“Memorylands” of Difficult, Contested and Dissonant Memory in “Monastery Spaces” in Post-Secular Turn in Russia

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Прасторы складанай, канфліктнай і дысанантнай памяці ў расійскіх манастырах эпохі постсекулярнага павароту

У XX—XXI ст. праваслаўныя манастыры ў Расіі змянялі свае рэлігійныя, палітычныя і культурныя ролі, становячыся “прасторамі памяці”. Сёння, калі ў іх прасторы перасякаюцца ўспаміны рэлігійных абшчын, зняволеных, мастакоў і грамадзян, яны адыгрываюць вялікую ролю ў «войнах памяці» і барацьбе за спадчыну. Артыкул Надзеі Беляковай і Аляксандры Калеснік прысвечаны манастырскім прасторам як месцам памяці і канфліктаў апошніх 25—30 гадоў на прыкладзе Спаса-Яўхіміева манастыра (Суздаль).

Viewing heritage as an evolving process [1] shifts the focus from simply defining heritage to understanding its functions and impacts. This approach to heritage-making, which involves collection, institutionalization, commodification, and preservation, emphasizes how contemporary societies engage with the past. It calls for examining what is remembered, forgotten, commemorated, or constructed, and determining who is recognized as an heir to cultural heritage [2; 3]. This perspective urges scholars to explore the politics of heritage, particularly in relation to cultural identity, access, control, and sovereignty [4; 5].

In this context, religious heritage and its relationship with existing religious places and practices deserve a scholars’ special attention. The postsecular turn in the social sciences and the humanities was associated with the need for a new conceptualization of the role of religious institutions in the contemporary world, including in issues related to heritage management and memory politics [6]. As Zuzanna Bogumił and Yuliya Yurchuk note, the postsecular turn also implies greater sensitivity to “one more domain where a close relationship between memory and religion can be observed: space” [7, 16]. The transformation of the status of a place from religious to secular and back is expressed in the continuous intersection of not only its different functions, but also various and usually difficult memories. In cases of marking such places as cultural heritage, their management by a wide range of agents – state, church, heritage institutions – often turns out to be conflictual.

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The Saviour Monastery of St. Euthymius in Suzdal

No less problematic is the representation of the past and memory associated with religious places. Cyril Isnart and Nathalie Cerezales suggest that heritage-making at religious sites preserves their ritual significance while adding new dimensions of meaning [8]. This process transforms sacred spaces into highly symbolic locations, conscious of their wider value [9; 10]. Integrating religious sites into formal conservation and museum practices can create friction between religious traditions and secular management, often leading to the adaptation of rituals to suit tourist expectations [11]. State intervention in matters of representation of both the religious and secular past is also widespread.

This paper examines tensions surrounding religious heritage and the intersection of diverse memories in post-Soviet Russia, focusing on how monastic spaces have transformed in their memorial and heritage status amid the growing influence of the Church.

Postsecular turn in the post-Soviet space

In post-Soviet space over the 20th and 21st centuries, religious spaces secularized after the Russian Revolution and mostly returned to the Russian Orthodox Church after 1991, have undergone multiple transformations in their religious, political, and cultural significance, often becoming complex "memorylands" [12]. The postsecular turn that began in the late Soviet era and solidified in the first post-Soviet decade was associated with the re-entry of religious institutions and agents into the public sphere, asserting their own narratives and reclaiming their past. Churches and monastery spaces actively participate in the "memory wars" and the battle for heritage: national, public, or religious [13; 14].

In the last 10–15 years, the clash between heritage discourses and religious sites in Russia has intensified. Many religious sites (primarily churches and monasteries), which received protected status in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet decades and were recognized as UNESCO World Heritage sites or sites of federal or regional significance, are now regaining their religious status. This has led to tensions and conflicts regarding both heritage management and engagement with different audiences (tourists and pilgrims).

Discussing religious heritage and the difficult memory associated with it, it is possible to identify at least three models of the balance of power between key agents – the state, the church, museums, and heritage institutions – which are linked to the modes of work and representation of the past(s) of the monastery spaces.

First, the change in the status of religious heritage could strengthen the position of the Russian Orthodox Church, which often becomes the primary agent in redefining the significance and memory of these places. A notable example is the Solovetsky Monastery (est. in 1436), which has been the subject of "memorial wars" over the past decades [15]. For 20 years, local authorities, the Orthodox monastery, and the state museum shared control over the Solovetsky Islands. In the late 1980s, public interest in the history of the Solovetsky labor camp (SLON, 1923–1933, later labor camps and prisons under other names till 1939) grew, leading to the first exhibition and memorial dedicated to its victims in 1989. The collaboration between the Solovetsky Museum and the Memorial Society marked the start of efforts to commemorate Soviet repression on the islands in the early 1990s. Since its return in 1992, the monastery has transformed the islands into a religious memory site. While Memorial emphasized Soviet repression, the monastery prioritized the memory of Orthodox martyrs imprisoned and killed during SLON's operation. In 2009, the situation changed, when leadership of the museum and monastery was consolidated under one person, blurring the line between secular and religious governance. In 2015, the museum, under the leadership of the Solovetsky Monastery's abbot, ended the partnership with the Memorial Society, shifting focus to the persecution of Orthodox clergy and the "new martyrs." At the same time, the Solovetsky Monastery has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1992, which invariably influences both the work of the museum and the life of the monastery.

Second, there are instances where the Church's presence is minimal, allowing museum spaces

to develop with the active participation of various communities, such as museum employees, local historians, heritage and memory activists. The Kirillo-Belozersky Museum-Reserve (Kirillov, Vologda Region), established as a museum in 1924, exemplifies this. The museum, located within the monastery walls (est. in 1397), arose through the collaboration of influential agents – architects, restorers, and local historians – and has become a city-forming monument for local citizens. Since the late 1950s, regular restoration work has been carried out at the monastery by history and art students. In 1965, the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR issued a resolution on the organization of the All-Russian Society for the Protection of Historical and Cultural Monuments (VOOPIK) for the purpose of attracting the general public to active participation in the protection of monuments, and this organization received institutional registration next year [16]. In 1968, the museum in Kirillov received a new status and name – Kirillo-Belozersky Historical, Architectural and Art Museum-Reserve. The emphasis in the museum exposition was placed on the Orthodox art of the Russian North. Since then, restoration work at the Kirillov-Belozersky Monastery by student teams and VOOPIK (Всероссийское общество охраны памятников истории и культуры – Russian National Society for the Preservation of Heritage) has become annual. According to Nadezhda Belyakova's observations, gradually the work in the detachment acquired traditions, and the arrival of the construction team became an event for the city residents [17]. An attempt to revive the monastery in the early 1990s failed due to lack of funding, resulting in a model of peaceful coexistence between religious and secular agents, with the museum playing a leading role in memory formulation.

Third, many religious sites exhibit a gradual strengthening of the Church's role alongside enhanced heritage management and tourism infrastructure development. This is particularly evident in places already integrated into tourist routes, where increasing the Church's visibility serves to divide tourist flows between general tourists and pilgrims. In such cases, the palette of memory from the post-Soviet era often becomes contentious, with memory and its redefinition becoming the subject of struggle. The Saviour Monastery of St. Euthymius (Suzdal, Vladimir region) is a striking example of this phenomenon. We propose to examine this example in more detail, focusing on the problem of working with a difficult past.

Multi-layered heritage in Saviour Monastery of St. Euthymius in Suzdal

Suzdal is a small old town 26 km from Vladimir and 220 km from Moscow with a population of about 9 thousand people, located on the Kamenka River, a tributary of the Nerl River. The Saviour Monastery of St. Euthymius was founded in 1352. The first abbot of the monastery was Monk St. Euthymius, who belonged to the circle of spiritual interlocutors of St. Sergius of Radonezh (1314 or 1322–1392), the most influential religious figure of the 14 century's Rus'. After the canonization of Euthymius in 1549, the monastery became known as the Saviour Monastery of St. Euthymius (Spaso-Evfimiev). The patronage of the Suzdal and Moscow princes provided the monastery with rich land holdings and many privileges. By the end of the 17th century, the monastery had become one of the wealthiest. The existing stone ensemble of the monastery was formed in the 16th–17th centuries [18]. In 1766, a "prison for insane convicts" was opened in the monastery, which existed until 1905. During the World War I and the Soviet times, the monastery was also used as a prison [19]. Closed in 1923, the monastery came under the jurisdiction of the Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU) and was turned into a political prison [20]. During the World War II, the political isolator was replaced by a prisoners-of-war camp (1943–1946). After the war, a children's colony was opened in the monastery, first for boys and then for girls.

In the 1960, large-scale changes related to the development of tourism began. In 1967, major restoration work started, and in 1968 the monastery became part of the Vladimir-Suzdal Museum-Reserve, becoming an important part of the tourist route "Golden Ring", which was proposed and developed by the VOOPIK and very

quickly became the hallmark of tourism branding and development in the USSR primarily for foreign tourists [18]. As a part of the "Golden Ring", museum space in Suzdal included the Kremlin (10th cent.) with the Nativity Cathedral (13th cent.) and the Saviour Monastery of St. Euthymius. The tourist infrastructure developed rapidly in Suzdal, and monastic premises were also used for these needs. In particular, hotel premises for Soviet "Intourist" company were built on the territory of the former Intercession Convent (14th cent.) (now these premises are rented to pilgrims). After the collapse of the USSR, tourism in Suzdal continued to actively develop with the participation of international institutions. Thus, the architectural ensemble of the Saviour Monastery of St. Euthymius was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1992.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the exhibition on the monastery grounds was significantly expanded and supplemented with the participation of the Memorial Society, primarily with data on political prisoners and prisoners of war. The monastery itself was positioned as an important place where religious and secular difficult pasts intersect.

In the mid-2010s, attempts began to strengthen the role and presence of the Church not only in the life of the monastery, but also in the work of the museum. The main factor was the gradual return of several premises of the Saviour Monastery of St. Euthymius to the Russian Orthodox Church [21]. On October 10, 2015, the relics of St. Euthymius were returned to the monastery, and from that time, Divine Liturgies began to be celebrated weekly [22]. On February 14, 2017, by decree of Metropolitan Evlogiy of Vladimir and Suzdal, Hieromonk Arseny (Smirnov) was appointed rector of the Bishop's Compound of the Transfiguration Cathedral of the Saviour Monastery of St. Euthymius [22]. Since then, services have been held daily. On March 12, 2017, the first monastic tonsure in the modern history of the monastery took place [22]. According to local guides, Hieromonk Arseny is considered quite liberal and defends the museum status of the monastery [23]. In the foreseeable future, it is expected that the state will return some monastic buildings to the Church for monastic life needs according to the "law of restitution", filling the monastery's number of brethren. The return of the iconostasis of the Transfiguration Cathedral from the Central Museum of Ancient Russian Culture and Art named after Andrei Rublev to the Saviour Monastery of St. Euthymius remains a relevant issue, even if it is transferred to the State Vladimir-Suzdal Museum-Reserve as an exhibit.

It also should be noted that there are many Protestants in the town. Local guides note that more than half of the local population are Protestants: evangelicals, Baptists, Adventists, and others [23]. Additionally, the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church is based in the town.

Small businesses in Suzdal are highly developed, primarily catering to foreign tourists and, in the last 2,5 years following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, tourists from Moscow. Suzdal hosts many festivals and celebrations that attract tourists from the capital, such as the Cucumber Festival, held since 2001, with the overwhelming audience, now being visitors from Moscow and St. Petersburg. Many pilgrims also come to the city, primarily from Moscow and St. Petersburg. Some tour guides note that in the 1990s, the local residents were not particularly welcoming of the opening of churches, as religious temporality and rules did not always align with tourist flows (for example, services could interfere with tourists visiting the churches) [23]. For many local residents, the priority has been the development of their businesses. In this regard, the return of the Saviour Monastery of St. Euthymius to the Church was not widely supported in the town, but at the same time was not contested by the townspeople.

Prison building and exhibition

The complex currently includes a functioning monastery, several churches and a number of museum buildings. One of the most problematic remains the Prison Building. The building, originally constructed in 1730 as a cell building, was the last major construction project of the monastery. In 1823, it was repurposed specifically

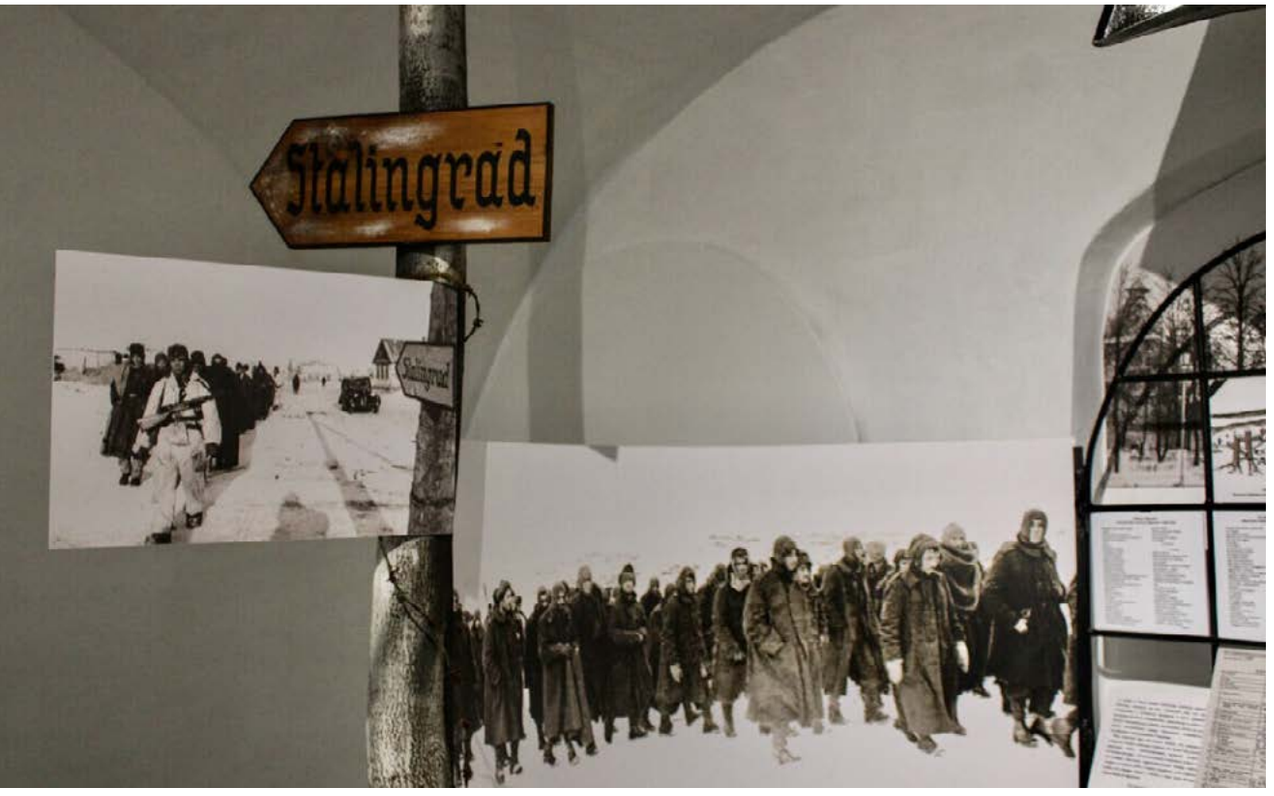
The Saviour Monastery of St. Euthymius in Suzdal, Monk Abel's cell

as a monastery prison for clergy [21]. The prison building is an extended, one-story, barracks-type structure with an exercise yard in front, located behind a high brick wall in the northern part of the monastery.

In 1977, an exhibition was opened detailing the pre-revolutionary history of the monastery prison, with significant emphasis on the Decembrist uprising, particularly noting Decembrist Fyodor Shakhovskoy, who died there in 1829. In 2001, the exhibition was significantly updated with the participation of the Moscow Memorial Society. This update was facilitated by the declassification of many state and departmental archives in Russia during the 1990s, allowing for a more comprehensive historical narrative [23].

The exhibition repositions Suzdal not just as a spiritual capital, but also as a place of exile. The first part of the exhibition presents materials on the history of the prison and the fate of its prisoners in the pre-revolutionary period. Much attention is paid to political and religious prisoners of the 18th and 19th centuries, in particular to the monk Abel, convicted in 1800 for predicting the death of Paul I, and the Decembrist Fyodor Shakhovsky.

The second part prepared with the participation of the Memorial Society narrates the history of the Suzdal prison through various stages of Soviet times, including the repressions of the 1920s–1930s and the period from 1940–1946 when the prison functioned as a filtration camp for soldiers



German and Italian prisoners of war from Stalingrad

Former Italian prisoners of war in Suzdal, 1990s

and officers of the Red Army. The exhibition, dedicated to Stalin's repressions, schematically presented the cases of various prisoners from Vladimir and Suzdal putting them in the broader context of the Gulag punitive system in the USSR.

The exhibition dedicated to the war and post-war period, on the contrary, focuses on the personal stories of prisoners of war, which is connected with the special status of prisoners. After the WWII, when the Suzdal prison served as a camp for prisoners of war, it housed officers from Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus's group defeated at Stalingrad. When Stalingrad was saved, more than 90,000 prisoners of war were captured by Soviet troops. These prisoners had to be held somewhere, and about 3,000 were placed in the Suzdal NKVD camp. This camp housed Germans, Austrians, Romanians, Hungarians, and a few Spaniards, but most of the prisoners were Italians. They were transported to Vladimir by train and then walked about forty kilometers to the detention site. In the summer of 1943, Paulus himself was detained there for over two months.

First of all, attention is paid to the conditions in which the prisoners of war were kept and the help of the local population in their survival, as well as and the effect that the captured German officers, exhausted by the long journey, had on the local residents. From the inscription on the exhibition sign: "Imagine, it was war. At that time, many were undernourished, but they tried to help. The guards even drove sympathizers away from the column, forbade them from passing food. But not everyone, of course, was so disposed towards the enemy," from the story of Andrei Babakov, a research fellow at the Vladimir-Suzdal Museum-Reserve [23]. The conditions of detention of prisoners of war allowed them to visit the library and concert hall, where they could sing or play instruments. They also worked only voluntary. Both Catholics and Lutherans had the opportunity to organize religious services. Masses were held in the Assumption Refectory Church, and a Protestant service was held in one of the round towers of the monastery. The prisoners were even allowed to play football. With the onset of spring 1944, the Italians held in the camp began to plant flowers near the buildings. From the inscription on the exhibition sign: "For example, they [prisoners of war] were taken to nearby collective farms for harvesting and collecting firewood. For this, they received a certain payment in the form of an increase in the diet. Romanian prisoners of war started a vegetable garden here. The Italians were excellent cooks and worked in the kitchen. Residents of the village of Chernizha were surprised that they were cooking frogs," from the story of Andrei Babakov, a research fellow at the Vladimir-Suzdal Museum-Reserve [23].

The second important part of this exhibition is dedicated to the stories of several Italian prisoners of war who served time in the Suzdal camp and returned to Italy after the war. The exhibition presents gifts from Italian prisoners to the guards and local residents, thanks to whose help they were able to survive. The final part of the exhibition is dedicated to the memory of Italian officers, some of whom came to Suzdal in the 1990s. From the inscription on the exhibition sign: "I would like to thank all those women who, when we were in the 'come on, come on' marches, gave us a piece of bread at the risk of themselves," Ugo Spaccamonti, second lieutenant of the Italian army, former prisoner of war [23].

As local guides note, after the monastery was returned to the church, the number of visitors to the exhibition has greatly decreased due to religious services [23]. However, since the monastery continues to be a UNESCO Heritage site, visiting is possible for both pilgrims and tourists.

Conclusion

In 2022, Ekaterina Pronicheva, who previously headed the Moscow Tourism Development Committee, was appointed as the new general director of the Vladimir-Suzdal Museum-Reserve. At the end of 2023, the exhibition closed for renovations in preparation for the celebration of the 1000th anniversary of Suzdal. It is supposed that after the restoration, the exhibition 'Prisoners of the Monastery Prison' will be rebuilt with the inclusion of prison courtyards in the exhibition space. Local guides (particularly those from the community of guides formed around Vladimir VOOPIK

who work with tours of the "Golden Ring") note that the new administration of the Vladimir-Suzdal Museum-Reserve plans to close the part of the exhibition dedicated to repression [23]. The mention of Memorial, which was closed by court order in December 2021, is considered inappropriate in the current context. Instead, the exhibition will focus on imprisoned representatives of the church (before 1917), with the Soviet period being represented only by materials about prisoners from Stalingrad.

On one hand, the heritage of Suzdal is increasingly branded as part of the "Golden Ring," targeting both Russian and foreign tourists while maintaining its UNESCO status. On the other hand, the Church is gradually gaining influence and visibility, particularly in managing tourist flows, though without undermining the heritage status of religious sites. The complex history associated with the monastery space poses challenges for both tourism and religious authorities, as it does not align neatly with their objectives. Local historians, many of whom are also businessmen, are willing to engage with tourists and pilgrims but are not committed to advocating for the preservation of discussions about the difficult past; moreover, they seem largely excluded from these broader processes.

As previously mentioned, there is a clash between heritage discourses—focused on heritage management and tourism development—and religious discourses. This clash is not uniform, but it often leads to the exclusion of discussions about a difficult past and contentious memories. The closure of the Memorial Society and the persecution of its activists have further facilitated this exclusion.

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