

ARTYKULY

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WHAT IS THE LITERATURE OF SOCIALIST TRAUMA?¹

ABSTRACT

The present article aims to propose a new concept, that of the “literature of Socialist trauma”. Most of the countries of the Eastern Bloc developed repressive patterns inspired by the ideological and procedural matrix of the USSR. While they eventually evolved in their own individual way, the impact of these repressive systems on literature produced similar dynamics throughout the Bloc. In all these countries, a vast number of literary works – poems, oral poems, auto/biographical works, fiction – related to socialist-inspired state repression were written. The time has come to analyse them in a comparative perspective in order to understand if there is the potential to change our understanding of 20th and 21st century European literature by analysing what could be a hidden genre.

KEYWORDS: Soviet repression, trauma literature, Gulag literature, Socialist trauma, Socialist repression

INTRODUCTION

The publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in November 1962 represented a watershed for world literature. On the one hand, it launched on the stage of world literature one of the most influential authors of 20th century literature; on the other, it established the theme of the Gulag into the realm of world literature. Up until that moment, the existence of literary

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works triggered by the traumatic experience of the Gulag was known only by the former prisoners of the Soviet camps themselves and by the few hundreds of people who had those works in their hands thanks to samizdat.² In 1962, while the survivors of the Holocaust were fully recognised in their status of victims, and while the works of giants of Holocaust literature like Primo Levi and Paul Celan were already known by the general public and studied by researchers, the millions of victims of Soviet repression were faceless and voiceless, regardless of the efforts by Russian émigrés or survivors of the Soviet camps of other nationalities (like Gustaw Herling-Grudziński) to show the world the harsh reality of the Gulag. Khrushchev's secret speech at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on the "cult of personality" was a first admission by the Soviet state of the horrors caused by Soviet repression, however it was not until the publication of Solzhenitsyn's work that the world had a clearer idea of the real face of the Gulag. Meanwhile, in the other countries of the Eastern Bloc, as well as in Yugoslavia and Albania, the socialist regimes would not release any detail about the waves of state repression and their effects on the thousands of people hit by them, while the vast majority of literary works triggered by state repression remained silenced or circulated in samizdat in the countries where such system of clandestine printing and distribution was active. In the following decades, when the archives were still locked and would not release any official document which could help researchers to understand the scale and nature of state repression in the socialist field, literature bore the task of telling the truth. Solzhenitsyn soon became the world-leading figure of Gulag literature, while many other authors' works, both Russian and from other socialist countries, circulated underground thanks to samizdat or were published on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

The collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989 and of the USSR in 1991, other than changing for good the landscape of geopolitics, reverted the communicative dynamics about socialist-inspired state repression. While the works of dozens of repressed writers were brought to the surface together with hundreds of memoirs and recounts of the horrors caused by state repression, the newly formed states often encouraged the re-evaluation of their recent past by denouncing the crimes of the regimes that had just been crushed. In many countries this resulted in the opening of state archives and in the restoration of historical and archival research's roles for the assessment of the repressive past of the countries involved.

² Previous publications on the topic of the Soviet concentration camps, such as Sozerko Mal'sagov's *An Island Hell* (1926), bore mainly a witnessing function. They were written before WWII mainly by prisoners who escaped the Soviet camps and managed to flee abroad, where they published their memoirs. While these texts have some aesthetic features, their main objective was to testify about the existence of concentration camps in the Soviet Union and to denounce the inhumane treatment of the prisoners.

STATE REPRESSION AND LITERATURE IN THE EASTERN BLOC: A FRAGMENTED RESEARCH PANORAMA

The research landscape on the literature generated by state repression in the socialist countries of Europe has been heavily influenced by this state of things. The first, pioneering works on the topic focussed mainly on Solzhenitsyn (e.g. Lukács 1970; Moody 1973; Nivat 1974), whose literary outputs were seen also in connection with his activity as campaigner, while other publications which were devoted to other repressed writers focussed on the witnessing function of their texts or on their role in society (see, for instance, Markievicz 1965; Medvedev 1973; Mal'tsev 1976; Kadić 1978; Venclova 1979). At the same time, the ongoing repression of dissidents in the Soviet Union and in other countries of the Eastern Bloc was monopolising the attention of readers and researchers more than the literary outputs of some of their protagonists (e.g. Václav Havel, Vladimir Bukovskii and Paul Goma).

With the collapse of the socialist regimes the situation changed. In the countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, some of these writers were re-discovered and their works at times used in the process of constructing a national identity based also on the shared memorialisation of the general suffering inflicted upon the population by the regimes (see, for instance, the debate on the “Executed renaissance” in Ukraine, Lavrinenko 2004, or the publications by Ruxandra Cesereanu on state violence on writers in Romania, e.g. Cesereanu 1998). In Russia the situation was different: after circulating in samizdat and tamizdat for many years, the literary works generated by state repression remained in a limbo for almost a decade. Published by the dozens in the late 1980s and early 1990s, their impact on the general public and researchers alike was rather small – one decisive factor was the fact that these works emerged together with those of dozens of other censored writers, amongst which featured some of the greatest names of 20th century Russian literature, whose work had been hidden to the general public by the Soviet censors. Apart from notable exceptions, such as Varlam Shalamov, the names and works of most of these authors remained marginal and understudied or completely ignored.

Towards the turn of the century, a few researchers began to study Russian literature related to state repression not only as a corpus of texts written by witnesses, but rather as a body of literary works written by writers, poets, thinkers which also have an aesthetic function (Taganov 1998; Toker 2000; Jurgenson 2003). A similar tendency can be recorded in other national contexts, where the works generated by state repression under socialist rule have been largely studied (e.g. Skultans 1998; Cesereanu 2005; Siguan 2017; but also Sariusz-Skapska 1995; Venclova 1996; Herling, Marinelli 2015; De Carlo, Herling 2022).

Over the last two decades, many works have been devoted to the study of this specific type of literature. Yet, regardless of the many outstanding contributions to the study and understanding of the phenomenon, it is the opinion of the author of the present article that more can be done by unifying all research under a common

perspective. In fact, the research done has so far focused on national literatures, with the only exception of a few articles (e.g. Gall 2016) and the collected volume on camp literature seen in a transnational perspective edited by Anja Tippner and Anna Artwińska (Tippner, Artwińska 2019).³ As a result, some thirty years after the collapse of the USSR and other European socialist regimes, the research panorama on the literary works generated by the experience of state repression in those countries remains dispersed and fragmented even if all these countries shared similar repressive patterns. The study of these literary works in a comparative way – i.e. by confronting the texts generated by state repression in the USSR and in the countries of the so-called Eastern Bloc – may lead to a radically different understanding of this literature which, possibly, could lead to the identification of a “hidden page” of European literature: a transnational, multilingual and unified corpus of texts which share not only similar contents, but also similar stylistic features. In order to do so, it seems necessary to change our understanding of the relationship between state repression and literature in the countries involved. This requires a wider change in the way we understand and codify all those national literatures, including in Russian literature, i.e. arguably the most studied national literature to date.

RUSSIAN LITERATURE RELATED TO SOVIET REPRESSION: THE STATE OF THE ART

Regardless of the importance of the topic in its national literature and the fact that two of the most prominent authors of 20th century Russian literature (i.e. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov) devoted their works mainly to their experience of repression in the Gulag, within Russian studies there are many lacunae related to the study of the main sector of literature related to Soviet state repression, i.e. Gulag literature. Such lacunae are so wide, that there is not even consensus among scholars as to what the words “Gulag literature” identify, if works by authors who have spent a term in the Soviet camps or works about the Soviet camps – including those by authors who never spent a term in the camps, such as Vasilii Grossman or Georgii Vladimov. This is just one of the many shortcomings of the current state of research on the Russian case. Works on this literature that take on a wider perspective usually ignore Gulag poetry (Gall 2012; Toker 2019; Jurgenson, Thun-Hohenstein 2007; Tippner, Artwińska 2019; Lachmann 2019; Jones 2024), while – paradoxically – works on Gulag poetry usually treat them as separated from the wider context of Gulag literature (Kelly, Ueland 1994; Vilenskii 2005; Pieralli 2013, 2017, 2018, 2019a and 2019b). Moreover, apart from rare exceptions (e.g. Thaidigsmann 2009), quite often Russian Gulag literature is often identified

³ A different case is Leona Toker’s work *Gulag Literature and the Literature of Nazi Camps: An Intercontextual Reading*, which compares the corpora of Gulag and Holocaust literature (Toker 2019).

with the literature related to the Stalinist Gulag. This means that literary works generated under Lenin are mainly ignored and those which focus on repression after Stalin's death are usually separated from the development of the repressive system in a diachronic perspective (see Cehak 2004). In addition to that, apart from a few works that deal in passing with the literary works published in the White Sea-Baltic Canal camps – which, however, do not provide a detailed analysis of the literary value of such works (see Ruder 1998; Tolczyk 1999; Draskoczy 2014) – an entire section of Russian literature of state repression has so far been almost completely neglected, i.e. the literary works written within the camps and published on the journals, newspapers and almanacs issued by the Soviet camps. Finally, while many excellent pieces of research have been written over the years on Gulag literature authors (e.g. Mikhailik 2002; Tolczyk 2005; Ganushchak 2005; Mikhailik 2018; Toker 2018; Lundblad-Janjić 2021; Thun-Hohenstein 2022; Cooke 2023), a few aspects seem to be understudied, e.g. the impact of trauma on the literary form, on which only a few articles were written (Young 2011; Gall 2016).⁴

Other than these lacunae, in my opinion the real “missing piece” of the research panorama is the understanding that the Gulag was a specific historical phenomenon that was embedded into the Soviet experience, and that to study the Gulag ignoring the peculiarities of Soviet repression, its different evolution stages and its impact on a wider scale means to reduce severely the chances of having a clear understanding of the phenomenon.

The Gulag was the most impactful part of the Soviet repressive system. Organised under Stalin in 1930 under the institution whose acronym (Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei, GULag) was going to identify the whole system of Soviet camps after the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, the Gulag was the result of a series of processes and evolutions within the Soviet repressive machine that date back to the very early days of the Soviet state, when the widespread waves of arrests led to the creation of concentration camps to contain the masses of prisoners. The decision to organise these camps into a system aimed at using profitably the forced labour of the inmates and at facilitating the boom of Soviet economy by building industrial plants, roads, railways and mines thanks to the exploitation of the prisoners' workforce came after Lev Trotskii, Feliks Dzerzhinskii and other political figures suggested the idea over the 1920s (see Graziosi 2007; Plekhanov, Plekhanov 2007 and Gullotta 2018). The creation of the Solovki prison camp in 1923 was pivotal to the making of the Gulag system: entrusted to the political police, it led to the conception of a series of techniques for the exploitation of forced labour that were eventually used in future projects (e.g. the “great constructions of Communism” such as the White-Sea Baltic Canal, the Moscow-Volga Canal and the BAM,

⁴ In my previous publications, I have tried to address some of these issues by working on the publications of Soviet prisons and camps (Gullotta 2011a, 2018 and 2021a), evaluating Gulag poetry against the backdrop of its wider context (Gullotta 2016) and propose a systematic use of trauma theory to study these literary works (Gullotta 2012, 2021b).

see Gorcheva 1996). While the worst horrors of the Gulag occurred in the 1920s and under Stalin, the system remained active until 1987, when it was officially dismantled with the release of political prisoners signed by Gorbachev (Applebaum 2003). Still, most of the publications on the Gulag and its literature mainly focus on the Stalinist period (see, for instance, David-Fox 2016; Jurgenson, Werth 2017; Toker 2019).

Given the continuity of the Soviet repressive system, such an approach limits the understanding of the phenomenon both in the wider socio-historical context, and in the specific context of literary studies. In fact, most of the works on Gulag authors have a thematic approach: they analyse one aspect against the backdrop of the author's experience in the camp (see, just to quote one such example, Krotova's work on the theme of memory in Shalamov's poetry, Krotova 2017). However, some of the key features identified in the oeuvre of some of the most important Gulag authors can be seen in other, lesser-known authors. The reason of such phenomenon is to be found in the very nature of Soviet repression, i.e. its ideological premises, stemming from the ideas that inform penal policies in socialist countries: and it is only by taking into account state repression as a whole, and not only single sectors of it, such as the Gulag, that it is possible to have a clearer understanding of the nature of the literary processes involved in these works.

THE IDEOLOGICAL NATURE OF SOVIET STATE REPRESSION

Most scholars (e.g. Applebaum 2003; Graziosi 2007; Plekhanov, Plekhanov 2007) agree that Soviet repression was based on the categorial and usually preventive targeting of enemies of the people and of the party irrespective of their actual deeds. In other words, ever since the first days of the Soviet experience the main targets of repression were not people who committed crimes against society (violence, homicide, burglary etc.), but rather those who belonged to social categories which were deemed incompatible with the Soviet state. Triggered by the critical conditions of the Revolution first and the Civil War after, many of the first arrests waves were in fact against "enemies of the revolution" – noblemen, merchants, the clergy, etc. Arrests were often preventive: it was not necessary to make some concrete deed against the revolution; it was enough to belong to one of the "counter-revolutionary" categories to be eliminated from society. Such a system evolved in different times – from the epoch of "re-education" (1920s), when the Soviet institutions sought to re-educate the inmates to the new Soviet life through forced labour, to the epoch of "re-forging" (mid 1930s), when the aim was to re-create the individual, to later "epochs" – but the ideological and procedural patterns on which they were based did not change until the very end of the Soviet experience. What changed over time were the "categories" that were targeted (Trotskyists, kulaks, saboteurs, enemies of the people, spies, Jewish doctors, dissidents, *refuzniki* etc.) and the intensity of the repression to which they were

subjected (which was more devastating during the Great Terror and World War II than other periods), but the mechanisms behind Soviet repression remained unchanged.

Those targeted by Soviet repression had to be removed from society, punished, marginalised – a typical trait of repression under totalitarian regimes (see, for instance, Arendt 1951). While the process was not straightforward, the vast majority of targeted people would be humiliated, beaten and brutalised, women often subjected to sexual violence, as the ideological premises behind state repression entailed that every arrested person was an enemy to the state, society and the leader, and therefore deserved to be treated ruthlessly. The same pattern, though with a different intensity of violence level of violence, applied to people who underwent other forms of repression (what Oleg Khlevniuk calls “indirect repression”, see Chlevnjuk 2011), such as those that involved the relatives of arrested people during the Great Terror, who were often subjected to deportation, exile, dismissal from work, etc. This process of dehumanization, described in detail in Holocaust studies by prominent figures such as Primo Levi and Hannah Arendt (Levi 1947; Arendt 1963), was first codified in official Soviet documents, then communicated to the general public thanks to the massive use of propaganda (Schlögel 2008) and finally depicted in literature (for instance, in Vasilii Grossman’s *Everything Flows* the author described the dehumanization of the kulaks during the dekulakisation and the Holodomor).

After the death of Stalin and the amnesty which freed millions of prisoners, the main changes in the repressive system were that, mostly, state repression stopped being preventive (i.e. people were usually repressed for their actual deeds against the Soviet state, as happened, notably, with the dissidents), and that the process of dehumanization of the individual was less consistent and intensive – while many prisoners were subjected to tortures, including the forced use of psychiatry, others were treated in a less traumatic way behind bars. Still, the categories of victims hit by state repression were removed from society, marginalised and punished, even if, with the creation of the dissident movement, they managed to ensure overall better living conditions thanks to the support received by international actors.

The evaluation of the literary corpus comprised of works generated by the experience of state repression in the Soviet state shows a variety of common features, from the structural features of oral poetry (e.g. the use of ABAB or AABB rhymes related to the specific needs of the memorialisation of poems under extreme conditions, see Vilenskii 2005 and Gronas 2010, 2011) to common *topoi* and narrative strategies in memoirs and autobiographical works (e.g. the attempt to “rehumanise” the “dehumanised”, the description of the first encounter with state repression in relation to the loss of human values and dignity, the “travelogue” *topos*), to wider aspects related to trauma and representation. Some of these shared features – which are visible both in texts written by repressed authors and by those who did not undergo direct repression⁵ –

⁵ The discussion of such cases can not be included in the present article. Their analysis is included in a monograph which is currently being written.

seem to be directly influenced by the specific way prisoners were treated in relation to their status of enemies of the people: this allows us to suggest that the literary works generated by state repression in the Soviet Union are influenced by both the historical context and the ideological imprint of the penal system.

THE IDEOLOGICAL NATURE OF STATE REPRESSION IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE EASTERN BLOC

The literature generated from state repression in other European literatures is, in many aspects, similar to that produced in the Soviet Union because of the common ideological imprint which informed state repression, and because of the fact that the USSR functioned as a model in setting up the security agencies of all the countries of the Eastern Bloc after the end of WWII, even though they had practices and structures inherited by previous states (Pucci 2020).

In fact, all the countries of the Eastern bloc underwent a period of heavy repression during their formation process. The first to be hit was Poland after the 1939 Soviet invasion (Siedlecki 1990). Soon after that, it was the annexation of the Baltic states into the USSR in 1940 that triggered mass repressions (Davoliūtė, Balkelis 2018). In both instances, large sections of the population were targeted by categorial and preventive repressions, which led to the arrest, deportation and execution of thousands of people. When the USSR regained control over the Baltic countries in 1944, it resumed the forced deportation of thousands of Estonian, Lithuanian and Latvian citizens to the Soviet Gulag and to other areas of the USSR and the same happened when the USSR regained control over Poland. The selection of the victims was based mainly on the same categorial principles, while the victims went through the same experiences of repression as those suffered by Soviet citizens (Siedlecki 1990; Davoliūtė, Balkelis 2018). Similar dynamics affected citizens of other countries of Eastern Europe.

Towards the end of WWII, as the USSR gained control over Eastern Europe, it exerted significant influence on all the countries liberated from the Nazi occupation in creating not only socialist states which worked as satellite states, but also their security agencies (Applebaum 2012). Using the networks created through Comintern, and through the newly-developed Cominform, the USSR imposed its repressive model on the countries of the Eastern Bloc, either through the presence of advisers in the European socialist countries (as happened, for instance, in Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany, see Pucci 2020), or through the ideological and operational training of officers in Moscow: just to quote one such example, archival documents show that around 3,000 Yugoslavian army personnel were trained in the USSR and 29 members of the OZNA (“Odeljenje zaštite Naroda”, Department for the People’s Protection, the Yugoslavian security service formed in 1944 from which the state security agency were eventually formed) were sent to the NKVD academy in

Moscow (Dimitrijević 2019). In all the countries of the Eastern Bloc, over the period between 1939 and 1953, a series of repressive operations marked by the same mechanisms developed in the USSR took place, even when Soviet officials were not directly involved in them, as was the case of Tito's Yugoslavia, which targeted mainly Yugoslavian Stalinist supporters after the Tito-Stalin split took place in 1948 (Jakovina, Previšić 2020), or in Albania, before and after its "Soviet period" (Czekalski 2013).

Considering that, regardless of the geopolitical changes which occurred in the Eastern bloc, the waves of state repression followed similar procedures, then it can be assumed that at the basis of the similarity of the experience of repression in the countries of the Eastern bloc – be it under the Albanian Sigurimi, the Bulgarian KDS, the Czechoslovak StB, the Hungarian ÁVO/ÁVH, the Polish UB, the Romanian Securitate, the Yugoslavian OZNA/KOS/UDBA, or the GDR's Stasi – was not the matrix imposed by the Soviet officials around the end of WWII, but the ideological premises which informed the state security agencies in the socialist countries. Just like in the USSR, the victims of repression were mainly targeted on a categorial and preventive basis; they were publicly identified as "enemies of the people" or "enemies of the party"; as such, they were subjected to the same expulsion from social life which occurred in the USSR to the individuals targeted by state repression; they were often marginalised and/or isolated in prisons and camps, which were often informed by the same ideas of "re-education through labour" which resulted in the imposition of forced labour – similar patterns of violence and humiliations against those subjected to repression was a consequence of these ideological premises. The creation of forced labour camps was a common phenomenon in the Eastern Bloc: according to the Open Society Archives online exhibition "Forced labour camps" (<http://w3.osaarchivum.org/gulag/>), between 1948 and 1954 Hungary had 199 camps, Czechoslovakia 124, Bulgaria 99, Romania 97 and Poland 47, while in East Germany special camps for political prisoners were established (Sonntag 2011; Greiner 2014), some of which were located in the same premises as Nazi camps. While each agency and state developed over time in different ways (as happened, for instance, in Romania after Ceausescu's criticism of the USSR after the condemnation of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, Verdery 1994), and while some practices of repression were influenced by the local context, the same socialist-informed type of repression plagued Eastern Europe everywhere after WWII, where people were arrested, deported, imprisoned or eliminated mainly on a categorial and preventive principle.

LITERATURE OF SOCIALIST TRAUMA

In all these countries, just like in the Soviet case, a wide number of writers, poets and thinkers were targeted by repression. Their literary output was shaped or heavily influenced by their experience of repression in a way that bears resemblance to the

Soviet case. Among the prisoners of Tito's Goli Otok were writers such as the Serbian Dragoslav Mihailović, the Slovenian Igor Torkar, the Albanian Teki Dervishi and the Bulgarian and Macedonian writer Venko Markovski, all of whom wrote extensively about their experience of repression using some of the patterns identified by Leona Toker as typical of the literary genre of "Gulag memoirs" (see Toker 2000). In Goli Otok, some of the prisoners composed oral poems, just like many inmates did in the Soviet Gulag: their poems have shared structural features (see Dušanić *infra*) and the same applies to the poems written by the Hungarian inmates who were sent to the Soviet camps (see Papp *infra*). Similarly, the works of Baltic (e.g. the Estonian Jaan Kross and the Latvian Ojārs Vāciētis) and Polish authors (such as Jozef Czapski, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, Leo Lipski, Jacques Rossi and Aleksand Wat) who were sent to the Soviet camps and experienced the same repression as their Soviet fellow inmates bear resemblance to works written by repressed Soviet authors (see, for instance, the use in Herling-Grudziński and other authors of narrative structures drawn from Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*, Gullotta 2011b). The structure of Leo Lipski's tales bears resemblance to those of heavily traumatized former Gulag inmates such as Lev Konson, as shown by Alfred Gall (see Gall 2016); Aleksandr Wat's reflections on trauma as recorded by Czesław Miłosz involve similar issues of trauma and mediated representation as shared by Shalamov with Irina Sirotinskaia (Sirotinskaja 1999); and the dynamics that are described by Petra Čáslavová about the creation of oral poetry in Czechoslovak prisons is entirely in line with those of oral Gulag poetry in Russian (Čáslavová 2011, 2013).

As this brief overview shows, European literature is marked by the presence of a large number of authors who were targeted by state repression inspired by a particular interpretation of the social premises of socialism. It is a vast and extremely varied body of literary works, comprising authors coming from different countries, cultural backgrounds and writing in different languages, which however share similarities and/or elements that echo all along the literary landscape of the countries of the former USSR and Eastern Bloc. All the above seems to suggest that there may indeed exist a transnational page of European literature that has so far not been recognised and analysed adequately. The time has come to unify a vast and disperse transnational literary corpus under a shared critical perspective.

The trauma – both individual and collective – caused by Socialist state repression and its "literary consequences" require a new approach, one that could draw from several fields of studies, such as trauma studies, Holocaust studies or cognitive poetics (in this field, the work of Mikhail Gronas is particularly relevant and needs further research on a wider corpus, see Gronas 2010, 2011). Such an approach needs to take into consideration not only works by repressed authors, but all works related to socialist repression in these countries in order to see if the "socialist trauma" has produced similar works across a variety of national corpora and if the traces left by this trauma in contemporary literature in the countries involved (e.g. in works by Herta Muller, Guzel' Iakhina or even Zakhar Prilepin) bear similar models, struc-

tures and/or stylistic features. Only by working in this direction we may acquire a more nuanced and clearer understanding of 20th century European literature.

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