

September 7, 2013

## On “Being There” and Spatial Dimension to History

**Michael David-Fox**

I had read a lot about Solovki before we traveled there. I had studied the *Solovetskii Lager Osobogo Naznacheniiia* (SLON, or the Solovetskii Camp of Special Designation) extensively when writing an entire book chapter revolving about the writer Maksim Gor’kii’s visit to Solovki in 1929. For example, I had read histories of the Gulag and secret police camps, of which Solovki was a crucial component; I had looked through the memoirs and writings of prisoners, Soviet ideological and political publications. I thought I had been conscientious in also perusing general histories of the archipelago and the Solovetskii monastery. Finally, I had gazed intently at the marvelous photographs in Iurii Brodskii’s remarkable 500-page volume, *Dvadsat’ let osobogo naznacheniiia*. (In fact, the discovery of the 2009 second edition of Brodskii’s work in a little souvenir store on the island, which was missing at the Library of Congress, was a small yet unexpected highlight of the trip).

What I did not get from all my reading was a clear and precise sense of the spatial layout of SLON. Partly, this was my own fault; there were place names in the works that I had read, but I did not go the extra mile and try to locate them on maps. For example, I had read quite a bit about the cruel tortures of the men’s “punishment isolator” (*shtrafnoi izoliator*) on Sekirnaia gora, where many of the atrocities of the camp had taken place, but did not have a clear sense of where that stood in relation to the main monastery.

Moving around Solovki, by boat, by bus, on foot, and by bike (in conjunction with learning more about the economic and religious development of the Solovetskii monastery from our Russian colleagues, who were experts on this topic), gave me a much clearer sense of the spatial dimension to all the Soviet activities on the archipelago. In particular, I realized just how tightly the Soviet camp after 1923 was intertwined with the structures taken over from previous centuries of “monastic colonization” of the archipelago. The isolator, for example, was housed in the *sobor* (church) atop Sekirnaia gora. In the chapel inside, restored after 1991, the Bolsheviks had whitewashed the religious imagery and replaced it with red slogans. (One example can be found on page 117 of Brodskii’s book, which I now look at with different eyes. It says “Soviet power does not punish, but corrects”—which takes on special meaning in the context of what went on in the isolator.) Similarly, at the remarkable Botanical Gardens on the main island that the monks had cultivated, camp prisoners continued their horticultural endeavors while the camp director took over the fine house of the archimandrite. The camp’s activities on the other islands of the archipelago closely followed the earlier construction of the previous era. And even a number of monks, we learned, who were skilled in financial calculations, ended up working for the secret police authorities after the monastery was closed in 1920.

Traveling around the island and the archipelago thus did not only make me attuned to the spatial layout and the distances between different places I had known about before, but it revealed a key historical connection to investigate further. Moreover, it made me think about how to not pass over but more systematically research spatial history from the sources that are available.