

## Reflections on Solovki

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Our trip to the Solovetsky (Solovki) Islands was in some ways a study in contrasts. From bustling and cosmopolitan St. Petersburg we were quickly (well, not that quickly) in the forests of Karelia on our long but well-supplied train ride north. Then, just as suddenly, onto the open sea in a small ferry, which took us from the town of Kem' to the Solovetsky Islands. Gulls, following behind the boat, served as the main source of entertainment on our 1.5-hour trip. Passengers held bits of bread aloft or threw them into the air, and the gulls duly swooped down to snatch them.

The view from the ferry—rocky islands adorned with lichen and low coniferous forests—reminded me a great deal of the Newfoundland/Labrador coast, and others of the western Scottish isles. The Solovetsky monastery, however, left little doubt as to where we were. The cupolas of the main cathedral (undergoing partial *remont*, of course) loomed above imposing fortress walls, made of enormous boulders plastered together with brick and mortar. The prominence of natural materials was striking, and fortress was evidently strong enough to withstand even nineteenth-century bombardment. Much of the monastery is original, but it is clear that the monks themselves straddle the old world and the new. The sight of bearded monks, clad in black robes, was strange enough, never mind seeing two rolling through the *dvor* of the monastery in a Toyota 4x4.

There is something almost Dostoevskian about Solovki. Besides the monastery and landscape, a place of harsh beauty where even a Raskolnikov might find salvation, there is island's distinction as one of the first Soviet penal camps, the progenitor, in many ways, of the GULAG system, as Michael David-Fox explained during a talk one afternoon. Only remnants of the old camp are still in evidence, but it of course hovers like a ghost over the archipelago. There is a museum, and the monastery has set up a memorial of sorts at a skete that served as the "isolator" for prisoners, who were kept in appalling and often lethal conditions. An unknown number were shot on the adjacent hillside.

A week after our trip to Solovki I visited the Dachau concentration camp near Munich, also the first of its kind. In contrast to Solovki, however, Dachau is minutes from a major city, very neat, all concrete, steel and stucco. The line between past and present also feels much sharper, as the whole camp is a museum. Whereas forest and monastery have all but grown over the camp on Solovki, Dachau is paved over, blighted, and seemingly frozen in time (although there were major changes after 1945). On Solovki the effects of the camp on the natural world appear minimal, as seventy years' of new growth has filled in old gaps in the landscape. According to the Solovki museum, logging removed much of the forest cover in the 1920s and 1930s, perhaps one of the reasons the camp was closed in '39. The trees indeed looked spindly and young, but given the latitude they could well have been many decades old. One curious characteristic was the absence of animal life; I don't think I saw a single wild mammal, even a squirrel or mouse, during our time on the island. Perhaps starving camp prisoners snatched up whatever they could, and these populations had yet to repopulate. Or, quite possibly, we just scared them off.

The monastery, with its long presence and wide-ranging commercial operations, had marked the land more clearly than the camp. A vibrant center for fish and salt trading for centuries, it was an important economic hub, and, as Julia Lajus and Aleksei Kraikovskii remind

us, part of the colonization of the Russian north. Perhaps the most impressive example of the monks' industriousness is the system of canals that connect several of Solovki's lakes. There are an astonishing number of lakes on the islands, and one afternoon we rowed through several of them without portaging, thanks to the narrow but well-made canals. These were at one time, no doubt, the island's true roads. Between the canals and the sluice gates near the harbor, where falling fresh water once powered mills, it was clear that this was a place where man and nature have long been intertwined. Longer, of course, than the monastery has been there, as the intricate stone labyrinths on neighboring Bolshaia Zaiatskaia Island—and the competing stone cross built later by some enterprising monks—made clear. This continuity with the past is one of the things that most sets apart representations of this northern landscape those in Canada, where talk of pre-European wilderness and native stewardship is so often the norm. On the Solovetsky Islands, the dichotomy between ecological natives and rapacious outsiders would ring particularly false. Here, "Russians" are as native as anyone.

In its heyday the monastery seems to have achieved something approximating an equilibrium with the local environment, or at least with its fisheries, as Julia and Aleksei illustrated during our workshop in St. Petersburg. More recently, the creation of the Vodlozero National Park in the 1990s—which Alan Roe detailed during our workshop—suggests a desire to return to a confluence of ecology and spirituality following the upheavals of the twentieth century, though the success of such alternative models of development remains to be seen. Whatever becomes of the Russian north, the Solovetsky islands will continue to attest to the constant interaction of culture and nature, and of past and present.