate and supposed great feats of executioners themselves executed:

### *Future Decision-Making*

Future decision-making regarding the Tayshet Monument, and many similar monuments commemorating Stalin's victims, will face a difficulty in balancing the narratives and representations of Soviet history. Future decision makers must consider the contexts of both Tayshet's local history and the wider framing of the Soviet past in Russia's contemporary spaces.

The case of Tayshet's monument to victims of political repression is related in many ways to similar monuments in Russia. For instance, the "Wall of Sorrow" was revealed on 30 October 2017 in Moscow after being ordered for construction by Putin 3 years before.<sup>26</sup> While the monument marks progress in the memorialisation of the victims of political repression, it has been argued that the monument has been used as a political instrument by the Russian government to 'pretend that political repression is a thing long since past.'<sup>27</sup> Thus, it is not only the presence of these monuments but also their use by the state which makes them contested by both sides of the re- and de-Stalinisation divide. Interestingly, a July 2015 survey carried out by Thomas Sherlock found that 47 per cent of participants supported the construction of a state-approved monument to the victims of Soviet repression, whilst 18 per cent were opposed and 35 per cent had no opinion.<sup>28</sup>

The continued presence and erection of such monuments to victims reinforce the presence of Tayshet's monument. However, de-Stalinisation has become a larger problem in Russia in the last decade, with the appropriation of Stalin's era and symbols by mass culture, the increasing justification of Stalin's actions, and the unofficial rehabilitation of Stalin.<sup>29</sup> Thus, monuments to victims of Stalinism are now pushing against a tide of Stalinist patriotic sentiment, whilst there is a simultaneous effort, whether for political gain or historical distancing, to criticise the Stalin era further. These two contradicting efforts of glorifying and criticising the Soviet past are occurring in parallel, and colliding over monuments such as that of Tayshet.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 46, 53

<sup>26</sup> Neil, MacFarquhar, "Critics Scoff as Kremlin Erects Monument to the Repressed", *New York Times*, October 30, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Sherlock, 'Russian Politics and the Soviet Past: Reassessing Stalin and Stalinism under Vladimir Putin,' *Communist and post-communist studies*, vol. 49, (1) (2016) 57.

<sup>29</sup> Anton Weiss-Wendt and Nanci Adler, eds, *The Future of the Soviet Past: The Politics of History in Putin's Russia.*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 4.

Any future decision-making will need to incorporate actors with contesting and complex views and attempt to encourage a national, or at least regional and local, narrative around the Soviet and Stalinist past of Russia.

## Summary and Conclusions

The impact of the contestation of the Victims of Political Repression Monument in Tayshet was local, regional and national. The monument contributes to debates over the role of the region in the Gulag system and the history of its infrastructure within the forced labour of the Gulag. Furthermore, the monument is inextricably linked to a national debate over Soviet history, and the way in which this history should be represented in public spaces and the degree to which the state, communities and academics should explore this uncomfortable past. Contestation appears to be ongoing and may have escalated in the environment of Russia's War on Ukraine. The War on Ukraine may threaten the legitimacy of the Russian regime, and in turn provide a withdrawal of criticism of the Soviet past, in order to construct historical narratives which ensure power and legitimacy.<sup>30</sup> Any decision must acknowledge the impacts of recent Russian conflicts and patriotism on perceptions and representations of the Soviet past.

This case has, in many ways, illuminated the difficulties of balancing two competing Soviet histories, and the ways in which the Russian authorities and government have participated in balancing or utilising these histories. It is assumed by many that the Russian government controls the memory and representation of the Soviet period, denying any wrongdoings of Soviet authorities in order to prevent the weakening of its own strength and legitimacy. However, this case study has shown that the very establishment of the Tayshet Monument reflects a wider acknowledgement in Russia and within the Russian government that there needs to be a greater criticism of the Stalinist system. Nevertheless, understanding the construction of such monuments and the encouragement of narratives criticising Stalinism should be viewed with caution, as they are often utilised for political gain and are not complete in their rejection of Stalin and Stalinism.

While this study enables an analysis and understanding of conflicting memories and representations of Soviet history, there is a lack of more recent updates on the Tayshet monument. An understanding of changing circumstances in Tayshet and the status of the monument since 2020 would encourage a greater understanding of the position of Tayshet in this wider national narrative of conflicting Soviet representations.

In this way, the Victims of Political Repression Monument in Tayshet illustrates the complex relationship which Russia has, within local communities, regions and national discourses, with its complex, multi-stranded and uncomfortable history. The balancing and co-operation of two conflicting interpretations of Stalinism and the Soviet past must take place in order for Russia's public spaces to be reconciled with the memories of the nation. The future of memorialisation and Soviet history remains, in many ways, fragile and incomplete.<sup>31</sup> This is reflected in not only the vandalism of the Tayshet Monument to Victims of Political Repression, but also in a lack of

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Sherlock, 'Russian Politics and the Soviet Past: Reassessing Stalin and Stalinism under Vladimir Putin,' *Communist and post-communist studies*, vol. 49, (1) (2016), 57.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



decision-making regarding the monument, which is also part of a wider national absence of a cohesive and clear policy towards memorialisation, history and Russia's Soviet past.

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## About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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