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Dossiê Objetos e sujeitos em contextos de mobilidade

Installing a Biography: The Intertwined Pathway of a Last Address Memorial Plaque in Post-Soviet Russia[1]

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Abstract: *In this paper, I examine the trajectory of a commemorative plaque that is part of the Last Address initiative. Drawing on ethnographic work I conducted in Saint Petersburg, I show how a German commemorational idea of the post--Nazi past migrated to post-Soviet Russia. I analyze the movement of the plaque in space and time, and reveal the post-Soviet Russian character of the initiative. By tracing the circulation of the plaque in the public sphere, I aim to show the entwinement of two biographies: that of the commemorated individual and that of the physical plaque itself. The paper demonstrates how the biographies provoke the emergence of bottom-up discourses on the soviet violent past of Russia.*

Keywords: *Object, memory, motion, monuments, post-Soviet Russia*

Instalando uma biografia: o caminho entrelaçado de uma placa comemorativa do projeto *O Último Endereço* na Rússia pós-soviética

Resumo: Neste artigo, tomo como foco a placa comemorativa que diz respeito à iniciativa *O Último Endereço.* Por meio de trabalho etnográfico em São Petersburgo, demonstro como uma prática alemã de homenagem às vítimas do nazismo migrou para a Rússia pós-Soviética. Irei analisar os efeitos decorrentes

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da mobilidade da placa no espaço e no tempo, enfatizando os aspectos propriamente russos da inciativa. Almejo apresentar como as biografias das vítimas, bem como a biografia contida na placa, estão imbricadas na esfera pública. O artigo demonstra como as biografias provocam a emergência de discursos de baixo para cima sobre o passado soviético violento da Rússia.

Palavras-chave: Objeto, memória, movimento, monumentos, Rússia pós-sovietica

La instalación de una biografía: el camino entrelazado de una placa conmemorativa del proyecto *La Ultima Dirección* en la Rusia postsoviética

Resumen: En este artículo, examino la trayectoria de una placa conmemorativa que forma parte de la iniciativa *La Ultima Dirección*. Basándome en el trabajo etnográfico que realicé en San Petersburgo, muestro cómo una idea conmemorativa alemana del pasado post-nazi emigró a la Rusia postsoviética. Analizo el movimiento de la placa en el espacio y el tiempo, y revelo el carácter ruso postsoviético de la iniciativa. Al rastrear la circulación de la placa en la esfera pública, pretendo mostrar el entrelazamiento de dos biografías: la del individuo conmemorado y la de la propia placa física. El artículo demuestra cómo las biografías provocan la aparición de discursos emergentes sobre el violento pasado soviético de Rusia.

Palabras-clave: Objeto, memoria, movimiento, monumentos, Rusia postsoviética

Introduction

In December 2014, post-Soviet Russia saw the emergence of a new form of commemorating victims of political repression during the Soviet period.[3] Reflecting the primary goal of the commemoration, namely, the installation of plaques to memorialize the victims on the façades of houses, at their last official address, the project is called *Poslednii Adres*, or the "Last Address". This project was initiated by the Russian journalist Sergey Parkhomenko on behalf of the

3 Throughout its history, from 1917 to 1991, the Soviet regime was characterized by oppression of its own people, with the years 1917-1953 considered the most traumatic, particularly due to the Great Famine in Ukraine (*Holodomor*, 1932-1933), the Great Purge (*Yezhovschina*, 1936-1938), and the Gulag system of forced labor camps. These and other forms of state terror were significantly reduced or curtailed upon Stalin's death in 1953 (Epple, 2020).

Memorial NGO.[4] Parkhomenko was inspired by the *Stolpersteine* concept applied throughout Europe over the past two decades.[5] The small, stainless steel plaques (19 × 11 cm) feature a brief biography of the victim: date of birth, profession, date of arrest, date of execution, and rehabilitation date. For example, on the plaque installed at Nevskiy ave 54, in Saint Petersburg [Fig. 1], the first line opens with the preliminary words "here lived," the second and third lines display the victim's name (Viktor Karlovich Bulla) and the fourth line states his profession, "photographer." The following lines refer to various dates: that of his birth, 1883; that of his arrest, 23.06.1938; the date he was shot to death, 30.10.19386; and the year that he was "rehabilitated" by the state, 1958.

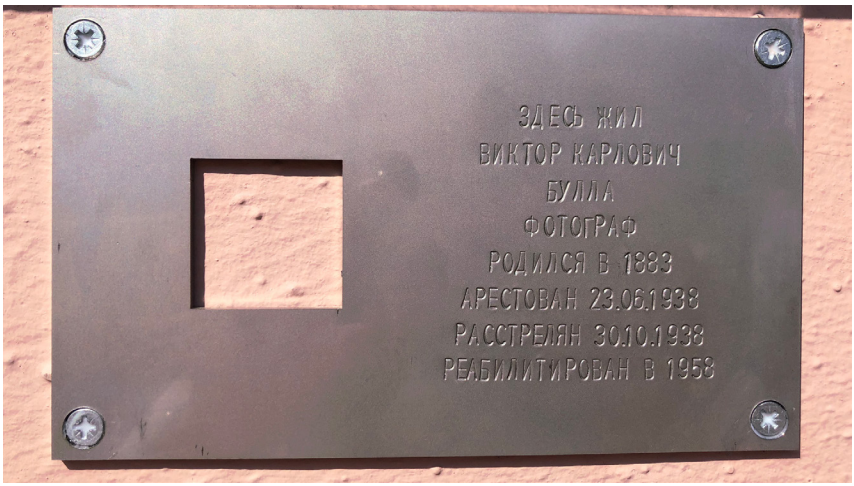

Figure 1. The plaque of Victor Karlovich Bulla, installed on August 1, 2018 (photo by the author)

Anyone who wishes to install a plaque in memory of a victim may do so. The procedure begins with the completion of an online application and the payment of 4,000 rubles (approx. USD 60). The victim's file is then sent to a *Last*

4 The NGO *Memorial* documents political repression in the Soviet Union and present-day Russia and supports the moral and legal rehabilitation of its victims. See the NGO's website at https://www.memo.ru/en-us/.

5 The brainchild of German artist Gunter Deming, *Stolpersteine* are "stumbling stones" paved into the sidewalk in front of the houses from which victims of Nazi persecution were deported. More than 75,000 "stumbling stones" have been embedded in the sidewalks across 26 countries in Europe (Mandel; Rachek, 2020).

6 If the place of the murder is known, it is also written on the plaque after the date of death.

Address archival member, who confirms that this person exists in the database. Following this confirmation, the victim's biography is sent to the Moscow-area manufacturer which produces all the plaques. The second part of the process entails negotiation with the residents of the building where the plaque will be placed. In this negotiation, called *soglasovanie* [reconciliation], volunteers try to secure permission to install the plaque from the building's current residents. This typically involves face-to-face interaction, which can sometimes be uncomfortable for the various parties involved.

In my observations, I noted that three main groups ordered plaques for installation. The first is victims' family members. Since most of the victims commemorated on the plaques were murdered in the late 30s, the closest family members are mostly the grandchildren. Not infrequently, one hears these individuals say that the plaque serves as a kind of grave for their grandparent, whose remains cannot be located. The second group is made up of those one might term "pro-installation neighbors." These are people who live at the victim's last address and discover, through *Memorial* archives, that someone who lived in their building or apartment was murdered during the Soviet terror. The third group consists of "colleagues" or "followers," people who currently work in the sphere in which the victim operated and who wish to commemorate their deceased colleague. Commonly, this group is represented by people from cultural or academic spheres in which the victims have left behind a timeless trace in the form of a poem, a painting, or even an academic dissertation.

Although there are more than 1105 plaques in Russia overall, with 371 in Saint Petersburg alone, installed on 219 houses (for December 2020), this commemorational project is not officially recognized by the state. The government's ambivalent attitude towards the plaques is manifested by the absence of officials at such installations, as well as the lack of official recognition of the initiative as commemoration. As a result, the *Last Address* operates and strives for legitimacy as an "informational" sign rather than as a "commemorative" initiative.

Through my fieldwork in Saint Petersburg, I observed the specific processes of "reconciliation," the "installation ceremony," and the plaques' fate in the cityscape after being installed. I realized all these processes appeared as conflict zones, where disagreements and struggles surrounding the past could rise to the surface and be negotiated in the framework of remembering victims. In this article, I will present and analyze the discourses around these negotiations over the plaques' installation. In order to contextualize the discourse's formation, I will first show the transition and translation of the western German idea to post-Soviet Russia through time and space. Next, I will demonstrate how the

plaques reveal not only the biographies of individuals but also a 'biography' of the nonhuman object in the public sphere. Finally, I will seek to elucidate the memory dynamics between the actors that surround the plaques, and the configurations it creates. While the government seeks to silence this kind of memory, the new bottom-up commemoration undermines such silencing through the discourse it facilitates among post-Soviet residents.

Memory Politics in Post-Soviet Russia

Unlike in post-war Germany, where a determined attempt was made to deal with the problematic past, post-Soviet Russia has been characterized by historical amnesia (Khazanov; Payne, 2008). This process began during the Soviet period, where no monuments were built to memorialize the state's terror, government archives remained sealed, and the secret police agents, responsible for the violent fate of untold numbers of citizens, never expressed any public acknowledgement of their actions (Etkind, 2013). In Germany, there was a broad consensus on the need to commemorate the victims of Nazi crimes (Forest et al. 2004). In post-Soviet Russia, however, despite evidence of massive terror during the Soviet period (Khazanov; Payne, 2008), the "remains of millions of people hidden in plain sight all over the former empire did not leave a mark" (Gessen, 2018: 53). Neither the remains nor the memory of those millions of people were ever given their due at museums or monuments.

As Alexander Etkind has observed, "The very nature of Soviet terror makes it difficult to comprehend, remember and memorialize" (Etkind, 2013: 11). Its "nature" was characterized by uncertainty and ambiguous relations with the past. During the Soviet era, terror victims' fate was kept vague, the dates and places of people's murders remained a secret, and the scale of the terror was never discussed publicly. Moreover, many post-Soviet Russian citizens today perceive Stalin as the responsible for the terror. At the same time, however, he is also perceived as a great leader who defeated Germany in the "Great Patriotic War" (Lee, 2011), a common Russian term for World War II. Only a few counter-hegemonic NGO organizations, such as the *Memorial* and the Sakharov Center, have devoted their efforts to researching the violent Soviet period, spreading awareness of it, and commemorating the victims (Adler, 2012).

Thus, Russia's memory politics are characterized primarily by top-down manipulation, ruled by elites who seek to shape public perceptions of the violent past (Forest et al., 2004). The past depicted by government officials is skewed in a predominantly positive manner. Meanwhile, its dark chapters are either relegated

to oblivion or whitewashed and featured in a forgiving light. Grodsky (2007) explains the failure of 'transitional justice'[7] by noting that in times of transition, a government often cannot function effectively without making use of the institutional remnants that served the state under the previous regime. This therefore precludes a preoccupation with the past crimes of the preceding authorities. In post-Soviet Russia, the primary institutions of Soviet repression, the NKVD and the KGB, were never discredited in mass consciousness, and are held in high esteem by many Russians to this day (Khazanov; Payne, 2008). In that spirit, in 2007, Vladimir Putin's government approved an educational reform in history classes stating that the terror was the price for the Soviet Union's achievements in World War II and its transformation into a modern state (Sherlok, 2016).

It is important to mention that Russia's current regime does not deny that the repression occurred. For instance, Putin's government inaugurated a monument to the victims of the Stalinist purge called 'Wall of Grief'. At the same time, however, Putin denounced the *Memorial* NGO as a 'foreign agent' (Lipman, 2016). This zigzagging between remembering and denying the state's crimes has become characteristic of Russia's memory politics (Skulskiy, 2019). According to Etkind (2013), Russia cannot be said to be 'denying' its problematic Soviet past, since it is being dealt with in various official and unofficial ways. Etkind suggests that the process in post-Soviet Russia, rather than denial, is better described as misrepresentation. I argue, following Etkind, that the plaques have become part of a new, rare, grassroots representation of the Soviet repression, intending to commemorate the people who were killed by the regime but have not yet earned the nation's recognition. By examining the plaques and how they are interwoven into the cultural memory field, we can better understand the material objects that constitute memory in post-Soviet Russia and how those objects challenge established traditions of remembering among the actors surrounding them.

The Plaques' Translation in Transition

Having migrated in space from the German post-Nazi context to post-Soviet Russia, and from pavement to façade, the plaques also experienced a temporal transition, attesting to their less-than-consensual acceptance in the latter context. After the plaques are installed, they are often vandalized [Fig. 2] and even

7 A process in which countries move from dictatorship to democratization and reconciliation. The success of the "transition" to democracy depends on how these countries deal with a past that was characterized by human rights violations (Grodsky, 2007).

removed. These two dimensions of transition, in space and time, show the plaques' different configurations in the public sphere, and the varying responses to them by local actors, in turn attesting to the complexity of present-day attitudes towards the Soviet Union's past.

"Translation" is an analytical concept that can be applied to the plaques' double transition. Julia Lerner (2007) suggests that in every cultural translation, a new field of knowledge is established. This is evidenced in the new formations of the commemoration objects in Russia. The transformation from stone to plaque, from being paved in the sidewalk to being installed on the wall, represents the physical changes that allow us to understand the new contexts it created. Taking a closer look at these processes of transition and translation will enable us to analyze the plaques' design and presence in the cityscape, which reveals that several intertwined processes are unfolding (Ingold, 2009). Tracing the double movement of the plaques and what they create is essential to understanding the current memory of post-Soviet Russia.

When migrating from one tradition of remembrance to another, cultural objects are not merely translated between contexts. They become part of a process in which different translation agents – "the translator, the receiver, and the translation object – are reformatted" (Varutti, 2014: 103). This is an interpretive process in which social actors are engaged in the new social network (Latour, 1987). Relatedly, Lerner (2007) argues that translation always involves t he act of deciphering and re-encoding cultural categories. In other words, it is impossible for a translation to perfectly convey a message encoded or expressed in a system of symbols. Accordingly, the "side effects" of translation shape the physical and symbolic perception. These side effects, argues Kopytoff (1986), can be seen as breathing life into a new space, where temporal classifications and reclassifications are implemented into culturally constituted categories. Recoding the cultural categories allows us to look at the cultural memory anchors of post-Soviet Russia through the shape and process of the plaques' installation.

"What is this all about?"

In one of my early fieldwork observations, I had the opportunity to participate in an installation ceremony that also involved *soglasovanie*[8]. The ceremony was held in the Malaya Nevka area of Saint Petersburg, in a house with two floors. About

8 In the *soglasovanie* process, the volunteers obtain the permission of the building's current residents to install the plate. This often involves tense interactions and may be difficult for both parties.

twenty people had gathered by the time I arrived. Later, I learned that these were *Last Address* volunteers, as well as permanent members of the installation initiative, who together install the plaques and check their condition on a biweekly basis.

While standing near the building waiting for the ceremony to begin, I saw one of the neighbors come out and ask, *"What is this all about"?* The volunteers responded by saying that they wished to install a plaque in memory of Feodesiy Sambook, a man who lived in that building before his execution in 1937. The neighbor stated that no one had coordinated this event with him and asked us to leave, mentioning that we were on private property. A volunteer then spoke up, saying that the building had only two families and that the other family had approved the installation of the plaque. She added that she had come to the building three times already, but that this neighbor had not been home. The neighbor insisted on the illegality of the proceedings, and asked the volunteers to produce documents proving otherwise. The activists became nervous, realizing that this was a "difficult case". Meanwhile, at the end of the street, I noticed four men holding flowers. They, too, appeared concerned. It was later revealed that these were the victim's grand- and great-grandchildren.

The aforementioned negotiation took about half an hour, and appeared exhausting for all parties involved. Throughout, the volunteers held folders full of documents. From listening to the negotiations, I understood that these documents attested to a kind of twilight status of the ceremony; that is, it was officially defined as "informational" rather than "memorial". During the quiet but tense conversation, I tried to imagine such a situation in Germany – a public discussion concerning permission to affix a small plaque in memory of a Nazi victim. In Germany, the crimes of Nazism are recognized on both the collective and the official level. Although there is a necessity to have an official permission from the local authorities, the *Stolpersteine*[9] project enjoys a sort of societal carte blanche in Germany. It does not meets the negotiations with unofficial representatives that oppose the initiative. In contrast, the installation of a plaque in Saint Petersburg requires the agreement of residents, who sometimes express a negative attitude toward having such a plaque on their wall. The current Russian government has not banned the project, but neither has it endorsed it, thus reflecting the ambivalence in Russian society about its past. The volunteers, for their part, take advantage of official ambivalence and the resulting legal loophole to promote commemoration under the guise of information.

9 This commemorative project has installed over 75,000 stones across Europe. Only in rare cases have German citizens opposed or denounced the installation of a commemorative stone.

Let us return our negotiations. One of the grandchildren, a man in his 60s who had ordered the plaque from *The Last Address*, approached the recalcitrant neighbor and said, "If it's all about your approval, I would ask you personally. I come from far away; I'm his grandson. If it's all about your approval, I ask you, let's reach a compromise." At this point, the neighbor agreed to follow the group to the backyard, to see where they planned to install the plaque. About twenty bystanders followed them. The installation approval required the signing of a document, which the neighbor seemed hesitant to do even when Sambook's grandson was standing next to him. The neighbor eventually signed the paper but asked that he be provided with documentation by the end of the week that Sambook had indeed lived in his house. After he was assured that such documentation would be provided, Victor, a 30-something installation specialist and volunteer, proceeded to open his toolbox and screw the plaque into the wall. Following the established tradition of the ceremony, the last screw was driven by Sambook's grandson [Fig. 3]. In the meantime, a crowd had gathered around the plaque.

The installation was followed by a short address by Evgeniya Kulakova, chief coordinator of the Saint Petersburg initiative:

> *Feodesiy Sambook was a biologist born in Belarus in 1900. In 1937, he was arrested and received a death sentence within two months. When he finished his PhD, he moved to Leningrad [today, Saint Petersburg]. After a few years, he was accused of espionage and was declared "enemy of the people." On November 3, Feodesiy was sentenced to death, and on November 10, he was murdered [sic]. He left behind extensive academic literature… It is also known that Feodesiy was informed upon by one of his colleagues at the university.*

Sambook's grandson now emerged from the crowd and stood before the plaque. He bowed his head and stated that the person who had informed on his grandfather used his research to promote his own career. Then, with a trembling, tearful voice, he recited the following lines:

My grandfather was murdered in 1937.
I've never seen my grandpa.
We never sat by the same table,
He never made me dinner…
My grandpa was killed in '37,
Drifting after the forces of evil.
The 21st century is upon us
And I still don't know where his grave is...

The private part of the ceremony began after the plaque had been affixed to the wall. The family members brought flowers and spoke with the audience that came to hear who Sambook was. The event was reminiscent of a graveyard memorial service, with the plaque representing a tombstone. In this process, I realized the pivotal role of the neighbor, who served as the gatekeeper of this memory. As neighbors determine whether or not the plaque gets installed, we see that memory is here constructed bottom-up, by negotiation at the micro level. This negotiation about the legitimacy of commemoration, the neighbor's authority, the clear absence of the victim's perspective and the insistence on the legalities of the matter, if not enduring fear of the authorities, reveal how the *Stolpersteine* was translated into Russia and what it created in the Russian public sphere.

Analyzing this event, we can see how the need to remember this historical episode in Russia was translated into the post-Soviet sociopolitical reality rather than merely copied from Germany. Memory of the victim takes a backseat to the issue of whether or not the plaque can legally be installed. In other words, the plaque operates in a liminal space between the official and unofficial levels, while both lack consensus on this specific form of commemoration and on reconciliation with the past more generally. Moreover, the citizens' reckoning with the violent past highlights the steel plaque's fragile status, given the ambivalent official response against the background of a still-ongoing public trial of the history of Soviet terror.

Figure 2. The vandalized plate of Victor Karlovich Bulla, installed on August 1, 2018 (photo by the author, April 14, 2019)

Figure 3. Feodesiy Michailovich, Sambook's grandson, inserts the last nail of the plaque. August 2020 (Photo by Natalia Shkurenok)

Rehabilitation – Criminals or Victims?

The plaque's translation in post-Soviet Russia is further demonstrated by its final line inscribed on the plaque. This line refers to the date on which the person whose biography is engraved on the plaque has been *rehabilitated*.

This process of political rehabilitation emerged after Stalin's death, part of the de-Stalinization policy during the Soviet era (Etkind, 2013). In other words, the victims of the terror received the legal status of a person who was victimized by the repression and did not in fact commit any crime.

At one of the *Memorial* St. Petersburg's society meetings, I spoke with Natalia, who has been working in the organization for many years. For her, this line encapsulates what she calls the *sovok*[10] regime, the essence of the brutal regime in the USSR which classified people into artificial categories. Natalia implies that all the people murdered during the Soviet regime were victims, and this practice of political "*rehabilitation*" carries the spirit of the Soviet regime into post-Soviet Russia. In her research, Nanci Adler (1993) writes about rehabilitation and the Soviet process of determining criminality and victimhood. She argues that this process created a condition in which many innocent people have

10 This pejorative term refers to a person or phenomenon that does not have to be related to the USSR period, but has characteristics that can correspond with it.

yet to be recognized as victims rather than criminals. For example, those who did not survive the Gulag camps and did not have children to apply for their "political rehabilitation" have not received their rehabilitation. Several hundred thousand cases are still pending (Adler, 2012).

This "rehabilitation" clash in post-Soviet Russia has been awarded scholarly attention. It especially arouses critical voices among activists from *Memorial*, such as Natalia. Thus, the *Last address* members may oppose this "line" on the plaque, but in the same breath, they rely on it as a tool to establish the initiative's legitimacy in the public sphere. Volunteers point to the rehabilitation line on the plaque as pivotal for obtaining neighbors' approval. More than a few residents ask if the person commemorated on the plaque is a criminal or a victim. For the volunteers, particularly those who coordinate the installations with neighbors, the line constitutes proof of the government's attestation of the person's innocence at the time of death. Thus, all the victims commemorated on the plaques have the rehabilitation status that enabled the engraving of this line. A problem arises from the fact that victims who have not received "conditional pardon" status may not be commemorated on the plaques. This situation leaves some of the victims behind and constructs a selective manner of remembrance. Such a lack of proper retribution "towards many political prisoners have never been 'rehabilitated' or compensated for their suffering contributes to sustaining the memory of the terror" (Etkind, 2013: 10) exposes how victimhood is perceived in post-Soviet Russia.

In June 2020, one of the plaques in Saint Petersburg was vandalized [Fig. 4] when some unknown person drew a Hammer and Sickle symbol and wrote "enemy of the people" on it. The response of Sergey Parkhomenko on his Facebook[11] page emphasizes the need to specify that the people commemorated on the plaques are victims by declaring their rehabilitation:

> *A person unknown to us, who, as he hoped, inflicted this insulting inscription, decided to vandalize the only place on earth where the name of Fritz Mikhailovich Pankok appears. This Pankok has no grave; nowhere else is his name written. Only this sign. We don't [even] have a photo of this person. He disappeared without a trace. And very little is known about him… Fritz Mikhailovich Pankok worked as a mechanic… He was a Latvian, born in 1893 in the town of Libava… In early December 1937, he was arrested on a false,*

11 https://www.facebook.com/serguei.parkhomenko/posts/10222159002913503 (last retrieved on August 4, 2020)

> *fabricated charge of "causing damage to the transport system." One month later, on January 4, 1938, he was shot. Ten days after the arrest, his wife Leontina Petrovna was discharged from the apartment and sent into exile in Central Asia, to the city of Gorchakov, Uzbek SSR, where her traces were lost. In 1959, Fritz Pankok was fully rehabilitated, and the charge against him was found to be falsified.*

The act of vandalism sparked an extensive public debate on the subject. Parkhomenko even argued that this Soviet mark ought to remain on the plaque as a reminder of the current residue of the country's violent past. Nevertheless, he emphasized that Pankok was rehabilitated. It seems that this line is not just a biographical fact, but a critical element that allows his memory to be installed and publicly confirmed. Drawing on the work of Margaret Mead, Igor Kopytoff (1986) has suggested that one way to understand a culture is by examining its perception of biographies. Following this argument, the line at hand (*rehabilitated*) represents the person's life path, and it shows the necessity of classifying people even after their death. Without this "line" or status, it is unlikely that the victim will be remembered publicly. These circumstances indicate that even today, Russian citizens struggle to find consensus in their attitude towards their past. Without national consensus on who is considered a victim and under which circumstances rehabilitation status is granted, oppressive Soviet categories of classification remain alive, amplified by the current regime's desire to rehabilitate Stalinism today (Klocker, 2018). The fate of Pankok's plaque exposes another classification system which is still being negotiated among post-Soviet residents, making the plaque into a hybrid form of cultural commemoration.

Figure 4. Fritz Michailovich Pankok's plaque. June 2020 (Photo by Lidiya Petrova)

To Place the Plaque in Time

During my observation, I noticed disproportionate reactions to installing this seemingly harmless commemoration plaque, thus exposing its controversial character. The plaques installed on the walls, designed to resemble ID cards without the person's picture, emphasize the absence of both the people themselves and a public awareness of the historical time in which they were murdered (Khazanov; Payne, 2008). The building from which the person was taken is still standing, transforming it into a symbolic place that holds the past and transfers it to the present. The place where the actual historical event occurred becomes a post-historical site where past events' meaning and memory are continuously contested (Assman, 2008). Indeed, the plaque, by evoking the past, intensifies the sense of the site's historically charged nature.

In this way, the plaques become an "unmediated part of the material landscape, open to any number of responses and interpretations" (Mandel; Lehr, 2020: 377). The dynamics of marked or unmarked, forgotten or remembered, reveal the plaque's double motion in space and time as the crucial element in creating a new place of remembrance. Such material is always in motion, being assembled and reassembled in shifting configurations of meanings (Sheller; Urry, 2006). The commemorative initiative's transition and translation engender different perspectives and different ways of behavior around it. What I presented as changes through space and time, and what Latour (1987) specifies as an object's agency, are an interpretive process of recoding in which various social actors engage with the new social network.

Two Biographical Stories: The Person and the Plaque

Compared to the state's official large monuments, visible in the public sphere and commemorating the hegemonic historical and so-called collective events, the plaques are much smaller and sometimes barely visible. The state's monuments represent the nation's heroes, those who most significantly contributed to the Motherland in different spheres, while the contribution of the people named on the plaques is in doubt. In that sense, the plaques challenge the idea of monumentality, since totalitarian regimes like the former Soviet Union tend to create monuments in the shape of large rocks that never change over time and thus address history as if it is fixed (Young, 1992). Skulskiy (2019) argues that what is remembered, what is forgotten, and what is altogether unforgettable in post-Soviet Russia arises from where something falls in the Motherland-centric discourse, as long its place there may be explicitly defined. In other words, the

individual or the historical event that does not fit the "given niches" of a sacralized national identity will be cast out. This clash between the remembered and the forgotten appears because of the absence of cultural signals warning the public that an identity which takes a stand against the "anti-Motherland-centric discourse" is potentially dangerous (Kopytoff, 1986).

In Russia, where the authorities try to control what kind of commemoration is visible in the public sphere, thereby determining the historical narrative, these small plaques' installation undermines the dominant state narrative. The project attempts to bring the perished victims back to the cityscape from which they were taken, thus undermining the "Great Hero" memory practice that characterizes the Soviet and post-Soviet legacy[12]. One example reflecting some neighbors' resistance to a plaque's installation is the objection that the person named on the plaque was "*just a **simple** person*." For him, only ***distinguished*** people should be commemorated on the walls of their house. Challenging this perception by adopting the principle of "*Every Life Matters*," the plaque acts as a symbolic gesture emphasizing the individual. Each person, whether a simple working person or a popular musician, has a name, a date of birth, a profession, and a story of a life brought to a violent end by government terror; they are all commemorated in the same way. In this section, I will argue that the plaque represents a human biography and also its own life story as a non-human object. The plaque thus indicates two different fates, the victim's and that of the plaque itself – both embedded and interwoven in the public sphere.

A Person's Biography

The plaques installed on the buildings carry the individual biographies that document past violent events and show what and who was "left out" by the official history. In this way, they play the role of counter monument (Young, 1992). At the same time, the power of the historical evidence of one person is embodied in the motto of the *Last Address* initiative, "One name, One life, One sign"[13], similar to the motto of the *Stolperstine* project – "One stone, One name, One person". Deming Gunter, the German artist who initiated the latter project, drew his inspiration for this idea from the post-Talmudic saying, "Every person has a name." Gunter cites this saying to convey the idea that "a person is only forgotten when his or her name is forgotten" (Suganda, 2020; Drozdzewski, 2018). One's name, in this line of thinking, expresses one's singularity as a person.

12 Today, throughout post-Soviet Russia, there are many monuments commemorating the heroes of the Soviet era.

13 Odno imîa, odna zhizn', odin znak

In one of my conversations with Yulia, one of the main volunteers and the coordinator of the "neighbor's negotiation" [*Soglasovanie*] team, I asked what she thought might incline neighbors to allow the installation of a plaque on their building. In response, she showed me the documents that she presents to building residents, some bureaucratic and others more personalized. There are documents describing the project's legal status, others that indicate the widespread scope of the project throughout Russia, and still others that illustrate how the plaque will look. There is also a document that attests to the victim's rehabilitation. Various other documents refer to the victim's personal life and include a short biography and, when available, a portrait. She mentioned that in her conversations with the residents who are deciding whether or not to permit the installation, she makes sure to show the face of the person who once lived in the house. The personal nature of the documents, and Yulia's insistence on presenting the physical aspects of the individual, tell us that the plaque is not merely a memory of the terror but also evidence of one person's life, proof that he or she once existed. This object, then, interweaves personal biographies into the public sphere and becomes part of it.

After one of the installation ceremonies, I asked Yulia how the city looks to her since she started participating in the project. She pulled out a special cleaning kit that she carries around with her that contains stain removal liquid and wipes. "*I visit them, I know they are fine... Sometimes I keep the kit in my bag; if I see something dirty on the plaque [tablichka], I know I can clean it.*" "*Ermolaeva looks like new,*" she observed later, recounting how she had cleaned the plaque commemorating Vera Ermolaeva, a Russian artist sentenced to death on September 20, 1937, and shot a few days later in a labor camp near Karaganda, Kazakhstan. Yulia uses the word "*tablichka*" but also refers to people by their last names (e.g., Ermolaeva). While doing so, she checks if the small sign that indicates that Ermolaeva once lived here is "all right" and no one damaged it. She also "calls" her name, as though she is visiting her and relating to her. Evgeniya Kulakova, the project manager in Saint Petersburg, observed, "Every time you walk in the city, you know that not too far away there is a plaque. And especially if the place is not in the center of the city, I usually turn around to see that everything is fine with it. For me, there is a new layer on the map of the city. You start to realize who lived at different addresses. You just check that everything is fine."

Evgeniya checks a plaque's condition. She knows, she says, *exactly who* lived in that house. This plaque-checking brings to mind the image of one person checking on the welfare of another person. In this sense, the plaque becomes

the material proof of the person's existence, and taking care of the physical plaque resonates with taking care of the person's memory, as part of the volunteers' struggle to make a place for those who once lived in this space. Thus, the particular way the volunteers relate to the plaque indicates that the plaque has become humanized. The plaque becomes a subjective object in the cityscape, one that – like a person – can be approached, touched, cleaned, and even removed.

A Plaque's Biography

In their article on the *Stolperstine*, Mandel and Lehr (2020) analyze the "afterlife" of the Stumbling Stones in the public sphere. They suggest the term *lieux chargés*, which blends Pierre Nora's notion of *lieu de mémoire* with the idea of an *objet chargé,* namely, the loaded and salient collision of counter-monuments (Mandel; Lehr, 2020). While "afterlife" suggests the notion of before and after, Holtorf (2002) proposes instead that we focus on what things are or how things have become. I chose to focus on the plaques, borrowing the concept of objects' biographies, which expose the different stories of the people around them (Kopytoff, 1986). The rich and loaded biography of things is well illustrated by an event that occurred in October 2020 in Saint Petersburg.

On the famous "Dovlatov" house at 23 Rubinstein Street, located in the center of Saint Petersburg, sixteen plaques were removed. These plaques [Fig. 5 and 6] were installed during the years 2015 and 2016, two years after the project was launched. Almost all the people mentioned in the plaques were murdered in 1937-1938, and all of them were rehabilitated between the years 1956 and 1989. Thus, these plaques convey the stories of sixteen neighbors who lived simultaneously at the building until being executed.

This is not the first time that plaques disappeared or were vandalized in various regions of Russia. However, this specific event drew significant media attention, reporting that the plaques were removed after a campaign of three apartment owners in the building who allegedly claimed: *"There are too many plaques, the house looks like a graveyard."*[14] This media attention was probably due to the symbolic location, which is a site with several interesting features. First of all, Sergei Dovlatov, a famous Russian writer, lived in this house from 1944 until 1975. Second, the building houses the central office of the Memorial society. The plaques on the building were one of the distinctive characteristics of Rubinstein Street, which had become very popular in recent years.

14 <https://www.fontanka.ru/2020/10/18/69508741/> (last retrieved on October 23, 2020).

Evgeniya Kulakova saw no reason for the house management company [*Upravdom*] to remove the plaques. She explained that, according to other building residents, most of the neighbors favored preserving the plaques on the building. One neighbor said that he was not opposed to the plaques, but at the same time asked that their official status be settled. The lack of official validity at this particular address lies in the fact that when the first plaque appeared on the wall five years ago, the coordination [*soglasovanie*] process was conducted through one woman in charge of the house committee at the time. This woman has since left the building, so the arrangement has expired.

This incident is an example where, once again, the biography of the individual and the historical period being commemorated are secondary in the conversation. Meanwhile, the plaque itself moves from place to place, being discussed along the way. Evgenia told me that she went to the house management company office to pick up the plaques, and only managed to collect them [Fig. 7] and bring them back to the *Last Address* office after prolonged negotiations. Interestingly, building management companies in Russia are private companies responsible for home renovation, cleanliness, water pipes, and elevator maintenance. Thus, this situation raises the question of why a company specializing in the physical maintenance of the building would remove the commemorational character plaques, claiming that they are illegal, at the request of only three of the residents.

Analyzing this event, we can see that the individual's commemoration, or the need to remember the historical episode in Russia, takes second seat to the legal issue of the plaques' installation. In other words, the plaque acts in a grey area between the official and unofficial levels, with neither level providing an agreed-upon approach to this form of commemoration. The sixteen plaques thus migrated from one place to another: first, they were "born" in a Moscow district at the request of a few people, next transported to Rubinstein street for installation, then removed from the wall, and finally returned "home" in Evgenia's bag. For now, the plaques are being stored in the office until the residents of that building reach a decision on what to do about them. This situation raises the question of who owns the memories encoded on the plaques, since the neighbors once again occupy a position of authority. This position recalls the Soviet concept of the "comrades' court", which represents a form of judgment that originated in mock trials and public dramas in Soviet culture (Lerner; Zbemovich, 2013). The memory of the Soviet terror thus becomes something that the "comrades" have the authority to discuss. In this sense, the process of

discussion and persuasion is complicated but remains at the grassroots level, which is probably what makes the installation of the plaques possible at all.

Tracing these plaques' physical journey reveals that they have a symbolic fate, ever-changing, as an "object in process" (Domanska, 2006). It follows that the meaning of the plaque shifts over time and place. Such fluctuation reflects how different actors perceive this form of commemoration: their perception of the biography, the person whose name is engraved on the plaque, the history the plaque represents, and the current debate on who should be remembered and how. The person's biography, embedded within the biography of the plaque itself, draws denunciation from the public sphere. Consequently, the plaques embody a human biographical testimony from the past, and at the same time they are non-human actors witnessing the present.

Figure 5. Rubinstein 23 street in Saint Petersburg. On the left of the building, sixteen plaques were installed. On the right is the monument to Sergei Dovlatov, a well-known Russian writer (photo by the author, April 14, 2019).

Figure 6. Rubinstein 23 street in Saint Petersburg. Sixteen plaques were removed from the 23 Rubinstein building in Saint Petersburg. (Photo by Natalia Shkurenok, October 2020)

Memory Configurations in One Plaque

A plaque's installation on a building acts almost like a tattoo of the past. State restrictions on this kind of project further indicate the power of tangible and concrete traces that shape the hegemonic historical narrative. The plaques reveal Russia's memory politics, imparting the notion of proper "public institutions" that control society's presentation of itself to itself and the struggle over the power of what has been referred to as a "public institution of remembrance" (Kopytoff, 1986).

The plaques mediate and bring together many actors: those who order the plaque, residents, volunteers, officials, and of course, the victims and the perpetrators. I showed how these different actors relate to and interact with the plaques. Additionally, I demonstrated that the plaque is not only shaped by these actors, but also constructs different meanings among them – human and nonhuman alike. In other words, the plaque itself participates in the process of creating meaning.

It would be difficult to neatly divide the main actors around the plaque into those who act for it and those who act against it. The various actors' accounts demonstrate how culture provides its members with more than one discursive framework of remembering (Assmann, 2015). For some, the plaque represents a victim's sole grave or trace; for others, it is an object of questionable legality and value.

These disagreements create a conflict zone where the different actors struggle to find a consensus. Indeed, they often try to prove the superiority of their own view. Yet, conflict at the grassroots-level can stimulate discourse. In that regard, Yifat Gutman (2017) argues in her book, "Memory Activism," that official restrictions on the remembrance of certain events can achieve the opposite of what such constraints intend to accomplish. To take a contemporary example, one might consider the efforts of the Israeli government to establish the so-called Nakba law. Rather than suppressing Palestinian memory, however, discussion of the law created a public debate that raised awareness of this issue. In the discussion at hand, while the Russian government tries to eliminate its violent past from the public sphere, the plaque's existence encourages people to have a discourse around it.

As history unfolds, it leaves marks, scars, and traces, which later become the focus of memory through symbolization and the construction of narratives (Assman, 2008). Skulskiy (2019) argues that the public memory of repression is easily erased in Russia because this narrative does not explicitly relate to the

narrative of the victorious Motherland. I offer another lens through which to examine repression. Notably, the plaques do not force a particular narrative of remembrance, but they do challenge decades of lack of discussion on this matter. Installed on the walls, they provide a permanent reminder of names and events that have been long ignored, forgotten and misrepresented. The plaques allow those names and events to be awakened. This social memory can be activated in many ways, even if it ends up being denounced and vandalized along the way. Thus, while the Russian government tries to eliminate its violent past from the public sphere, the plaque's existence encourages people to engage in discourse around it.

Moreover, the plaques offer the human actors in their sphere a crucial glimpse of the microhistory (Apel, 2014) of their country, providing biographical information on individual victims of the Soviet regime. As non-human actors, the plaques are at once changed by their circulation and change the collective. They act, and as a result, they demand new modes of action from other actors (Sayes, 2014). In discourse, space is often conceived of as something shaped by politicians (Assman, 2008). However, the plaques appear as objects that already have a name and a history, operating in gray legal areas and refusing to surrender to the hegemonic discourse. Significantly, what the plaque articulates is the symbolic transformation of an alternative visual construction of meaning in space and time.

Figure 7. Sixteen plaques initially installed at 23 Rubinstein Street in Saint Petersburg, now located in Evgeniya Kulakova's bag. (photo by Evgeniya Kulakova, October 21, 2020)

Conclusion

This article examined the *Last Address* initiative and its memorial plaques, which became the focus of my methodological and analytical study. The appearance of this form of memory initiative involves the plaque's agency as an object moving in time and space. First, I showed how the German memorial idea in the image of *Stolperstein* emigrated from Germany to post-Soviet Russia. Next, I demonstrated how the plaque's double motion in time and space shapes different ways of translating the German initiative into post-Soviet Russia. While the plaque is revealed to be saturated with vast and various meanings, I identified the two distinct biographies that are intertwined: that of the commemorated individual and that of the physical plaque itself. I demonstrated how the plaque has a life story of its own that goes beyond the life story of the victim. Finally, I discussed the different configurations among the actors who perceived the plaque. I argued that while Russia's memory politics delineate the Russian government's limited ability to deal with its past crimes, new forms of memory, initiated from the bottom-up, challenge the state narrative and provoke a new form of remembrance and a new discourse around the neglected past.

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