

Our Trip to Solovetsky Island

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In August, our group of Russian, American, and European scholars embarked on a trip to the Solovetsky Islands, in the White Sea of Russia's Far North. Having gathered in Russia's 'northern capital', Saint Petersburg, we journeyed for 16 hours northwards by train to Kem', before making the crossing to the Solovetsky Islands by small ferry. Our destination was the largest island in the archipelago, Bolshoi Solovetsky Island. Our purpose was to explore the relationship between the environment and natural resource use.

The two most notable features of Bolshoi Solovetsky Island are its monastery and its history as one of the first Soviet penal camps. We were fortunate to have in our group scholars and historians that were able to share their expertise on both of these subjects. Julia Lajus and Alexei Kraikovskii, both of the European University of St Petersburg, illustrated not only the ways in which the monks of Solovetsky were able to utilise the natural wealth of the local fisheries and adapt to the local landscape through the construction of canals that served as a substitute for roads, but also to place the development of the Solovetsky monastery into the broader historical context of the colonisation of the Russian North.

With us also was historian Michael David-Fox, who shared his expertise on the role of Solovetsky in the Soviet penal system during our visits to the Solovetsky monastery (which was used as a prison), the smaller church atop the Sekirnaya hill (that was used for isolation punishments), the Botanical Gardens (where some prisoners worked) and Solovetsky's own museum of the history of the GULAG. At all these places, the history and experiences of the wretched people that passed through the penal system here hung in the air, invisible but almost tangible.

What unites the experiences of the monks of Solovetsky monastery and the prisoners of the Solovetsky penal camps is the reversal of a dichotomy that is now treated as received wisdom in the industrialised world: That man has conquered nature, domesticated it, and bent it to his will, including the exploitation of the earth's natural resources for his own enrichment and development. On Bolshoi Solovetsky Island, one cannot help but feel that it is nature that remains in control, and that those who lived there in centuries past were engaged in a struggle simply to survive, always dependent on the local resources but never mastering them. Solovetsky may have been one of Russia's wealthiest monasteries, but life for the monks, far from European Russia, at the mercy of harsh winters and eking a precarious living from fishing, must have been far from easy. Similarly, for the tens of thousands of prisoners that spent time on Solovetsky, the combination of climate and geography made escape virtually impossible, and their lives within the camp depended on the local climate and food supplies.

Having spent part of June 2013 on the Scottish Hebrides, I was struck by the similarities between these two environments, both of them northern, sparsely populated, and beautiful. While the Hebrides carries the tragic history of the Highland Clearances, Solovetsky bears the burden of its Soviet penal history. Both places are staggeringly beautiful, yet haunted by the ghosts of their former populations. Both places are now frequented by tourists, who marvel at the beauty of the landscape and local wildlife, and pity those who suffered there at

the hands of their fellow men. The idea of tourism in such a location, and the mastering of the environment for such purposes, was well illustrated in a presentation by Alan Roe on Russian national parks during our time on Solovetsky.

My own research considers the political economy of natural gas in Russia, and its production, transport, domestic sale, and export. The trip to the Solovetsky Islands illustrated the challenges man faces when he wishes to develop the natural resources of an isolated northern region. Even just moving around Solovetsky itself, across short distances, was a challenge. The major roads were rudimentary, while the secondary roads were dirt tracks that dissolved into impassable channels of mud, as we discovered when we hired bicycles and attempted to cycle to a dam some 10km from Solovetsky monastery. Soviet planners faced a monumental challenge in the 1970s when the main centre of Russian gas production shifted from the Volga region to North-West Siberia. With the major gas fields in this region now declining, Russia's largest gas producer (and successor to the Soviet Gas Ministry), Gazprom, faces another 'giant leap north' into virgin territory as it shifts its production centre to the Yamal Peninsula. Just as their Soviet predecessors did in the 1970s, Gazprom has built railways, bridges, roads, new housing settlements, and all manner of related infrastructure, as it attempts to develop the natural wealth of a region of permafrost, swamps, rivers, harsh winters, and mosquito-infested summers, far from the major population centres of European Russia.

Indeed the three themes of 'the North', aquatic environments, and exploitation of natural resources remained central when we returned to St Petersburg for a day of seminars on the retired icebreaker, the Krasin. After Alexei and Julia gave another presentation on the role of monastic fisheries in mastering the Russian North, Nick Breyfogle, Mark Sokolsky, and Abigail Sutton gave interesting presentations on the subjects of fisheries and the colonisation of aquatic environments. These were followed by presentations by Jonathan Oldfield, Voicu Sucala, and myself on the study of Russia's productive resources, and the exploitation of such natural resources in Romania and Russia respectively.

As a participant, I would like to conclude by thanking Prof. David Moon and Victoria Beale for organising the trip, the Leverhulme Trust for making the trip financially possible, Katya Kalemeneva for being such a charming and informative tour guide on Bolshoi Solovetsky and 'Great Hare Island', the staff at the Hotel Priyut for our wonderful accommodation on Bolshoi Solovetsky Island, and our colleagues at the Solovetsky Maritime Museum and the Krasin icebreaker for providing the facilities for our intellectually valuable and highly enjoyable presentation and seminar sessions.