

## Post-Soviet Exclusions

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There is a great deal of literature on Soviet cartography covering the extent to which it served propaganda purposes, and on various geographical distortions done to highlight some parts of the Soviet landscape while hiding others, excluding them from representation.

Less has been written on how these manipulations influenced the construction of spaces in Soviet minds and the perception of the immense Soviet land in general. How did the absence of access to precise geographical data and the level of security surrounding the production of maps influence the way people thought about their land? Some of my work as an artist conceptualises the Soviet “unsaid” and silences in various knowledge production systems, including cartography. Here I will simply call them “blank spots”, without going deeply into the theory.

In this essay my question about silences goes beyond Soviet times. How has cartography changed in the post-Soviet era? What sense of space is being constructed for Russians by post-Soviet cartography? Have the traits of Soviet cartography sneaked into Russian maps? Have the “blank spots” been filled? These questions have yet to be unpacked and studied.



My work P.S. (Penitentiary System) consists of 12 transparent Plexiglas panels (see photographs). Each panel has geo-referenced dots to represent types of penitentiary institution in Russia, mapped by open data sources: correctional colonies for men, women, girls, boys, ex-FSB officers, hospitals and so on. On the last panel is a tracing of the contour of Russia. The installation aims to expose the current extent and locations of correctional institutions in Russia.

P.S. has its origins in an ESRC-funded project, [Space and Gender in Russia's Geography of Punishment](#), initiated by Professor Judith Pallot, who invited me as a cartographer to do geo-referencing of the archival data. The project was one of the first initiatives of its kind, followed by the [Topography of Terror](#)<sup>1</sup> and [Mapping the Gulag by the Gulag Museum in Moscow](#). While working on the project I started to think of making a statement outside academia which could draw attention to the problem.

The production of geographical knowledge and creation of spatial identities has always been bound up with the state of a society. The geographical imagination – the way people see and think of their country – shapes the way people perceive themselves, the space they belong to and how it contributes to their identities. However, the production of such imagination can be controlled or manipulated by those in power.

Soviet and post-Soviet geographical imaginations and how they were constructed in society are an especially interesting case. Their formation in socialist and post-socialist spaces dramatically differs from the imagination formed in other countries in what can be described as the Global North, and this crucial difference is almost completely overlooked by western and Russian scholarship.

The main difference is that (post)-Soviet geographical imaginations depend on cultural representation rather than personal observations – far more so than in many countries in the Global North. This can be explained by factors such as the vast size of the former USSR (and contemporary Russia) and the lack of internal mobility– due to the heritage of Soviet transport infrastructure, travel costs, absence of tourist infrastructure and underdevelopment of domestic tourism. People lack the possibility and possibly the desire to see the country by themselves, and instead rely on the visual images they see in the media, museums, schools and universities.



What is even more important is that almost all the institutions that produced geographical knowledge and its representation in the Soviet period were controlled by the state and had to follow the party line. To a certain extent this is still true. Though in contemporary Russia academic institutions, at least superficially, enjoy more freedom from the state, the narrative of geography and visual production of Russian regions is still mostly a privilege of those who are in power. There are numerous discussions about the way historical narrative is becoming increasingly monopolised by the Russian government, but little attention is drawn to the geographical discourse that is, in my opinion, undergoing the same process of unification and centralisation.

In other words, the way Russians form an image of their country and specific regions within it relies on cultural products, which are mostly produced by organisations that are either directly connected with the government or depend on financial support from the government.

Maps are one such cultural product – a crucial one. So, if we approach contemporary Russian maps from that perspective, how do they contribute to the geographical imaginations of Russians? What I propose to look at is how the “problematic” Soviet landscapes are represented in Russian maps. Are we able to find ex-Gulag sites on official Russian maps? Can we find a single “official” map revealing ex-Terror landscapes? Have the blank spots been filled in?

Well, actually – no. The silence created by the Russian government around the topic is perfectly reflected in the maps.

The National Russian Atlas (NRA) – the main official set of post-Soviet maps issued in 2014 by the Russian Cartographical Agency – deserves a separate study in detailed research as it carries a lot of information to decode in terms of Russian citizens and their perception of space<sup>2</sup>. For example, I found the short explanatory text that accompanies the section on migration fascinating. It says that:

Russian routes of migration historically lie from the centre towards the peripheries .... In the 20th century, migration was mainly directed towards the east – to Siberia and

the Far East. The population of the Far North was growing faster than that of other regions. The migrants arrived from the Central Black Earth belt.

What an elegant way of telling the story of mass deportations, forced relocations of national minorities and the Gulag camp system!

The history of Russians themselves is also framed within a certain narrative. The NRA ignores the Gulag and Stalin's repressions in general, and there is no information on camp distribution, nor any estimates of the number of victims on a regional level. The deportations mentioned above are also not indicated. On the contrary, the atlas glorifies the "Industrial development of the USSR in 1926–1940" as well as the "Collectivisation". Relevant maps show the distribution of major industrial facilities and the number of people involved in their construction. These data, nevertheless, might be a useful source of information for future researchers of Gulag camps and spatial distribution of prisoners.

This is just one of the examples of post-Soviet "official" cartography which fails to reconsider approaches to the representation of Soviet landscapes, events and elements of infrastructure. Being part of an overarching programme of glorifying the USSR and not acknowledging the scale of Stalin's Terror, the official cartography ignores it.

This geographical knowledge, however, is being produced by NGOs, activists and visual artists. Numerous projects by Memorial Moscow, regional sub-divisions of Memorial and the Museums of the Gulag are trying to fill in the gap and embed the system of the Gulag into the maps. Russian artists and photographers are starting to explore military landscapes by themselves, working on the borderline of visual ethnography and arts.

So why are Soviet blank spots still present in official Russian cartography? Why do the governmental commemoration programmes not include anything on ex-Terror landscapes and camps? The reason for ignoring them can have nothing to do with security – quite a lot of the primary data on the camp locations has been published already and used by academics (see [gulagmaps.org](http://gulagmaps.org)). Is it, then, a fear of admitting the extent to which the present Russian penitentiary system is based on the Gulag camps? The shame of acknowledging the unpleasant parts of Soviet history?

Whatever the reasons, the Soviet principles of cartography need to be overcome. Revealing the blank spots of Soviet cartography and mapping the ex-Terror landscapes will help to create a necessary distance to these events and acknowledge them on the official level.

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<sup>1</sup>Inspired by the Berlin project of the same name.

<sup>2</sup>A. N. Kraiukhin (ed), *National Russian Atlas* (Moscow: Roskartografiia, 2008).