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# Lost in Post: Memory and Oblivion in Post-Soviet Urban Text

Abstract

Il saggio si propone di indagare la dialettica tra memoria e rimozione nel 'testo urbano' postsovietico dopo l'invasione russa dell'Ucraina. Il 24 febbraio 2022 ha infatti segnato una «accelerazione della storia» (Nora 1984 I, XVII), una netta cesura tra un passato prossimo – quello postsovietico – e un futuro ancora incerto. Tale cesura ha innescato un nuovo e inedito «lavoro di memoria» (Ricoeur, 2016: 40) ma anche di rimozione, che rielabora le funzioni dei luoghi e, conseguentemente, delle pratiche del quotidiano. Questi aspetti si riflettono sul 'testo della città' nel quale si assiste a operazioni di conservazione dei brand occidentali che in seguito all'invasione e alle sanzioni hanno lasciato (realmente o apparentemente) il paese, ma anche di rimozione, come nel caso dei morfemi urbani legati a Memorial: dalla chiusura delle sedi dell'organizzazione alla rimozione delle targhe del progetto della memoria *Poslednij Adres* (Ultimo indirizzo).

Keywords

Testo urbano; Memoria; Rimozione; Re-branding, Russia Post-sovietica.

Abstract

The article aims to investigate the dialectic between memory and oblivion in the post-Soviet Russian 'urban text' after the invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, 24 February 2022 marked an «acceleration of history» (Nora 1984 I, XVII), a sharp *caesura* between a near past – the post-Soviet past – and a still uncertain future. This *caesura* has triggered a novel and unprecedented «work of memory» (Ricoeur, 2016: 40) but also a process of obliteration, which has redefined the functions and the roles of places themselves and, consequently, of everyday practices. This is reflected in the urban 'text of the city' in which there are operations of continuity of Western brands that have left (whether really or apparently) the country as a result of the invasion and sanctions, but also of removal, as in the case of the urban morphs linked to Memorial: from the closure of the organisation's headquarters to the dismantling of the plaques of the *Poslednii Adres* (Last Address) memory project.

Keywords

Urban Text; Memory; Removal; Re-branding; Post-Soviet Russia.

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## 1. Re-branding and remembering

On the morning of 31 January 1990, braving the bitter cold, there were more than five thousand people in Pushkin Square, in Moscow, chomping at the bit to cross the threshold of the first Soviet McDonald's. The location was full of significance: here, from 1966 to 1988, the legendary Lira café had had its home and thrived; an establishment with a Western interior which had been a meeting and gathering place for youth groups such as the Soviet hippies, but also, at the height of Perestroika, the backdrop to Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaign[1].

Turning back to that 31 January, McDonald's provided more than thirty thousand meals, not only because of the novelty of the food, which for the Soviet wages of the time was by no means cheap, but also because of the revolutionary implications of the event, the breakthrough of an outpost of the Western world. It was, however, still a long and tortuous path, as demonstrated by the endless and well-disciplined queue that had snaked across the square throughout the day, similar to those that usually formed in front of shops, in which stout women, armed with their *avos'ki* – the iconic net bag of Soviet 'shopping' – during the years of the infamous *defitsit*, nurtured the hope of obtaining something to eat or other consumer goods[2]. The *izobilie* (literally "abundance") concerned only rare cases and did not exempt the Soviet citizen from interminable queues: like that in front of Lenin's Mausoleum, which nevertheless repaid the wait with a 'portion', of «inexhaustible» ideological product[3]. Obviously, the queuing at shops did not involve the tourists from the longed-for West who – depending on the years – were piloted to the *Berezka* (lit. "birch"), selective-access places where there was an abundance of 'dedicated' products, from souvenirs to typical Russian food (to which, of course, members of the nomenklatura also had access), purchasable in foreign currency only[4].

The opening of the American fast-food restaurant in the centre of Moscow was a hint of a profound change that would eventually and shortly lead to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Without delving now into the controversial history of McDonald's in the USSR, which had begun more than ten years earlier with the registration of products and an attempt to open for the 1980

[1] On Lira, see *Moskva. Cafe "Lira"* (1985), see also Piccolo (2023: 266-272).

[2] «Deficit [...] denoted scarce, hard-to-find goods. More often, the goods are not obtained in the usual, roundabout, complicated and sometimes not quite legal way» (Sarnov, 2000: 61).

[3] Piretto (2015: 91); on Soviet queues, see ivi: 88-93.

[4] The nomenklatura was fascinated by the foreign goods that could be found in these exclusive shops (perfumes, delicatessen, etc.). As Piretto (2015: 138) pointed out, unlike the empty Soviet shops for the masses, which displayed in their windows goods that could not actually be bought, the windows of the *Berezka* shops were blacked out because «it was not considered appropriate for an ordinary citizen to be confronted, even visually, with that universe». On *Berezka* shops and their closure in the Perestroika years see Ivanova 2017.

Olympics in Moscow, I would like to underline the semiotic force of the event: it is the first Soviet fast-food restaurant, as shown by the curious union (or ideological collision…) of the globalised logo[5] with the USSR flag. A flag that a few months later, with the collapse of the USSR, would be lowered, within the framework of a wave of radical changes in the urban space starting with the removal of symbols and monuments of the Soviet past and through the adoption of a new 'language': the names of the country, cities, streets and metro stations (as many as 32 in Moscow) were changed.

The city is in indeed a «*complex* text, stratified in time and variable in space» (Volli, 2005: 6), constantly shifting, but at the same time capable of preserving the memory of the past, in an intricate organisation of signs and meanings, in which different (and conflicting) forces come into play: past/present, beginning/end, construction/destruction, semanticisation/desemanticisation. The city is therefore an open and dynamic polyglot discourse, «a cauldron of texts and codes, variously arranged and heterogenous, belonging to different languages and different levels», which makes it «a field of diverse semiotic collisions that would be impossible under other conditions» (Lotman, 2020: 130).

These features are even more striking in the Russian urban text, particularly in the Moscow text of the 20th and 21st centuries, in which the above-mentioned dichotomies can be subsumed under the continuity/rupture macro-opposition. In detail, there are three breaking points – or cultural «explosions» (see Lotman, 2009) – moments that had the greatest impact on the urban tissue: the Russian Revolution, the collapse of the USSR and the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. These were events that marked «an acceleration of history» (Nora, 1984: I, XVII), a Turning Point (see Abbot, 1997: 85-105), a profound fracture between epochs, signs, ideologies at the basis of the very conception of the city. The change from Tsarist to Soviet Moscow is beyond the scope of this article but we should mention that in the 1990s, traces of the Soviet past were largely erased and, in several cases, pre-Revolutionary Moscow buildings, streets and squares names and urban elements and signs were restored.

The large-scale operation of *damnatio memoriae* with the removal from the urban text of the 'morphemes' of the Soviet past such as monuments, statues, slabs of an uncomfortable and still painful past, has been accompanied by the restoration of memory and history denied by the Soviet regime. For instance, in the first half of 1990s the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was re-built (later consecrated in 2000). Originally built in 19th century under Aleksandr Vitberg's project to celebrate the victory over Napoleon Bonaparte in 1812, during the anti-religious campaign (also to recover the considerable amount of gold in the domes and inside), it was demolished in 1931 to make way for the utopian Soviet Palace. The colossal building designed by Boris Ioafan, which envisaged the presence of a statue of Lenin on its summit with one arm raised

[5] On this theme see for instance Ritzer (2004: 8ss).

as if touching the sky with his fingers, remained unrealised due to the looming war that interrupted the work, but also to the architectural difficulties of such a huge project. Despite this, the Palace of the Soviets became a sort of chimera, feeding official discourse through its reproduction in posters, books but also films, such as *Novaia Moskva* (New Moscow, 1938) or *Kosmicheskii reis* (Journey into space, 1936) in which it appears in the Moscow skyline of the future. This is a phenomenon that we could call 'memory of the future' or of the invisible. In this regard, Gian Piero Piretto coined the syntagm «degeneration of the icon»: «The orthodox religious icon contained within itself the essence of the invisible; socialist realism subverts this concept by making "the invisible be seen" through the strategy of deception, of utopia only partially realised, but passed off as real» (Piretto, 2018: 216). In its place for many years remained an immense crater that in 1958 was transformed into the world's largest outdoor swimming pool[6].

In February 1990 – while Mc Donald's opened – restoration work on the church was authorised. Several examples of the transition from Soviet to post-Soviet Moscow can be enumerated, on which – as in the other countries of the former communist bloc – much has been written (see for instance Crowley and Reid, 2002; Forest and Johnson, 2002). Less investigated, on the other hand, is the third 'deflagration' of Moscow's urban tissue and its signs, the one that occurred after 24th February 2022, which again challenged Muscovites' and visitors' «urban semiotic competence», namely the ability to read the new segments of the city discourse «attributing to them a meaning related to everyday practices» (Volli, 2005: 7). Regarding tourism: while the Russian figures report similar numbers of visitors as in the past, it should be specified that it is the increase in domestic tourism (also due to the difficulties of reaching the usual European destinations, see, among others, Khlobistova, 2024) and the massive replacement of European and Western ones by those from China, India and Iran.

This shift to the East (or simply the estrangement from the West) is even more pronounced in the urban space: since the beginning of Ukraine invasion, many European and North American multinationals have decided to suspend or close their activities in Russia[7]. In most cases[8], like empty shells, the premises have been 'occupied' – given up, sold, etc. – by new local enterprises that have exploited both their typology and brand in a revisited key. The best known case is probably that of McDonald's, which has been replaced, since June 2022, by the new brand 'Vkusno – i točka' (literally "Tasty and that's it"), launched by Aleksandr Govor[9]: the fast-food restaurants of the new chain are almost all lo-

[6] On the Palace of Soviets and the Soviet utopia see also Papernyi (2011: 29-35).

[7] A thorough brand overview was done by Jeffrey Sonnenfeld and Yale Research Team, see Yale CELI List (2024).

[8] With some exceptions such as Danone or Auchan which created a special Russian brand (Moi Ashan) under which it continued to operate in Russia until April 2024 (see Chassany, 2024).

[9] On this rebranding strategy I refer to my previous work, see Piccolo (2023: 266-272).

cated in the former McDonald's sites, the logo has changed but it is reminiscent of the famous American giant; the colours are the same, even the umbrellas for the outdoor tables are in the shade of green, well-known and recognisable throughout the world. As for the dishes, the names have been modified but in many cases the meals served resembles those on the previous menu.

Similar operations have involved other food multinationals such as KFC, today Rostic's – Russian-owned by Smart Service, which took over a brand already known in Russia from 1993 to 2006 (see Mann, 2022; Rodionov, 2023) modifying the name but maintaining the previous KFC dishes (with a few exceptions) and confirming the previous staff. Instead, Starbucks, which shut down its 130 establishments in May 2022, became Star Coffee, a chain that, in addition to part of the name – and of the establishments – features a logo resembling the famous mermaid in which, however, the crown has been replaced by a *kokoshnik*, the traditional Russian headdress.

This switch does not only concern the domain of food and beverage but also several commodities. It suffices to mention two, that allow us to consider some variations in the rebranding paradigm: Decathlon and Ikea. The French sportswear and equipment multinational has been replaced by Desport, which bears the same sign, the same concept – as well as the same premises – and even the same slogans as the former French brand. The new name, however, had been in competition with some variants, from Desiatibore, Dec or Dk (Nurieva, 2023). Ikea is a further, more complex case, with various substitutes in the Moscow territory (and often in other cities). The first brand is Swed House which had already been founded by Merden to distribute Ikea products in Belarus (see Spetsivtsev, 2023). After 24 February, it also started to distribute on Russian territory. Not only the name, almost a metonymy that makes the (current) nationality of the brand explicit, but its hues – of the logo and the shops with their traditional yellow and blue colours – immediately recall the original. The same elements characterise another product line, that of the "Idea" stores: an idea, indeed, very successful and at a very low cost, in a kind of new futurist internal declination of the words, with the replacement of a single letter from the brand ('d' instead of 'k'), accompanied by a light bulb[10].

While McDonald's, Starbucks and the other above-mentioned brands have left the Russian market (though reserving the right to re-enter within a certain period), other companies that initially declared to leave the country have instead 'camouflaged' themselves in more or less clear-cut ways, especially in the eyes of Ukrainian operators. Thus, for example, Dobryi Cola (Good Cola) has replaced Coca Cola whereas Amazing Red sells Puma products. Without getting either into the delicate and slippery area of balancing profit and business ethics, or into the complex field of the current legal status of brands, this 'war of logos', whether old, new or disguised, is being mirrored in the urban semiotics.

[10] The Gud Lakk furniture shop, with its blue sign and store concept, also winks, albeit less conspicuously, to the original Swedish brand.

Brand names almost identical to the originals, logos very similar to their antecedents, the use of the same colour shades and of the same locations, enhance a process of actual defamiliarization of the urban text that challenges the citizens' semiotic competence: everything looks *almost* identical as before – logos, colours, stores, products – and, at the same time, nothing is identical as before. The analogous holds true for foreign visitors to Russian cities who find themselves immersed in the altered (defamiliarized) signs of a globalised commercial reality, once familiar to them.

If a brand is like a «proper name» that «rigidly designates the brand universe» and «can in no way be substituted by others, let alone borrowed, either by legal provision or by linguistic-communicative structure» (Marrone, 2007: 24), the Russian urban semiotic practice demonstrates that in its deformed and alienated form, the brands, in the words of Umberto Eco, «say almost the same thing» (2003). Behind a logo, in fact, there are not only economic and commercial implications, but also communicative ones, in a broad sense, up to «the transformations of the collective imagination, the construction and recognition of identity» (Marrone, 2007: 3). Within the urban text, these properties of logos are connected to the places (headquarters, stores, etc.) that host them and to their characteristics (colours, concepts, shop windows, slogans). As Eviatar Zerubavel notes, places are «a formidable basis for establishing a strong sense of sameness […] with some sense of permanence, they help promote the highly reassuring conservative illusion that nothing fundamental has really changed» (2003: 41). In the dialectic between memory and oblivion in the city's war of signs, the rebranding process that exploits the marks of the past, thanks to the continuity of places, creates a «mnemonic bridging» with the pre-war Russian reality and, consequently, through camouflage of the urban signifiers, an «illusory *quasi-contiguity*» (Zerubavel, 2003: 40) that everything is as before.

## 2. Oblivion and the Memorial

In contrast to the stubborn effort to maintain the memory of everyday life prior to 24 February, there is a parallel strategy of suppressing certain aspects of Russian society remembrance culture. One of the most significant removals in recent years is that of Memorial, a human rights non-profit organisation officially founded in 1989 in Moscow (but active from 1987) by a group of dissidents and historians including Nobel Prize winner Andrei Sakharov, which has fought, as the name suggests, for the reconstruction of memory of the victims of the repressions (Stalinist but also of the following decades) and the denunciation of Soviet crimes and persecution, through archival and documentary investigation[11].

[11] On the history of the organisation see for example the interview with Arsenii Roginskii on the 25th anniversary of the founding of Memorial (Ryzhenko, 2014); see also Dundovich (2023, 677 ss).

Already in the years of stagnation, intellectuals and dissidents against Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's expulsion had demanded the publication of his book-denunciation *The Gulag Archipelago* together with access to the archives of the secret police. Only during the Perestroika and especially with the fall of the USSR was it possible to access the archives and work on reconstructing the past. Over the years, Memorial has also promoted a vigorous publishing activity, both through Books of Memory, «a virtual cemetery of the victims of repression» (Dundovich, 2023: 683) and through monographs and collective books, a recovery of denied memory also with didactic purposes[12]. Memorial has received several international awards, ranging from the Nansen Refugee Award of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in 2004, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in 2009, to the Nobel Prize in 2022.

Nevertheless, on 28 December 2021, the Russian Supreme Court ordered the cessation of Memorial's activities and the closure of its offices due to violation of the Foreign Agents Law. Indeed, as the Prosecutor General states, the association would have contributed to creating «a false image of the Soviet Union as a terrorist state» by discrediting state organs and the memory of the Second World War[13]. Demonstrations by Memorial's supporters and even initiatives launched by its international headquarters followed[14], but, with the invasion of Ukraine, things came to an end and several members of the association were arrested.

Meanwhile, in December 2022, Memorial was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, although its president, Ian Rachinskii, was strongly advised not to withdraw the prize. Inside the country, not only were all Memorial offices bolted down, but within the urban context this erasure – of those fighting for historical memory – appears even more pronounced due to the sabotage of the *Poslednii adres* (Last address)[15], a project lunched by Memorial in 2014 to commemorate the victims of repressions. Inspired by the Stolperstein project and by virtue of the principle 'one name, one life, one plaque', *Poslednii adres* consists of small steel plaques (already more than 1,500) with data (name, date of birth, death and rehabilitation) of the repressed, placed on the buildings of their last lifetime address. The plaques have a hole in place of a photograph in order to represent loss and emptiness; as Oustinova-Stjepanovic notices, the plaques «instantiate a tension between an absent face of a mass atrocity and a specific name of the dead» (2023: 125).

Over the years, the project spread to other countries. In a relentless collision between memory and oblivion, *Poslednii adres* flanks *Vozvrashchenie imen* (Return of names), an initiative created in 2007 and organised by Memorial: on

[12] A list of publications can be found on the association's website.

[13] <https://www.memo.ru/en-us/memorial/departments/intermemorial/news/667> (28.11.2024).

[14] Since 2004 there has also been an Italian headquarters, see <https://www.memorial-italia.it> (25.1.2024).

[15] <https://www.poslednyadres.ru/> (28.11.2024).

this occasion, for 12 hours, on 29 October, the eve of Political Prisoners' Day, at the Solovetsskii kamen (Solovetsskii stone), the memorial to the victims of political repressions on Lubianka Square, citizens and activists read out the names[16] of the victims. It is a crucial site of memory: Solovetsskii stone was inaugurated on 30 October 1990 and placed in front of the FSB (former NKVD and KGB) headquarters and the monument of Feliks Dzerzhinskii, the founder of the Soviet secret police and 'icon' of red terror. The coexistence in the same square (and in Muscovite «*socio*mental topography of the past», Zerubavel, 2003: 2) of these two conflicting narratives of memory was short-lived: in August 1991, the statue of Dzerzhinskii was dismantled, like many other symbols of the Soviet past (Grant, 2001: 332-362).

Unfortunately, as early as 2020, the authorities banned the action because of COVID-19 and then reinstated it in 2023 in a completely symbolic and reduced manner, allowing only a few people to participate[17]. The action is also carried out abroad (including in Italy) and the Solovetsskii stone has become a symbol of the memory of dissidents and war victims where flowers are brought (as at the death of Navalnyi).

In conclusion, if the urban text is by its very nature characterised by a 'semiotic collision' of diachronic and synchronic elements that make it a 'powerful generator of new information' (Lotman, 2020: 130), the dialectic between memory and oblivion and «social *norms of remembrance*» (Zerubavel, 1997: 13), especially after 24 February, shows unprecedented and yet unresolved dynamics between a «work of memory» (Ricoeur, 2016: 40) and forgetfulness and, consequently, with its own identity. The result is a «continuous bricolage of urban appearance» (Volli, 2008: 19) in which memory and oblivion dictate persistence, reworking, but also absences and painful omissions.

[16] First and last name, nationality age, profession and date of disappearance or death are read out. For more details on Return of Names and similar commemorations see Oustinova-Stjepanovic (2023: 131-150).

[17] The authorities sabotaged this ritual commemoration. As Zerubavel notices, the rituality of the remembrance moments «helps mnemonic communities explicitly articulate what they consider historically eventful» (Zerubavel, 2003: 29).

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