

# Turning Sites of Massive Repressions into Memorials

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*Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo, 2018, 6:1:67-76*

## *Turning Sites of Massive Repressions into Memorials*

This paper is devoted to memorial complexes with museum exhibits of the victims of political repressions in Russia. They took place in the 1930th. Nowadays there are two great memorial complexes. One of them is Mednoe Memorial Complex not far from Tver city. The second one is Katyn Memorial Komplex situated not far from Smolensk. They are affiliated with the State Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia. There is one more memorial complex “Butovo Shooting Range” in Moscow region. A new museum exposition will be shown there. Its territory belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church, but at the same time, it was recognized as a historical place. Despite the form of ownership, those memorial complexes work with different categories of visitors and deal with historical memory. Being part of memorial a museum reveals its information significance.

Key words: the memorial complex, a museum, site of mass graves, victims of political repressions, historical memory, monument

The subject of victims of political repressions has been studied in Russia from 1990s when it was first mentioned at the government level: in 1993, the RF Presidential Human Rights Commission was established (since 2004, President of Russia’s Council on Civil Society and Human Rights). Professional historians and social activists began to study archives and museums which were chronologically and thematically associated with the periods of mass repressions. At the same time, the appearance of new museums, such as Museum of GULAG, Museum of Memorial Society, House on the Embankment Museum, etc., reflects public concern about political repressions of the past. A new important step in the coordination of Russian museums` work on the theme of political repressions has become the establishing “Association of Museums of Memory” in 2015 which includes 28 Museums.

Different databases are created and placed in the internet.<sup>1</sup> The Andrei Sakharov Museum and Public Center “Peace, Progress, Human Rights” are largely involved in interpreting and spreading knowledge on the subject. The online database “Monuments and Memorial Signs to Honor the Victims of Political Repressions Established in the former USSR” created by the Museum in 2008, is constantly enlarging (includes now 1207 objects).<sup>2</sup> More than 1200 graves are presented on the website “Memory Map: A Necropolis of Terror and GULAG” created in 2014 as part of the project “The Cemetery of the Victims of Political Repressions in Russia:

<sup>1</sup> *Виртуальный музей ГУЛАГа* online: <http://gulagmuseum.org/start.do?language=1>

<sup>2</sup> *Памятники и памятные знаки жертвам политических репрессий на территории бывшего СССР* online:<http://www.sakharov-center.ru/asfcd/pam/>

Register and Internet Resource” (Memorial Research and Information Centre, St. Petersburg).<sup>3</sup>

However, large memorial complexes with museums were established only at two places where mass graves of the victims of political repressions are located: Mednoye Memorial Complex in Tver region and Katyn Memorial Complex in Smolensk region. Both were established under the RF decree No. 1247 dated October 19, 1996,<sup>4</sup> were opened for visitors in 2000. Those complexes include Russian and Polish graves. Both memorial complexes are affiliated with the State Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia, the major national museum of the Russian history of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Another large memorial complex with the mass grave at the “Butovo Shooting Range” located in the Yuzhnoye Butovo District of Moscow which would include a museum is almost complete. “Memory Garden” was opened here in September 2017. The museum there is planned to be opened in the nearest future.

This article is focused on the history of creation of these complexes and their work.

*Mednoye Memorial Complex* is situated 25 km north-west of Tver city close to Moscow - St. Petersburg highway and 2 km west of Mednoye village. The Memorial area is 15,67 ha. More than 5 000 Soviet citizens and over 6 000 Polish citizens were shot and are buried here in 1937-1940. The Polish section of the Memorial includes a Polish military cemetery consisting of 25 collective graves with high metal crosses. The crosses are part of the space and conceptual



**Pict. 1:** Russian section of the Memorial Mednoye

composition also including a wailing wall with a bell and iron tablets with the names of people shot. The architectural composition was designed, financed and erected by the Poles. The Russian section of the memorial consists of two collective graves, two burials in each. The burial sites coincide with the boundaries of the graves, and the lamps are made in the form of commemorative glasses with bread – an homage to the Russian tradition of commemoration. The main ally of the memorial leads to a commemorative sign in the center of a triangular ground with a cross made of red granite embedded in the mound.<sup>5</sup> Here lies the stone with the inscription “To the Compatriots, Victims of Wars and Repressions” incised on the granite slab. The authors of the project note that “*a caring attitude towards forest and land which have being witnesses of the historical tragedy is inherent in the project*”.<sup>6</sup> There are also street installations commemorating the history of political repressions in Tver region. A museum exhibition in the Memorial is especially worth mentioning.

<sup>3</sup> Карта Памяти: Некрополь террора и ГУЛАГа online: <https://mapofmemory.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Постановление от 19 октября 1996 г. N 1247. О создании мемориальных комплексов в местах захоронений советских и польских граждан - жертв тоталитарных репрессий в Катynи (Смоленская область) и Медном (Тверская область) online: <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/9031087> [Дата обращения: 23.11.15]

<sup>5</sup> ЧЕРКАЕВА, О. Памятники жертвам политических репрессий в России. In: *Исторические экспозиции региональных музеев в постсоциалистический период*. Санкт-Петербург, 2009, pp. 285-286.

<sup>6</sup> ЧЕРКАЕВА, О. Памятники жертвам политических репрессий в России. In: *Исторические экспозиции региональных музеев в постсоциалистический период*. Санкт-Петербург, 2009, p. 286.

In the 1930s the ministerial cottages of NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) officers were situated here. Here were buried the residents of the Kalinin region (now Tver) shot between August 1937 and November 1938. All of them were named as suspects in the cases of the NKVD State Security Service in the Kalinin region. In 1940 Polish citizens incarcerated in the Ostashkov Special Camp (Kalinin region) and executed in the Kalinin prison were buried in Mednoye village. How come the Poles appeared in the Kalinin region? On September 17, 1939, the Soviet Union started military operations against Poland resulted in 25700 Poles being imprisoned and placed in three special camps, i.e., Ostashkov, Kozelsk, and Kharkiv. In March 1940 Lavrentiy Beria head of the NKVD, sent a note to Joseph Stalin proposing to “discharge” the camps. This actually meant physical execution of people.

The territory was closed and owned by the KGB (Committee for State Security) until the 1990s. However, first non-official excavation was performed by the members of the Memorial society (Tver branch) in 1989, when the closed territory was patrolled. The first commemorative sign, the granite slab with the inscription “To the Compatriots, Victims of Wars and Repressions” was opened on June 7, 1995. On June 11, 1995, a stone was mounted in the place of the future Polish memorial cemetery.<sup>7</sup>



**Pict. 2:** Exhibition space of the Museum (Mednoye)

The museum in the Memorial was opened in 2005. The exhibition includes documents and items collected by the Memorial Complex employees during expeditions in Tver region and

<sup>7</sup> *Дорогами памяти.* По местам Твери и Тверской области, связанным с политическими репрессиями 1930–1940-х гг. Путеводитель. Тверь, 2009, р. 20

archival research. The concept of the exhibition was to show the origin and the mechanism of mass massacres performed by the regime whose victims were buried at the Memorial. Accordingly, one section of the exhibition is devoted to the repressions of the residents of the Tver region, and another section to the Polish war prisoners. The exhibition complexes reveal the history of mass terror towards different social and age groups through the stories of particular people. Special attention in the exhibition is given to the children of “public enemies”. The exhibition gives an idea of the scope of repressions in the country through the example of Kalinin region.<sup>8</sup>

The Memorial Complex acts as an educational centre translating the knowledge about totalitarian past into modern society. The museum is located to the main country highway “Moscow-St. Petersburg”. So there are so the so-called “occasional” visitors here. They are attracted by a sign seen at the highway and allowed to discover the Complex territory and the museum both individually and in a group. The museum also accepts groups ordered in advance.

However, purposeful and constant work with a particular targeted audience is needed to form a collective memory of the society.

Taking into account the importance of addressing a social segment, the Memorial Complex lays great emphasis on working with the rising generation. The targeted audience of the museum includes senior school pupils, college students, and the students of higher educational institutions of Tver region. The memorial employees get in touch with history professors and hold biannual onsite conferences on the subject of political repressions. Before that, they perform a huge preliminary work: they transfer a specially developed questionnaire to the pupils and students, which allow them to identify the descendants of the repressed residents of the Tver region. Based on these data, they search information in the archives and reconstruct the destinies of the repressed ancestors. The conference starts with the pupils’ reports on the subject of political repressions. Then the memorial representative tells about the Mednoye Memorial Complex, and at the end names a pupil whose relative was a victim of political repressions. The narrative about the destiny of the repressed is the most important part of the conference. Such work has a strong emotional impact on the rising generation and awakens a great interest in the totalitarian past.

The charitable fund for senior school pupils “Vazhnoye Delo” (Important Affair) organizes a 2-day tent camp at the Memorial. The fund employees deliver lectures on the subject of political repressions.

A workshop “Biography of a Museum Item” is held annually for the students of Tver State Technical University. During this workshop, the destinies of those who suffered from political repressions are discovered through the history of museum items. The students explore the secrets of museum work; they are engaged in searching for the survivors and witnesses of those events (very few of them can be found) and the evidences of the totalitarian past.

Another constant target audience the museum works with includes the seniors, namely, the members of the social organization “Dostoinstvo” (Dignity). These are the victims of political repressions, their children, and other relatives. They visit Mednoye Memorial annually, on Radonitsa, the orthodox commemoration of the departed. The commemorative event at Mednoye includes church service, laying of wreath, political meeting, and visiting of exhibitions. The Memorial employees prepare a special exhibition for this target group every year.

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<sup>8</sup> «Постановили: расстрелять» «Трудное возвращение». Мемориальный комплекс «Медное». Тверь, 2010, р. 3

Another specific audience Mednoye employees work with is the community of minor orthodox brotherhoods. These are the Christians united in the specific organizations. They commemorate the victims of political repressions by going on a pilgrimage to the sites of mass massacres (Butovo, Katyn, and Kharkiv). The researchers present their reports, deliver lectures and conduct debates and round tables.

It is worth mentioning the annual broad-scale events at the Memorial requiring important organizational effort of the hosts. This is the “Day of Memory and Grief” devoted to the Soviet and Polish citizens, victims of political repressions (September 2), Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repressions (October 30), and the All Saints’ Day (in Poland).<sup>9</sup>

Research conducted by the Memorial employees resulted in publication of 4 volumes of “Books of Commemoration of the Victims of Political Repressions in Kalinin region” that included the names of 10 300 victims.<sup>10</sup>

The “Books of Commemoration” have been published in Russia since early 1990s in all the regions by various public organizations with financial support provided by local authorities. The books include the lists of the victims of political repressions in a particular region. In Tver region this work is being done by the Memorial Complex employees with the help of professional historians.

*Katyn Memorial Complex* is situated 20 km from Smolensk, in the so-called Katyn forest. The area of the Memorial is 18,5 ha. Like Mednoye Memorial, Katyn Memorial includes Polish military cemetery (more than 4000 burials of the Kozelsk camp prisoners) and the Russian section (more than 6000 burials), and is affiliated with the State Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia. The spatial concept and scientific content of the Memorial Complex and the museum exhibition are similar to those in Mednoye village: repressive organs of Smolensk region are described, and the political repressions are studied at the regional level.<sup>11</sup>

*Butovo Shooting Range* is the biggest mass burial site in Moscow and Moscow region. It is situated on the southern outskirts of modern Moscow, and its area reaches 5.6 ha. Admittedly, 25-26 thousand people were buried here. There are grave mounds, commemorative plaques with the names of the victims, thematic informational and exhibition stands, the wooden chapel of New Martyrs and Confessors of Russian Church, and the memorial cross. But the most important thing is that the “Memory Garden” has been constructed here. In front of the enclosed area there is a new stone temple and another memorial cross, as well as the building of the former NKVD commandants’ office.

The shooting range territory is owned by the Russian Orthodox Church.

In 1934 the territory of the former manor house Drozhzhino was handed over to the NKVD. From August 1937 to October 1938, more than 20 762 people named as suspects in the cases of the Moscow NKVD Service were shot and buried here. These were people aged from 14 to 82, representatives of 73 nationalities, of all religious backgrounds, and from all layers of society. Among them were the Germans, Latvians, Poles, Americans, Argentineans, Hindu, Afghans, and many others.<sup>12</sup> The shooting range territory was admittedly used for burials until 1953. The total number of victims has not yet been identified. In the middle of 1950s, the “special zone” was liquidated, and the shooting range was closed with a barbed wire fence.

<sup>9</sup> Мемориальный комплекс «Медное» online: [www.mk-mednoe.ru/index/news/](http://www.mk-mednoe.ru/index/news/)

<sup>10</sup> Книга памяти жертв политических репрессий Калининской области. В 4 т. Тверь, 2004-2015.

<sup>11</sup> Мемориал «Катынь» online: <http://memorial-katyn.ru/>

<sup>12</sup> Бутово – место памяти и покаяния online: [http://www.martyr.ru/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=156&Itemid=20](http://www.martyr.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=156&Itemid=20)

Before 1995, this area was thoroughly protected by the state security bodies. Nevertheless, the relatives of the deceased first entered the Butovo Shooting Range in June 1993, and erected the first commemorative plaque in October of the same year.<sup>13</sup> In May 1994, the memorial cross was erected at the shooting range, and the community of the New Martyrs and Confessors of Russian Church was created in Butovo. In 1995, the shooting range territory was handed over to the Russian Orthodox Church because a lot of clergymen were buried here (more than 300 of them have been consecrated). In 1996, a wooden chapel built in the western shooting range area has been sanctified. The Russian Orthodox Church conducted a complex research in order to identify the graves (the first burial was revealed in 1997) and found 13 mortuary ditches approximately 1 km in length.<sup>14</sup>

In 2001 the Butovo Shooting Range was recognized as a historical monument.<sup>15</sup> In 2002, the Butovo Memorial Center was created at the shooting range in order to coordinate the efforts of the state, religious, and public organizations to establish the Memorial Complex.<sup>16</sup> Such actions became necessary, since in 1991 various governmental structures and social activists started to explore the history of the shooting range. Creating the Memorial Center at the very site of the burials allows the organizers to combine efforts and avoid repetition when exploring the subject, as well as to translate the fact-based information to the visitors and quickly introduce new data in order to continue the research.

The Center gathers and publishes materials about people who suffered from repressions first of all in Butovo, but also in other places, irrespective of their ethnic origin and religious views. These actions may be considered as the continuation of the work of the Moscow Public Group on Commemoration of the Victims of Political Repressions (created in 1991) that started to publish the “Commemorative Books of the Butovo Shooting Range” in 1992 (8 volumes have been published that include 20 762 names).<sup>17</sup>

The Memorial Center participated in the construction project of a new stone cathedral. The director of the center studied traditions of the built “on the Blood” cathedrals.<sup>18</sup> The cathedral was sanctified in 2007.



**Pict. 3:** Lists of the victims (Butovo)

The Memorial Center has developed a concept of the so-called “Memory Garden” in the eastern part of the shooting range where an apple garden is situated. The idea is to “*commemorate the names of those shot in Butovo, irrespective of their social stand, convictions, and religious views*”. “The ditch is symbolically opened and there are stone plaques with the names of the victims on them... The visitors go down (approximately 0.5 m) and find themselves at one level with those who were shot.

<sup>13</sup> *Бутовский полигон. 1937-2007*. Русская Голгофа. Москва, 2007, p. 31

<sup>14</sup> Ref. 13, p. 35

<sup>15</sup> *Постановление Правительства МО от 09.08.2001 № 259/28 «Об объявлении памятного места «Бутовский полигон» в Ленинском районе памятником истории регионального значения и утверждении границ его территории и зон охраны»* online: <http://ipravo.info/mo1/legal11/178.htm> [Дата обращения: 23.11.15]

<sup>16</sup> Мемориальный научно-просветительский центр «Бутово» online: <http://butovo37.ru/index.html>

<sup>17</sup> *Бутовский полигон, 1937-1938 годы: Книга памяти жертв политических репрессий*. В 8 т. Москва, 1997-2004.

<sup>18</sup> ГАРЬКАВЫЙ, И. Храмы на Крови в традициях древнерусской мемориальной культуры XI-XVII вв. *Ип: Ныне и присно*, № 3-4, 2006, p. 201

This is a true document—a spatial model of execution lists”. The names are grouped according to the dates of executions and NKVD lists, which give the opportunity to see how many people died in one day. The walls with the names are located on the two sides of the ditch and symbolize the years 1937 and 1938. They are terminated near a small site where the “Memory Bell” is hung. The bell symbolically connects the reality and the past; everyone is able to ring it, and “*the frame to which the bell is fastened represents a barrier situated at the entry to the shooting range separating life and death for those who were delivered to the shooting range*”.<sup>19</sup>

The concept of the monument corresponds to the main objective of the Center: to resurrect the names of those who were erased by the totalitarian regime, eliminated from life, history, documents, registers, and encyclopedias.

The museum work is an important part of the Memorial Center’s activities. The main aim of the Center today is to create the Museum for the memory of the victims that would commemorate the executed regardless of their ethnic origin and confessions. Many men of art, literature, and science found death at the shooting range, and the museum’s task should be to protect and show what is left of their creative heritage. Actualizing cultural heritage of “another Russia”, the Russia between 1920s and 1930s, the one opposing the totalitarian regime, is one of the Center’s objectives. A special subject of the exhibition is the destiny of the repressed peoples, namely, the Poles, German, Latvians, and many others. Their tragic lives illustrate the global character and scope of Butovo dramatic events. Different people became victims of the ruthless repressive mechanism. The history of this repressive mechanism will be a core motif of the exhibition. The mass repressions of the 1930s will be shown through the events at the Butovo Shooting Range and other places where the technology of destroying one’s own nation was perfected.<sup>20</sup>

A permanent exhibition will be opened in the wooden building of the former pre-revolutionary Drozhzhino manor house where the NKVD commandants’ office was located.<sup>21</sup> The particular feature of the exhibition is its figurativeness and emotional immersion into the era: the visitor will find himself in the wagon for the arrested and in the detention caserne.

However, the Center’s activities do not only consist in organizing the exhibition.

The museum collection representing the history of the Butovo Shooting Range includes approximately 500 items.<sup>22</sup> These are mostly the personal belongings of those executed at the shooting range, received from their descendants. Acquisition of museum items is also an important activity of the Center, which allowed for organizing temporary exhibitions based on the available materials and for opening the first permanent exhibition in the stone cathedral (this exhibition is disassembled now).

Personal exhibitions (held in the movie club of the former NKVD-KGB school) tell us about lives and creative works of the artists and the exploits of the clergymen. The exhibition “Life and Work of the Priestly Martyr Metropolitan Bishop Seraphim (Chichagov)” was especially rich.<sup>23</sup> Seraphim (born Leonid Mikhailovich Chichagov) was an unusually gifted person. A courageous soldier, historian (in 1887-1888 he participated and kept a chronicle of the Russo-Turkish War), prophet, writer, artist, musician, he was awarded 14 Russian and foreign distinctions and orders for civil and military achievements. He cured approximately 20

<sup>19</sup> Яблони над «расстрельным ровом» online: <http://www.pravmir.ru/yablони-nad-rasstrelnym-rovom/>

<sup>20</sup> Мемориальный научно-просветительский центр «Бутово». Проекты online: <http://butovo37.ru/projects.html>

<sup>21</sup> Ref. 13, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Ref. 13, p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> Ref. 13, p. 38.

thousand patients using his own method based on the healing properties of plants (described in his book “Medical Conversations”). He was shot at the shooting range in 1937 aged 82 years old. The exhibitions became an event in the Moscow life and were shown in other Russian cities and the neighboring countries.

However, the first permanent exhibition was opened in the stone cathedral. When the project of the two-storey cathedral was being developed, it was planned to create an ossuary at the ground floor as an analogue of a Greek crypt.<sup>24</sup> In the cathedral's antechurch, the photographs of people killed at the shooting range are hung on the walls. In two cases there are personal belongings found in the mortuary ditch during excavation in 1997, namely, shoes, clothes, rubber gloves, shells, and bullets. The second section of the cathedral museum is the ossuary itself where the personal belongings of the priestly martyrs were mostly presented. These were church attire and liturgical items, violin and petroleum lamp, notes and letters of the arrested. As it was already said, this exposition doesn't exist now, because these belongings will be shown in the new museum.

Thus, the objects of seeing on the Butovo shooting range are located on two territories. It is really a shooting range (the burials, wooden chapel, commemorative plaque, the memorial cross, the site of the “Memory Garden”) and the territory opposite the shooting range (the stone cathedral, the another memorial cross and the NKVD commandants' office with the future exhibition).

However, in the future it is also planned to create another museum, as the religious (religion) community has already been handed over a building of the former stable yard owned until now by the Federal Security Service of Russia. The community members do not know what kind of museum will be created here. Two variants are possible: a museum for the history of church persecution or a museum for the history of repressions in the USSR.

The educational activities of the Center are focused on various age groups, so it is difficult to talk about one specific category. The Butovo shooting range is visited by individuals and groups, both religious and secular people. Foreign citizens also arrive at the shooting range searching for the repressed ancestors.

However, the most active and permanent participants of the pilgrimages to the sites of the new martyrs' services organized by the Center are mostly the chapel members. In addition, primarily for young church members, but also for everyone who is willing, annual onsite meetings are held at the places related to the shooting range (for example, the place of birth of a girl executed at the shooting range). The Butovo church members experienced in commemorating the repressed people erect crosses at the graves and help restore village chapels.

Another method of working with the young people is to hold meetings directly at the shooting range. Thus, students of the Moscow Film School not only help improve the shooting range territory, but also work here on their projects and explore the subject of political repressions.

The Butovo shooting range is also famous for its annual global events. On the fourth Saturday after the Easter, the patriarchal service is held here (Memorial Day of New Martyrs and Confessors of Russian Church) and is attended by 3-4 thousand people. On October 30, the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repressions, all the 20,761 victims buried at the shooting range are commemorated by name. The commemoration lasts about 8 hours.

The Butovo shooting range is a rare sociocultural phenomenon: people of different religious views, ethnic origin and age are gathered at the site owned by the Russian Orthodox Church.

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<sup>24</sup> Ref 13, p. 49.

Let's summarize that was said above. The subject of political repressions is better explored in those burial sites where the memorial complexes are created including museum exhibitions. The Mednoye and Katyn Memorial Complexes are important historical monuments for the Poles and the Russians; however, they mostly reflect the history of the repressive mechanism development in a particular region. Unlike them, the future exhibition at the Butovo shooting range will show the global and universal character of the catastrophe that happened in the late 1930s. The exhibitions in Mednoye and Katyn are based on chronological principle, primarily, on documents. On the contrary, in Butovo, great emphasis will be laid upon symbols and images, as well as reconstruction of the oppressive atmosphere of the 1930s in several rooms. The location of memorial complexes also defines their activities. The remoteness from cities of Mednoye and Katyn is compensated by the onsite educational work at schools, colleges, higher education institutions, and other facilities. The Butovo shooting range is situated on the outskirts of the millionaire city and is served by public transport, which ensures visitors' inflow and sufficient workload for the Memorial Center employees. Nevertheless, regardless of particular conditions, all the memorial complexes perform their main objective, namely, reconstruction and protection of the historical memory.

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*Постановление Правительства МО от 09.08.2001 № 259/28 «Об объявлении памятного места «Бутовский полигон» в Ленинском районе памятником истории регионального значения и утверждении границ его территории и зон охраны»* online: <http://ipravo.info/mo1/legal11/178.htm> [Дата обращения: 23.11.15]

*Яблони над «растельным ровом»* online: <http://www.pravmir.ru/yablони-nad-rasstrelnym-rovom/>