

ACTA UNIVERSITATIS UPSALIENSIS

*Uppsala Studies on Eastern Europe*

5



# Punishment as a Crime?

Perspectives on Prison Experience  
in Russian Culture

Edited by Julie Hansen and Andrei Rogachevskii



UPPSALA  
UNIVERSITET

© The authors and Uppsala University 2014

Printed in Sweden by Danagård LiTHO AB, Ödeshög 2014

Distributor:  
Uppsala University Library  
Box 510, 751 20 Uppsala, Sweden  
[www.ub.uu.se](http://www.ub.uu.se)  
[acta@ub.uu.se](mailto:acta@ub.uu.se)

ISSN 1104-6481  
ISBN 978-91-554-9064-5

# Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis for funding the publication of this volume. We are also grateful to Riksbanken Jubileumsfond for funding the workshop on which this volume is partially based. The workshop was entitled “Punishment as a Crime? Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Prison Experience in Russian Culture” and hosted by the Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies (UCRS) at Uppsala University on 15–17 August 2012.

The cover image is by Ilia Rogatchevski (London) and the inside images are by Igor Cherchenko (Tel Aviv). Nils Dahlqvist and Felix Cowan, interns at the Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies, have provided invaluable editorial assistance.

This book would not have been possible without the support of the Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies. Special thanks are due to Professor Elena Namli, research director in the area of identity formation, and to the Centre’s director Claes Levinsson.



# Table of Contents

Introduction.....9

## *Part I: Prison Realities*

*Igor Sutyagin*

Russian Prison Culture Today: A Participant-Observer's View ..... 19

*Martin Kragh*

Free and Forced Labor in the Soviet Economy: An Uncertain Boundary ....43

## *Part II: Reactions and Representations*

*Sarah J. Young*

Criminalizing Creativity: Language, Performance, and the Representation  
of Convicts in Imperial and Soviet-Era Prisons and Penal Colonies ..... 69

*Andrea Gullotta*

Gulag Humour: Some Observations on Its History, Evolution, and  
Contemporary Resonance ..... 89

*Helena Goscilo*

Complicity in the Illicit? Liube's Rock Band Bond with the Criminal  
*Zona* ..... 111

## *Part III: Comparative Dimensions*

*Inessa Medzhibovskaya*

Punishment and the Human Condition: Hannah Arendt, Leo Tolstoy,  
and Lessons from Life, Philosophy, and Literature ..... 137

*Andrei Rogatchevski*

Non-Totalitarian Imprisonment under Western and Eastern Eyes:  
Lord Archer, Eduard Limonov, and Theories of Human Motivation ..... 163

Index ..... 185

Notes on Contributors ..... 191



# Introduction

“A prison or a concentration camp is society’s extension,” observed Joseph Brodsky. In some ways, what goes on inside prison walls can be seen to mirror the outside world. By the same token, prison experience is not confined by barbed wire, but leaves traces in the surrounding society and culture. This volume is an attempt to elucidate various aspects of Russian culture through a study of its prisons and representations of prison experience, from tsarist times to the post-Communist period. It also seeks to understand Russian prison culture in a global context, as the specificity of Russian prison experience can be seen to go hand in hand with its universality.

Throughout Russia’s history, prisons have had a far-reaching impact on its society, culture, and political systems. Although the Gulag is the most notorious and frequently invoked example of inhumane punishment on a massive scale, the threat of imprisonment continues to be significant in the post-Soviet Russian Federation, where no fewer than 25 million people (between one-sixth and one-fifth of the population) have experienced a deprivation of liberty since 1991 (Ovchinskiĭ). According to one source, although the crime rate is between three and five times lower in Russia than in Western European countries, the rate of incarceration is between eight and fifteen times higher. As a result, 25 percent of the adult male population in the Russian Federation is an ex-convict (Svinarenko 258). The recent high-profile court cases of Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Pussy Riot continue to attract the world’s attention to the plight of Russian prisoners today.

The questions surrounding Russian prisons past and present are numerous. This book does not claim to provide definitive answers or a comprehensive historical overview of the Russian prison system. Rather, it aims to offer new perspectives on the phenomenon of prison experience in Russia and beyond, drawing upon both factual and fictional source material. A number of scholarly approaches inform the chapters of this volume, coming from literary and cultural studies, film and gender studies, philosophy, psychology, and economic history. Its contributors are united in their ambition to examine previously understudied material, taken in its complexity and varying degrees of disparity and continuity, in order to shed new light on both the specific and universal aspects of prison experience in Russia.

The book consists of three parts. The first, entitled “Prison Realities,” provides a factual overview of conditions of forced labor and confinement during the Stalin and Putin eras. The second, “Reactions and Representa-

tions,” examines a number of cultural responses to prison experience in Russia, from the nineteenth through the twenty-first century. The third, “Comparative Dimensions,” broadens the focus to include accounts of prison experience originating from contexts outside Russia.

The first chapter, “Russian Prison Culture Today: A Participant-Observer’s View,” provides witness testimony of prison life in Putin’s Russia. Its author, the researcher Igor Sutyagin, was arrested by the FSB in October 1999 and accused of high treason due to a contract he held with a British-based consultancy to prepare press surveys in Russia. In a trial later ruled to be in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights, Sutyagin was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. After more than a decade of imprisonment, he was released in July 2010, as part of a prisoner swap between the United States and Russia.

Sutyagin opens his chapter by noting that “many inmates of Russian prisons come to feel that it is absolutely impossible to explain the prison world to people who haven’t been there.” Nevertheless, this is what he does from the unique perspective of a participant-observer. After descriptions of the different types of facilities within the current Russian prison system, Sutyagin examines socialization processes within the prison subculture and various ways in which inmates’ internal hierarchies can be seen to replicate social structures in the outside world. He argues that inmates undergo both positive and negative socialization. Although taboos and behavioral codes among prisoners function as collective survival mechanisms, the harsh conditions of daily life in Russian prisons ultimately tend to turn inmates into anti-social individuals lacking skills essential for life on the outside. Sutyagin also considers the detrimental consequences of the contemporary Russian penitentiary system for society as a whole. He argues that the Russian prison system produces citizens who have lost any faith in the law and are unprepared to cope with such aspects of contemporary life as computer technology and the pace of information flow. As contributing factors, he cites disproportionately long sentences, the practice of sending inmates to prisons far from their homes, a corrupt judicial system, and the arbitrary enforcement of prison regulations. Finally, Sutyagin assesses the prospects for the current prison reforms in the Russian Federation. Contrary to the belief of some Western observers, Sutyagin concludes that these reforms are likely to increase the inhumanity of an already inhumane system.

The inhumanity of forced labor during the Stalinist era is the subject of Martin Kragh’s chapter “Free and Forced Labor in the Soviet Economy: An Uncertain Boundary.” Kragh argues that the institution of forced labor cannot be properly understood in isolation from the Soviet labor economy as a whole. As his overview of the labor market under Stalin shows, forced labor was not limited to the Gulag. Although exceptional in its scope and brutality, the Gulag was merely one component of Stalin’s efforts to increase labor production at a minimal cost to the state. Agricultural workers were tied to

the farms in what came to be called a “second serfdom.” The mobility of industrial workers was also restricted through legislation. Kragh elucidates the consequences of the forced collectivization of agriculture and forced industrialization begun in the late 1920s, showing how the labor market became progressively more restrictive even for employees who were never sent to the Gulag. In this way, the boundaries between the categories of “free” and “forced” labor became blurred. When organized protest or strikes became impossible, some workers resisted coercive practices in the workplace through absenteeism and unauthorized job-changing. Such tactics were subsequently criminalized, ultimately making labor disciplinary infractions the most widespread crime in the history of the Soviet Union. Yet Stalin’s coercive legislation and the Gulag system proved to be costly and inefficient. In conclusion, Kragh considers how various factors, such as bureaucracy and collusion within the state apparatus, served as checks on Stalin’s repressive machinery, ultimately leading to its partial dismantling.

The second part opens with Sarah J. Young’s chapter, “Criminalizing Creativity: Language, Performance, and the Representation of Convicts in Imperial and Soviet-Era Prisons and Penal Colonies.” It raises the oft-discussed question of whether there is any continuity between prisons in tsarist Russia and Soviet labor camps. Young notes significant differences between prison systems in these two historical periods, yet she discerns continuity between pre- and post-revolutionary literary depictions of Russian prisons, especially with regard to prisoners’ creative use of language in constructing new identities. The chapter analyzes the role of criminal language in Fedor Dostoevsky’s fictionalized memoir, *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1861), comparing it to Vlas Doroshevich’s *Sakhalin* (1897), Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales* (1954–73), and Andreï Siniavsky’s *A Voice from the Chorus* (1973). Young argues that contact with criminals in confinement influenced the artistic personae of all four of these writers, albeit in different ways. Dostoevsky and Siniavsky identified with the verbal creativity of criminals, finding freedom in their play with language. Doroshevich and Shalamov, by contrast, sought to distance themselves from criminals’ use of language, seeing it as overly sentimental, inauthentic, and symptomatic of the cruelty that prevails in the prison environment. Despite these differing attitudes toward criminal creativity, however, all four authors are united by their outsider status, which, as Young points out, is shared by criminals and artists alike.

Andrea Gullotta’s chapter, “Gulag Humour: Some Observations on Its History, Evolution, and Contemporary Resonance,” considers the phenomenon of laughter as a coping mechanism within the context of the Gulag system and Soviet repression in general. Gulag humor is defined here as all kinds of acts that stimulated laughter within labor camps, as well as jokes about these camps told from an outsider’s perspective. The source material consists of newspapers, journals, and theater plays produced within the

camps, on the one hand, and relevant fiction and memoirs, on the other. Gullotta considers various humorous genres, including comedy, satire, the folk doggerels of *chastushki*, and jokes, exemplifying how Gulag humor has evolved from the very beginnings of Soviet repression through the present. He notes that Gulag humor typically underscores the cruelty of prison authorities, as well as the Soviet system as a whole, through black humor and irony. The analysis draws on several different theories of humor, including Aristotle and Plato's superiority theory, di Cioccio's theory of aggressive humor, Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque laughter, and Henri Bergson's conception of laughter as a social phenomenon. Gullotta argues that laughter's function as a coping mechanism can help to explain the proliferation of jokes about the Gulag both within and outside of the camps. The chapter concludes with a consideration how echoes of the special kind of humor that developed out of the Gulag can still be heard in post-Soviet Russia.

Referring to the large body of works that have arisen from and about confinement, Brodsky called incarceration "practically the midwife of literature." Prison experience has likewise been the focus of many films. Helena Goscilo's chapter, "Complicity in the Illicit? Liube's Rock Band Bond with the Criminal *Zona*," analyzes the portrayal of prison life in Dmitrii Zolotukhin's 1994 musical film *Zona Liube*. The titles of both the film and this chapter play upon the Russian colloquial term for penal colonies (*zona*, or "zone" in English). Set to a soundtrack by the rock-pop group Liube and influenced by the aesthetics of video clips, *Zona Liube* features scenes in a Russian penitentiary, as well as flashbacks to inmates' lives prior to incarceration. Goscilo relates these depictions to the context of the first post-Soviet decade in Russia, when crime rates went up dramatically, and popular culture reflected a growing fascination with crime. This is exemplified by the band Liube's public image, which was informed, as Goscilo demonstrates, by stylized criminality. She also examines the film's gender-marked representations of inmates and administrative personnel, relating these to significant differences between women's and men's experiences of prison conditions in Russia.

The third part opens with Inessa Medzhibovskaya's exploration of the theme of confinement in literary, philosophical, and existential writings by a variety of well-known Russian and Western thinkers. Entitled "Punishment and the Human Condition: Hannah Arendt, Leo Tolstoy, and Lessons from Life, Philosophy, and Literature," this chapter argues that literature can reveal aspects of universal human responses to prison that are often absent from the discourse in the social sciences and humanities. She considers narratives of confinement by Fedor Dostoevsky, Lev Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Evgeniia Ginzburg, among others, comparing these with philosophical reflections by Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, Emile Cioran, Michel Foucault, Semyon Frank, Viktor Frankl, and Søren Kierkegaard. A connection is traced here between the experience of con-

finement and storytelling as a way of making sense of it. Medzhibovskaya holds the experience of confinement to be “a constituent condition of life itself” and “one of humanity’s most essential stories.” A number of ethical questions are shown to recur in the selected writings. For example, is it possible to exercise freedom under oppressive conditions? Can words help writers and readers to transcend conditions of confinement without running the risk of justifying imprisonment? In particular, Medzhibovskaya finds striking similarities between views of confinement expressed in Tolstoy’s late fiction and Arendt’s observations on the trial of Adolf Eichmann.

The final chapter, by Andrei Rogatchevski, also views Russian prison experience within a wider context. Entitled “Non-Totalitarian Imprisonment under Western and Eastern Eyes: Lord Archer, Eduard Limonov, and Theories of Human Motivation,” it opens with a discussion of similarities between Nazi and Communist prisons. It then poses the question of whether these hold true for prisons in non-totalitarian societies. An answer is sought primarily through a comparison of two firsthand accounts of prison experience in the twenty-first century, by the British Lord Archer and Eduard Limonov, the leader of Russia’s National Bolshevik Party (now known as Other Russia). Between 2001 and 2003, both served time in various prisons in Great Britain and the Russian Federation, respectively. Despite considerable differences in the authors’ backgrounds and circumstances of incarceration, they depict prison life in strikingly similar ways. Both offer accounts of deprivations with regard to food, exercise, sleep, and social interaction, and both also criticize the judicial systems that sentenced them, undermining the idea of prison as a reformative or crime-deterrent institution. The psychologist A. H. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs serves as the main frame of reference for the comparative reading of Archer and Limonov. Both seek to fulfil the higher need of self-actualization through writing, even though their basic needs are not satisfied in prison. Rogatchevski then compares the common denominators in Archer’s and Limonov’s prison writing to several other accounts from around the world, from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. A frequent theme is the function of reading and writing as coping mechanisms in confinement. In particular, the persistence of creativity in defiance of inhumane conditions emerges as a recurring aspect of prison experience, for some prisoners at least. This, in turn, provides those of us outside the *zona* with valuable insights into both prison culture and the human condition.

As several of the chapters in this book note, the term *zona* is often employed as a metonymical substitute for Russia itself. As one observer puts it, “*Zona* is arguably the most striking symbol of Russia. [...] This scheme is common everywhere: in a young pioneers’ camp, in the army, in prison, in the Politburo and in the new Kremlin” (Svinarenko 13). The Russian concept of *zona* can even be extended to describe not only Russia, but life anywhere, and not necessarily behind bars. As Max Hayward notes in connection with

Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, "the concentration camp is to be seen not just as a microcosm of life in the Soviet Union but of life everywhere. The majority of the human race is condemned to a daily grind, a rat-race, of which the concentration camp is the ultimate and most intense expression" (436).

The universal themes found in the works of Solzhenitsyn and numerous other writers on prison experience should not, of course, distract attention from the inhumane realities of prison life. In the Russian Federation, the number of prisons is due to increase dramatically, with plans to build around 500 new prisons before the year 2020 ("Do 2020 goda"). In such a context, the need for detailed and incisive study of the specific as well as universal aspects of prison experience grows more urgent. It is our hope that this volume will contribute to a better understanding of prison experience past and present, in Russia and beyond.

Julie Hansen  
Uppsala, October 2014

#### Note on transliteration and spelling

This volume adheres to a modified version of the Library of Congress system of transliteration of the Cyrillic alphabet, also reflecting, where unavoidable, the precedent of different variants. The contributors use either British or American English in accordance with their preferences.

## Works Cited

- Brodsky, Joseph. "The Writer in Prison." *The New York Times Book Review*. 13 Oct. 1996. Web. 11 Oct. 2014.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/17/specials/brodsky-prison.html>>.
- "Do 2020 goda v Rossii postroiat 500 novykh tiurem." *Klerk.ru*. 27 June 2011. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <<http://www.klerk.ru/law/news/231445/>>.
- Hayward, Max. "Solzhenitsyn's Place in Contemporary Soviet Literature." *Slavic Review* 23.3 (1964): 432–36. Print.
- Ovchinskiĭ, Vladimir. "Im vse do feni: Rossiiskaia vlast' pereshla na blatnoĭ zhargon." *Moskovskii komsomolets*. 16 May 2011. Web. 11 Oct. 2014.  
<<http://www.mk.ru/politics/article/2011/05/16/589378-im-vse-do-feni.html>>.
- Svinarenko, Igor'. *Russkie sidiat: Po zonam Rodiny*. Moscow: Vagrius, 2002. Print.



Part I  
Prison Realities



# Russian Prison Culture Today: A Participant-Observer's View

Igor Sutyagin

## Surviving Russian Prison

Many inmates of Russian prisons come to feel that it is absolutely impossible to explain the prison world to people who haven't been there. They often find it difficult to explain to relatives and friends the requirements of official prison regulations and the day-to-day realities of life in prison. Despite detailed instructions, relatives often send their imprisoned loved ones things which seem fine for free people but are actually prohibited behind bars, such as bright-coloured T-shirts. Only black or dark grey underwear and tops are allowed, to maintain the dominant colour scheme of the prison uniform.

Between October 1999 and July 2010, I awaited and then served my sentence in seven pre-trial detention centres and four penal colonies. These were located in the Kaluga, Moscow, Kirov, Iaroslavl, and Arkhangel'sk regions, as well as Udmurtiia.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I will attempt to characterize the basic framework of prison life and culture based on my own experience of it. The types of confinement I describe are colonies and detention centres for men; while the general situation is largely the same in colonies for women, there are no prisons for women.<sup>2</sup>

## A Brief Introduction to Russian Prisons Today: Topology, Territory, Terminology

First of all, let me explain what kind of facilities the Russian penal system uses to deprive people of their freedom. There are six types altogether. The three most common are the so-called correctional colonies of general (*ob-*

---

<sup>1</sup> The author was sentenced to fifteen years for high treason in accordance with Article 275 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (*Ugolovnyi kodeks RF*). The sentence was repealed in 2011 and 2012 by respective decisions of the European Court of Human Rights and the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation.

<sup>2</sup> While the whole correctional system is universally referred to as "prison" or "zone" (*tiur'ma* or *zona*) in colloquial Russian, this term has a very specific meaning in the legal sense. In the Russian penal system, prison per se is a penitentiary establishment where inmates are permanently kept in cells, in contrast to correctional colonies, where they live in barracks. Due to the fact that inmates are kept in cells at pre-trial detention centres, these centres are often referred to as "prisons" as well, although they are not prisons from a legal standpoint. There is thus a significant difference between the legal and the colloquial meaning of the Russian word "prison," which should be kept in mind to avoid misunderstandings.

*shchiĭ*), strict (*strogiiĭ*), and special (*osobyĭ*) regimes. There are also settlement colonies (*kolonii-poseleniia*), which are a rough equivalent of British open prisons. These are penitentiary establishments for adults, and it is possible to have unisex settlement colonies, with male and female inmates kept together. To make the punishment harsher, courts can sentence a male inmate to serve part of his term in prison (as opposed to a colony), usually at the start of the term.<sup>3</sup> According to the Russian penal law, female convicts can be sent to general-regime correctional colonies and settlement colonies only. There are also the so-called educational colonies (*vospitatel'nye kolonii*) for teenagers (from fourteen to eighteen years old), which are separate from penal institutions for adults. In some cases, different types of institutions for inmates of the same gender are located at the same place. For instance, there might be strict- and special-regime (male) correctional colonies on the same territory as the prison section (*pomeshchenie, funktsioniruiushchee v regime tiur'my*, abbreviated as PFRT).

In each correctional colony for adults, regardless of the regime, there are three different sub-regimes, or conditions (called *usloviia* in the Penal Code of the Russian Federation, or *Ugolovno-ispolnitel'nyi kodeks RF*): strict (*strogie*), general (*obshchie*), and commuted (*obleghennye*). Prisons have only strict and general sub-regimes, while there are four different sub-regimes for teenage inmates in educational colonies: strict, general, commuted, and privileged. As a rule of thumb, the commuted conditions of a harsher regime are roughly equivalent to the general conditions of a less harsh regime.

The differences between the three regimes of correctional colonies concern, first and foremost, the degree to which inmates are allowed contact with their relatives in the free world. Let us take as an example inmates serving sentences in general conditions at the correctional colonies of general, strict, and special regimes. Such inmates have the right to meet relatives for a period of up to four hours (known as short-term meetings, *kratkosrochnye svidaniia*) six, four, and two times a year, respectively. They are also allowed to stay with their families in a designated part of the colony for up to three days (long-term meetings, *dlitel'nye svidaniia*) four, three, and two times a year, respectively. The right to receive a certain amount of mail also depends on the regime. Adult inmates serving terms on general conditions in general regimes are allowed six boxes (*posylki*) and six parcels (*banderoli*) a year; the strict regime allows for four boxes and four parcels a year, and the special regime allows only three boxes and three parcels annually. Prison inmates are allowed two short-term and two long-term meetings, as well as two boxes and two parcels, annually.<sup>4</sup> Teenagers held on general conditions

---

<sup>3</sup> However, one example is known to the author of an inmate sentenced to spend twenty-four out of twenty five years of his term in prison.

<sup>4</sup> See Articles 121, 123, 125, and 131 of the Russian Penal Code.

at educational colonies have the right to eight short-term and four long-term meetings a year, and an unlimited amount of boxes and parcels.

Inmates who violate the rules in colonies are punished by various means. They may be sent to a solitary confinement cell (*shtrafnoi izolator*, abbreviated as ShIZO) for up to fifteen continuous days (up to seven days for teenagers), or to a cell-type facility (*pomeschenie kamernogo tipa*, abbreviated as PKT) for up to six months. In the latter, the term of punishment can be renewed if a rule violation occurs during the initial isolation. For example, if an inmate has served five months out of six and breaks some regulation, the clock turns back to zero and the six-month isolation period starts over again. Thus, inmates can be kept in PKT endlessly. By special court decision, repeated violators of the prescribed regime can be transferred to prison for up to three years of their term.

What does a typical correctional colony look like? Its territory is always divided into three unequal parts. The most visible one is the “living area” (*zhilaia zona* or *zhilka*), consisting of barracks (usually one to three stories high), a canteen, a medical centre (usually part of the barracks) with a small hospital (five to ten beds at the most), cultural activities area, showers, and laundry, as well as one of the two buildings of the colony’s headquarters. Living areas may also include small workshops, greenhouses, henhouses, a small stadium, and a convenience store for inmates. The largest part of nearly any colony is the so-called “industrial area” (*promyshlennaia zona*, often abbreviated in Russian as *promzona* or *promka*). This area consists of main workshops, warehouses, and headquarters for the colony’s industrial production, a professional education centre for inmates, fuel storage, garages, and additional buildings, such as a bakery or pig pens.

Each colony is surrounded by a system of five concentric fences with towers for armed guards at the corners of the outer fence. The territory between the innermost fence and the outer one represents the so-called “forbidden zone” (*zapretnaia zona*, also known simply as *zapretka*). Its width varies from a minimum of 20 metres to a maximum of 150 metres at the widest places. The forbidden area is the most dreadful part of any colony – in a sense it represents the territory of death, as tower guards have the right and standing order to shoot to kill any inmate who appears in this zone without prior approval from the colony’s operations duty officer (*operativnyi dezhurnyi* or OD).<sup>5</sup> The colony’s ShIZO-PKT (both are normally combined within the same building) is the only colony building situated in the forbidden area. The main building of the colony’s headquarters, along with the

---

<sup>5</sup> Guards at Russian colonies regularly execute this order. For example, one inmate was shot to death in the forbidden zone of the colony in Kholmogory, Arkhangel'sk region, the fourth one where the author was imprisoned. During a riot in the educational colony in Kirovgrad (Sverdlovsk region) in October 2007, a teenager was shot to death by a female guard when a group of teenage inmates trespassed the inner fence and approached one of the towers (“Bunt”).

barracks and headquarters of the guards company (*rota okhrany*), as well as the doghouse for the guards company's work dogs, are situated just outside of the forbidden zone. The part of the main headquarters building which contains rooms for inmates' meetings with family members might be located between the outer and the second fence of the forbidden zone.

Within the living area, the barracks are surrounded by a fence with a locked gate, which separates the barracks from each other and from the rest of the living area with common areas (such as the canteen, showers, cultural activities area, etc.). One hut together with the adjacent territory within the surrounding fence forms the so-called "local area" (*lokal'nyĭ uchastok* or *lokalka*); inmates may not leave their specific local area (singularly or in groups) without permission from the colony administration officers. In the rapidly increasing number of Russian colonies, locks on the gates to the local areas are remotely operated by a duty officer's assistant from a special tower-like building at or near the entrance to the living area. This is done to prevent the potential careless or unscrupulous breach of rules by officers patrolling the living area, who were previously responsible for locking the gates to the local area. Separate local areas are also arranged for the colony's medical centre, convenience store, and showers. A breach (whether real or invented by the administration) of the border of a local area is the most widely cited reason for placing inmates of colonies into solitary confinement cells.

Further divisions within each local area depend on the colony's administration. For instance, in several colonies with multi-storey barracks, where several detachments of inmates live in the same building, the territory around the building is divided into segments with isolated stairs and exits for each detachment leading to specific sectors designated for that detachment. Such an arrangement, established by the Penal Code of the Russian Federation, is based on the requirement to isolate inmates belonging to different detachments. The fulfilment of the requirement nearly always depends solely on the zeal of a specific colony and a regional penal administration.

To be terminologically precise, the word "barracks" means something different in Russian prison jargon than it does in English. In Russian prison jargon, *barak* is a standard detachment dormitory (*obshchezhitie otriada*), which in Russian correctional colonies consists of several parts.<sup>6</sup> The largest part is the sleeping hall (it is generally forbidden for inmates to be present in the sleeping hall outside of sleeping hours, which are at night, except for

---

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the Russian word *barak* does not correspond directly to the English word "barracks." The custom of referring to such a detachment dormitory as a *barak* stems from the times when they were located in one-storey buildings, leaving no fundamental difference between a detachment dormitory and the building containing it. Nowadays, however, detachment dormitories are usually located in buildings of two or three storeys; thus a dormitory, or a building containing several dormitories, can be referred to as *barak*. To further complicate matters, two detachments sometimes share the same storey. For this reason, researchers should use the English word "barracks" advisedly in descriptions of Russian colonies.

those who work night shifts). There are also sanitary facilities: one wash-room (with no more than five to six wash basins per detachment of 100–120 inmates) and one lavatory (in many colonies lavatories are equipped with urinals only; if this is the case, an additional toilet is built outside of the barracks in the local area; inmates must register their names in a special book upon leaving and re-entering the dormitory during night time to use the outside toilet). There is also a TV room, one or two cloakrooms for drying and storing clothes and boots, and a small tearoom – with only four to twelve seats per detachment. The much hated internal regulations (*Pravila vnutrennego rasporiadka* or *PVR*) strictly prohibit the cooking of food in barracks, as well as the consumption of food or tea anywhere except in designated areas. In addition to these rooms, the barracks contain the office of the head of detachment (a colony administration officer) and a small storage room for inmates' personal belongings (which doubles as the office of the detachment's head inmate, known as *starshii dnevalnyi* or *zavkhoz*). It is strictly forbidden for inmates to be present in another detachment's dormitory. While the rule is usually waived by prison administration officers for detachments located in the same local area with a common entrance, it provides a perfect excuse, if the administration needs one, to punish an inmate.

A description of contemporary Russian prisons would not be complete without mention of the inmates' self-imposed hierarchy. This system is too complex to be discussed in detail here. Suffice it to say that all inmates can be roughly divided into four main categories: (1) *blatnye* (professional criminals and their loyal supporters) including *vory v zakone* (literally, “thieves in the law,” denoting the criminal elite and highest authority within the criminal sub-society); (2) *muzhiki* (“plebs,” i.e., the majority of inmates at correctional colonies, who have committed crimes but are not professional criminals); (3) *kozly* (literally “goats,” denoting inmates who openly and actively support the colony's administration); and (4) *petukhi* (“cockerels,” a derogatory word for passive homosexuals, viewed as the lowest caste within the world of Russian prisons).<sup>7</sup>

There are also some statuses which do not directly relate to the hierarchy itself, but rather to inmates' personal or professional qualities. For instance, those who fail to keep their word or pay debts accrued in the officially forbidden card games might be tagged a *fuflyzhnik*. This tag can be applied to anyone from the four main groups in the hierarchy outlined above. *Baryga* (originally meaning a profiteer or dealer of low importance, usually with a negative connotation) is an inmate who serves as a broker for other inmates' day-to-day household needs. One can meet *barygi* among all four hierar-

---

<sup>7</sup> There are finer sub-divisions within each of these four main groups – for instance, *chert*, a derogatory word denoting an unhygienic person, usually belongs to the *muzhiki* caste, and there are numerous nuances within the *petukhi* caste.

chical groups, although they mostly tend to occupy the lower end of the group consisting of *blatnye*.

The prison hierarchy is not very flexible, and the change of an inmate's hierarchical position more often than not involves a downward move. Nevertheless, there are opportunities for moving upward, especially within one and the same caste. I once witnessed the seemingly impossible (in the view of many commentators) rise of one inmate back to the status of *muzhik* after having been downgraded to *petukh* and treated as such for several months. I know of another example in which an inmate known as a *kozol* (as he actively worked at the colony's medical section) was universally respected by inmates from all four hierarchical groups, in the same way as the most influential criminal bosses (*blatnye*) were shown respect. (This inmate was serving his second term and had been the leader of a small group of robbers while on the outside.) Thus, it is not entirely correct to describe the Russian prison hierarchy as entirely fixed, but it is characterised by an extremely high degree of rigidity.<sup>8</sup>

## Inside and Outside Prison

Russian prison life comprises a sort of parallel universe to the free world. There seems to be no better description. The Russian-Jewish poet Igor Guberman, who served eight years in a Russian prison for his purportedly dissident activities, made a particularly perceptive observation about Russian prison life in the following lines of poetry:

Не скроешь подлинной природы  
Под слоем пудры и сурьмы,  
И как тюрьма – модель свободы,  
Свобода – копия тюрьмы. (Guberman 9)<sup>9</sup>

Prison is indeed a model of the free world. Yet the problem we all face in trying to understand Russian prison culture (and indeed criminal culture in general) is that the same thing often means something different in prison than it does in the free world.

The difference between the two resides, for example, in the language used on either side of the prison fence, even if the words are seemingly identical. For instance, in the free world, the word *kosiak* means a doorpost or shoal (or even a spliff), but for inmates it means misconduct. Similarly, *zona*

---

<sup>8</sup> Additional hierarchical terms will be explained later in this article. For more on the Russian prison hierarchy, see, for instance, Aleksandrov, *Ocherki*. Iuriĭ Konstantinovich Aleksandrov was formerly the chief editor of the Federal Penitentiary Service's (FSIN, or Federal'naia sluzhba ispolneniia nakazaniĭ) Joint Editorial Board (OR FSIN Rossii), responsible for all of the FSIN's central media resources.

<sup>9</sup> Translation: You cannot hide the real essence / Under a layer of powder and cosmetics, / Just as prison is a model of the free world, / The free world is a replica of prison.

(zone, area) is a neutral word in ordinary usage, but it means either penal colony or the entire prison world for inmates and those with direct or indirect experience of the Russian penal system (of which there are many in Russia today). In Russia, to be “in the zone” means to be “doing time,” regardless of the actual type of institution. No one will ask you to specify which zone you are referring to if you say that your friend or relative is “in the zone”; it will be immediately clear to any Russian that the person you are referring to has been sentenced to a deprivation of freedom. A similar difference can be observed in the various meanings of the word *volia*. For inhabitants of the free world, it means “will” or “open space,” even an abstract “liberty.” But for inmates, *volia* denotes the world on the other side of the colony’s five rows of fences, packed, with all its complexity and diversity, into just one word. It is very difficult, indeed nearly impossible, for those who have not served time to feel how this specific word and concept resonates within the souls of inmates.

However, human nature is the same on both sides of the bars, so ultimately prison culture (hereafter referred to as a subculture when considered within the framework of society at large) basically fulfils the same human needs, such as the need for justice, order, and peaceful coexistence in a collective. I would say that this culture has a sort of triple nature; its deeply interconnected layers are (1) positive socialisation, (2) negative socialisation, and (3) replication of wider social structures.

## Prison Taboos as an Instrument of Positive Socialisation

The criminal world brings together people from very different social strata. Therefore, the establishment of a universal set of behavioural rules within prison is of the utmost importance for the criminal community’s self-organisation and self-regulation. Needless to say, not every prison inmate is a member of the criminal community, but everyone is forced to adhere to the rules established by criminals. A lack of such rules inevitably results in internal tensions between different groups of inmates and criminals in general. “We are stronger as one” is not only the official anthem of Queen Elizabeth’s Diamond Jubilee in the United Kingdom, but also a longstanding rule of any team competition or exercise of unity. This is true of any serious group enterprise, including those of the criminal sub-strata. Some prison taboos help to maintain rules by which inmates relate to one another. For instance, new prisoners soon learn that it is an absolute taboo to consume any food accidentally dropped on the floor. This is perhaps not strange, bearing in mind the tremendous overcrowding in Russian prison cells;<sup>10</sup> the con-

---

<sup>10</sup> In Spring 2000, in a Kaluga region pre-trial detention centre, I was the thirty-second inmate in cell no. 78, which was designed for eight beds within a space of sixteen square metres. I

sumption of contaminated food carries the risk of disease which can easily spread in a locked-down environment. Hence, this taboo, however strange it may seem, serves to prevent the outbreak of an epidemic.<sup>11</sup>

Washing one's hands after visiting the lavatory, bathing regularly, washing one's clothes, and many more such requirements of prison life are, of course, examples of common hygiene, which adults from the lowest societal strata might have missed in their previous lives outside of prison (ex-vagrants often have to be taught the reasons for washing one's hands). The deliberate stratification of criminals, characteristic of the prison sub-society, strengthens the socialisation process: everyone who does not obey these simple rules is downgraded in the prison hierarchy to the status of *chert*, which is just one or two levels above the real pariahs of the Russian prison world, *petukhi*. No reasonable inmate would want to be downgraded in this way; the threat of loss of status thus reinforces the positive socialising effects of prison taboos.

Those coming to prison from higher social strata are also taught a lesson by the system, as new prisoners learn to put aside any snobbish views they might hold of the lower classes. A certain level of respect for other inmates' basic needs is absolutely essential in prison, especially in an overcrowded cell, in order to prevent unnecessary and dangerous frictions between individuals with different cultural and social backgrounds, thrown into a dense and explosive prison environment. The tendency to put one's own needs above the interests of others is one of the manifestations of such snobbish views. Such views are counteracted by certain prison taboos. For instance, one cannot wake a sleeping inmate without good reason, and the urgency of a snob's personal need is not considered sufficient. This particular taboo serves a dual purpose: good quality rest is essential in the circumstances of conviction and incarceration for the preservation of an inmate's psychological well-being, not only for the inmate in question, but also with respect to the well-being and safety of his fellow convicts. Moreover, sleep provides a temporary mental escape from prison, so interrupting an inmate's sleep means, in a sense, sending him or her back to prison.<sup>12</sup>

---

remained there for several months. A regulation, at the time, of the Federal Service for Execution of Punishment specified a minimum of two square metres of space per detainee.

<sup>11</sup> However, as in the free world, "the harshness of Russian laws is compensated for by the freedom not to obey them" (суровость российских законов компенсируется необязательностью их исполнения), as the saying goes, commonly ascribed to either Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin or Petr Viazemsky. More experienced inmates know that if a piece of delicious food – sometimes irreplaceable in prison circumstances – is accidentally dropped, the taboo can be circumvented by semi-jokingly pronouncing the magic formula "It has fallen onto a newspaper!" and – voila! – it suddenly becomes permissible to consume it, as if there were no violation of the rules of hygiene.

<sup>12</sup> In colonies, regulations allow for eight hours of uninterrupted sleep at night. In reality, inmates have less, as they cannot go to bed before the lights-out and must rise ten minutes or so before the reveille, as remaining in bed after reveille is a punishable offence. In pre-trial

Prison culture also teaches inmates to keep each other's confidences. Cheating outsiders is standard practice, but it is not permitted, in theory at least, among members of the criminal community. Criminals, however, tend to make exceptions for themselves. For instance, they do not perceive occasional cheating of inmates who belong to the *muzhiki* category as unforgivable misbehaviour, as these are considered to be *lokhi* (simpletons), not deserving of the respect due to "real" criminals, or of unconditional and full-scale protection according to the *poniatiia* (literally "understandings," referring here to the unofficial criminal code of behaviour). The so-called "passengers" (*passazhiry*, i.e., those who do not really belong to the criminal underworld and are seen as occasional passengers on the criminal train) also belong to the group that can be targeted by professional criminals with relative impunity. Still, such exceptions cannot be allowed too often, in the interest of avoiding an increase of tension and open conflicts.

Contrary to popular belief, physical assaults are also taboo among inmates. When deprived for many years of their freedom, as well as of many other vital needs, people become fundamentally unstable. Thus, an old prison saying has the sad ring of truth: "In prison, one fights until blood is drawn. After that, one kills." It is extremely difficult to stop a physical confrontation between people suffering from chronic distress, so every fight that takes place carries potentially lethal consequences. A taboo against fighting aims to prevent these. This is not to say that fights do not occur, but the number of such incidents is appreciably lower than it would have been otherwise.

## Entertainment as an Antidote to Boredom and Low Morale

Russian prison is a world where nothing happens. Everyone and everything that helps to diffuse tension and distress are very much welcome in prisons and prison colonies. Inmates who relate interesting stories, whether invented or retold from books, are very popular, because they alleviate the boredom of prison life. The natural human need to fight off sensory deprivation with fresh impressions calls for entertainment and food for thought. Storytelling, humour, and even scheming to improve your own situation and/or to cause harm to enemies are all popular activities in prisons because they put the brain to work. This may seem to contradict the imperative to avoid conflicts, but unfortunately such conflicts sometimes prove to be unavoidable.

Russian prison humour is a very special form of art, characterized by elaborate and sophisticated jokes and complex wordplay.<sup>13</sup> It is not merely a case of art for art's sake, however, as it serves the practical purpose of fend-

---

centres this rule is more difficult to enforce, so the detainees sleep longer, provided the cells are not too overcrowded.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of Gulag humour, see Andrea Gullotta's chapter in this volume.

ing off low spirits among the inmates. Another way to describe Russian prisons is a world which does not tolerate depression: you either overcome it, or it overcomes you. Especially in the miserable conditions which prevail in Russian prisons, depression can lead to suicide.

Meanwhile, low morale affects not only those suffering from it, but also the people around them. This leads other inmates intuitively to help those affected to try and counteract it. Any inmate in low spirits will immediately find himself the object of friendly jokes. The tactics will be changed if the person affected does not respond to such efforts; in such cases the person will be put under strong social pressure, aimed at getting him to react and mobilise his psychological resources. The involvement of officials within Russian prisons in providing medical or psychological assistance is comparatively rare in the majority of Russian regions, although there are some regions, such as Udmurtiia, where penitentiary psychologists do their job very well.

## Negative Socialisation

Negative socialisation plays an important role in Russian prison culture. It is the tool which most effectively forges a new anti-social personality for an inmate and forms the foundations upon which any criminal by vocation is built. Replacing some social taboos from the outside world with new life principles is an inevitable part of an inmate's induction. After all, it is impossible for anyone to be a thief if the commandment "Thou shall not steal" is ingrained in one's moral character. The process of induction is not without its difficulties, as criminals are not necessarily able to separate themselves from society completely. There are many myths designed to make the transition for would-be *blatnye* – from social to anti-social behaviour – less painful and to help them preserve their self-respect. For example, Robin Hood-style stories depicting criminals as noble robbers restoring justice are very popular among younger inmates.

Paradoxically – but only at first glance – some social taboos are harshly enforced among members of the criminal community with regard to their relations within the criminal fraternity. The commandment "Thou shall not steal" is invoked when a criminal steals from other members of the criminal sub-society, which is considered one of the worst offenses imaginable. Any criminal caught stealing from another criminal is given the disgraceful epithet of *krýsa* (rat) and treated as such. As I mentioned above, cheating those regarded as outsiders is considered normal practice, but it is absolutely prohibited among criminals themselves. The seemingly paradoxical approach to the taboo of stealing from another criminal is in fact easily explained by the desire to erect an impenetrable barrier between "us" and "them." Different attitudes towards outsiders and insiders serve to preserve normal working relations within the criminal community, while at the same time drawing a

dividing line between the ordinary public and the criminal sub-strata of society.

The induction of prisoners also plays an important role for the criminal community's self-defence against law-enforcement agencies. Any cooperation with official bodies is an absolute taboo, which aims to prevent prisoners from contacting the prison administration for any reason. Methods of enforcing this taboo encompass the subconscious level: for instance, the colour red is utterly taboo. In Russia, the colour red is associated with power; in the Soviet Union, red was the official colour of the ruling Communist Party and the state. As a result, young or new prisoners, who tend to be most vulnerable, are prohibited from contact with red objects. For example, a prisoner who is allowed a visit from his mother is expected to leave immediately if his mother is wearing red. This rule is not always obeyed, but its very existence illustrates how deeply prison culture rejects anything connected with outside authorities.

Those who violate the taboo against contact with authorities outside of the criminal community are nicknamed *suki* (bitches) and are treated as traitors. Being labeled *suka* is one of the two worst humiliations possible. The infamous "bitch wars" (*such'i voïny*) among Soviet criminals after the Second World War were sparked by a disagreement over the limits of this specific taboo. The most consistent followers of the criminals' law strictly prohibited cooperation with outside authorities under any circumstances, while their opponents within the criminal fraternity differentiated between general cooperation and the kind needed for the defence of the country against foreign invaders or any other serious external threat.

In the past, all Russian colonies were unofficially divided into two basic groups, called "red" and "black" colonies. In a red colony, the administration exerts full and unconditional control over all aspects of life in the colony, whereas the internal life of a black colony is mainly controlled by criminal bosses, with the administration playing a more or less nominal role.<sup>14</sup> Recently, however, Russia's penal administration has undermined the power of criminal bosses and the principles of *poniatia* among prison inmates. They have accomplished this by according privileges to bosses of the criminal underworld and their lieutenants in exchange for maintaining order among ordinary criminals in the interest of the prison administration. As a result, there are no longer any colonies in which criminal bosses unconditionally reject cooperation with the prison administration. Criminal bosses and their lieutenants still pretend to exercise substantial influence on significant aspects of life in the colonies, but in reality they themselves are controlled by the administration and act in the interest of, and often on behalf of, the latter. The actual situation could be better described in terms of "red" and "pink" colonies, which differ only in the extent to which the administration controls

---

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed discussion of red and black colonies, see Aleksandrov, "Krasnaia."

day-to-day life in the colony. Red colonies have the strictest regime; the influence of the criminal bosses may be more visible if the administration is lazy, but the criminal bosses nevertheless carry out the orders of the administration in accordance with prison officials' desire to maintain order. This leads to a dubious situation, in which prison life appears to be based upon a system of *poniatiia*, whereas in reality the bosses within the hierarchy of inmates are, to an extent, obedient servants of the administration.

In my experience, as well as in that of close acquaintances, restrictions on inmates' daily life in a pink colony can actually be much harsher than in a red colony in the same region. The most unfortunate aspect is that in pink colonies, transgressions are dealt with according to an arbitrary interpretation of *poniatiia*, with the criminal bosses foregoing the enforcement of them in exchange for personal exemptions (*skashchukha*), granted by the colony administration, from the very rules they are supposed to be enforcing. Thus, in 2011, in the so-called black colony UG-42/28, where order was maintained largely by the prisoners themselves, the ban on mobile telephones was enforced more strictly than in the red colony UG-42/1. Only the criminal bosses who enforced this ban at UG-42/28 enjoyed the privilege of possessing mobile phones without restriction. These kinds of situations in the pink colonies have arisen due to the third key feature of Russian prison culture – namely, its attempt to replicate the free world's social structures within the criminal sub-society.

## Social Hierarchies in Prison

Lenin's well-known statement that "one cannot live in society and be free from it at the same time" (48) is an apt description of Russian prison sub-culture. Within their own insulated and isolated universe, Russian criminals and other inmates replicate, with some variations, the basic features of the society to which they formerly belonged. This leads to the creation of a hierarchical system headed by *vory v zakone* (criminal bosses) who attain a position of authority by undemocratic procedures and demand unconditional obedience.

The corruption characteristic of wider Russian society is present in the criminal community as well. Above all else, the criminal bosses value their own comfort and privileges, which are granted – and also easily withdrawn – by the administration. Hence, the criminal bosses hypocritically teach the rule of no contact with the administration to newcomers, while they themselves negotiate with prison administrators in their own interest. The ability to *vyvezti bazar* (sort out problems) through compromises with the colony's administration, and *ustroit'sia* (to arrange one's affairs) is valued as a symbol of the criminal bosses' power. In actuality, however, the criminal bosses serve the interests of the administration in order to trade with them more successfully. Thus, to a large extent, differences between the red and the

pink colonies are defined by the level of honesty, professionalism, and diligence of the regional penal administration.

The criminal sub-society, both inside and outside prison, includes close associates of the criminal bosses, as well as “passengers” (or “fellow travellers”) who have been sucked into the orbit of the criminal sub-society through unfair court verdicts or crimes committed through negligence. The fellow travellers constitute a statistically significant, yet voiceless group of inmates, and tend to belong to the lower castes of the prison community, i.e., *muzhiki*. They account for no less than 70 per cent of inmates in strict-regime correctional colonies, and likely even more in general-regime colonies. The hierarchy of the prison community ensures the necessary work-force and, at the same time, serves to maintain the balance of power within the community.

Members of the lowest caste of *petukhi* and *opushchennye* (sexually abused men) are forced to do the dirtiest and heaviest work. They are treated as untouchables; a universally observed taboo forbids physical contact with the *petukhi*, eating or drinking with them, or even sharing cutlery and crockery. Prison administration officers universally observe a similar rule with regard to all inmates: no officer ever shakes hands with an inmate. Officers explain that such a gesture is possible only after the official release of an inmate. This is an interesting example of a wider social attitude in Russian society, not only reinforcing the view of inmates as second-class citizens, but also mirroring the strata within the criminal sub-culture. Criminals are untouchable for the non-criminal, just as criminal sub-culture pariahs are untouchable for the rest of the prison community.

## Life after Release from Prison and Its Consequences for Society

### Information Flow

As I observed above, the Russian prison system can be described as a world where nothing happens. Even if inmates are lucky enough to get a job at colonies-owned enterprises (this currently applies to roughly 25 per cent of inmates; others are unemployed), they suffer from long-term sensory deprivation. This lowers inmates’ habitual level of sensory impressions, or, in other words, information load. This, in turn, leads to inexperience in dealing with the stressful situation of information overload which has become typical of contemporary society outside of prison.

Even if an individual who was well-adjusted to social and economic life at the time of sentencing manages to preserve his or her capacity to deal with a level of information load typical for the period prior to their sentencing, he or she would encounter, upon release, a dramatically increased information

flow. Indeed, some sources indicate that in developed countries, the flow of information currently doubles every 2 to 5.3 years (“Cisco”). Some even claim that the amount of information people currently have to process on a daily basis doubles in just a seven-month period (Kirsch and Titov 35). Compare this to the substantial length of freedom deprivation typical of current Russian court sentences. For instance, in 2010 in the IK-1 strict-regime colony in Arkhangel'sk, the average prison term was 10.4 years (the longest term I personally witnessed there was 28 years and 6 months). For those sentenced for the first time for crimes in the serious and extremely serious categories<sup>15</sup> and serving their terms in the IK-5 strict-regime colony in Sarapul, the average term in 2005 exceeded 13 years, with terms below 9 years being extremely rare, while on several occasions the duration of terms was between 27 and 30 years.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the information load experienced by a former inmate upon release from prison could be somewhere between 3 and 35 times higher than it was at the time of his sentencing. It is not surprising, then, that inmates often cope poorly with the flow of information in their attempts at rehabilitation after serving their terms. Inmates tend to lose their connections to social realities after a long deprivation of liberty, which makes them surprisingly credulous, in a manner more characteristic of children than of well-adjusted adults. As a result, after their release, such inmates normally struggle to reintegrate into society and are easily manipulated. Thus, their feelings of distress continue on the outside.

The nature of this stress differs significantly from what they became accustomed to while in prison, however. Even the high level of adaptability developed by inmates in response to the permanent uncertainties of prison life does not help in their reintegration after release, as their adaptability is geared to the extreme conditions of captivity, and is thus hardly applicable to normal life, where uncertainties have very different sources and characteristics. Needless to say, enduring stress caused by prison conditions threatens psychological stability, potentially increasing the probability of re-offending.

## Loss of Social Skills and Family Connections

Loss of important social skills is another problem created by long terms of freedom deprivation, typical in Russia today. A common consequence of long sentences is that the inmate loses contact with relatives. This is more common for female convicts than for male ones. Indeed, it is not easy to preserve and maintain good family relations for ten, fifteen, or twenty-nine

---

<sup>15</sup> Up to 75 per cent of inmates serve their terms for serious or extremely serious crimes.

<sup>16</sup> These figures are based on the author's personal observation while at the colonies mentioned. In 2011, *Rossiiskaia gazeta* stated that the most common period of freedom deprivation in Russia was between 5 and 10 years for the overall male prison population serving terms for both serious/extremely serious crimes and those less serious (Kulikov and Poliakova).

years, because the Russian Penal Code allows an inmate only very infrequent meetings with family members. The Penal Code allows inmates to call their relatives bi-monthly and speak to them for no more than fifteen minutes each time. The widespread practice of sending convicts to colonies far away from their cities of residence, although in defiance of existing penal law, also contributes a great deal to the difficulties that inmates' relatives must overcome in order to visit their loved ones, thus additionally impeding the maintenance of family connections.<sup>17</sup>

Many Russian convicts serving long terms lose their spouses along with faith in human relations and universal human values. Such an experience in itself can damage many essential social skills, such as the ability to establish and maintain enduring relations with other people. An individual's social functionality is connected to the level of life satisfaction. A system which destroys or seriously undermines people's ability to be happy poses a serious threat to the well-being and prosperity of society as a whole. The existing Russian legal practice of sentencing people to excessively long terms and sending them to serve these terms a great distance away from their relatives can thus have a negative social effect and might in itself be considered a crime.

Family separation is not the only negative effect the Russian penal system inflicts upon Russian citizens. Russian penal colonies are, to a great extent, self-sufficient worlds. This leads to a situation in which inmates' social experience is limited, for many years, to an environment with highly restricted horizons. Inmates serve their terms in the so-called local areas inhabited by 300 people at most (in some colonies, local areas are restricted to just one

---

<sup>17</sup> Article 73 of the Russian Penal Code presupposes that adult male inmates serve their terms at correctional colonies located in those Russian provinces where they lived or were sentenced. (This is not the case for adult female inmates and teenagers, as there are many Russian provinces without female correctional or educational colonies; see Article 73, Part 3.) In 2005, the Russian government initiated and Russian legislators accepted amendments to the Penal Code which have consequently made exemptions from this general rule for inmates sentenced in accordance with 20 articles of the Russian Criminal Code (out of a total of 288 articles defining specific crimes) and for all dangerous re-offenders, as well as those sentenced to serve part of their term in prison (Article 73, Part 4). Meanwhile, even inmates sentenced according to the Criminal Code articles, who are not exempt under Article 73, Part 4, are often sent to correctional colonies located far from their home provinces. This is partly a consequence of Russia's demography, as more than 10 per cent of the Russian population is concentrated in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Neither of these two cities possesses the necessary number of correctional colonies (there is only one general-regime correctional colony in Moscow). This problem has traditionally been solved through the practice of reserving colonies in certain Russian provinces for sentenced Muscovites and Petersburgians. For example, Muscovites are usually sent to Udmurtiia and Arkhangel'sk colonies and inmates originating from St. Petersburg often serve their terms in Arkhangel'sk and Murmansk provinces. Such a practice might be applied to citizens sentenced in other Russian provinces; to be sure, it is often applied to special cases, such as that of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who lived and was sentenced in Moscow, but was sent to serve his term in Irkutsk and then Kareliia.

detachment dormitory, thus reducing the number of possible regular contacts to 40–130 people).

Any attempt to contact other inmates beyond the local area is a serious violation of the Russian Penal Code, as well as the internal regulations of colonies. The long-term restriction of inmates' social contacts limits their experience of establishing and maintaining such contacts, inflicting potentially serious damage on social skills necessary for a productive life in contemporary society. It is not unusual for former inmates, especially those convicted while young, before they have developed sufficient social skills, to feel frightened of using public transport upon their release, as they feel highly uncomfortable in crowds. The damage to such an essential social skill can turn inmates into asocial and anti-social beings. The current Russian penal system has the potential to hamper or even destroy inmates' ability to be fully functional members of society, thus creating a sort of social Mowglis.

### Loss of Essential Socio-Economic Skills

As I observed above, the Russian prison environment leads to a lowering of inmates' habitual level of impressions and information load. In addition, the typically long terms of the Russian penal system mean that inmates tend to lose essential cultural and economic skills, and are unable to keep pace with developments in society. Imagine an inmate who was sentenced to 21 years in 1992, when computers were not yet a part of everyday Russian life, and released in 2013 to find himself in the world of internet banking, online payment, travel booking, and voter registration, without any previous experience of information technology. In 2010, I shared a two-level bunk bed with an inmate whose release date was, as they bitterly joke in Russian colonies, "never," that is, the year 2035. Imagine computer technology by that time, bearing in mind that any contact with computers is strictly prohibited by Russian penal regulations. Needless to say, the lack of computer skills, vital to a normal life, hinders former inmates' ability to re-socialise.

Inmates lose their professional skills, too. Colonies with enterprises lack modern machinery. This means that even those inmates who had industrial professional skills before sentencing do not have the slightest chance to maintain them. The Russian prison environment leads to the simplification of inmates' labour skills, producing workers who do not meet the need for innovative approaches in the current Russian economy. Instead of contributing to the country's labour market, the penal system mass-produces the traditionalist labour cadre (sometimes turning highly-developed labour resources into under-developed ones), which leads to problems for both former inmates and the national economy. These results can hardly be called the desired outcomes of the penitentiary system.

## Loss of Self-Reliance and Faith in the Law

Perhaps worse than the loss of specialised practical skills is the loss of self-reliant and conscientious, law-abiding members of society as a result of negative socialisation. First of all, the articulated paternalist nature of the Russian penal system means that during long terms, inmates grow accustomed to being automatically supplied with basic necessities, as it is the penal system's responsibility to provide inmates with food, clothing, and a roof over their heads. After several years of this, the fundamental instinct to work in order to meet one's basic needs inevitably weakens (although, in my observation, it rarely disappears completely).

This is arguably true of any prison system, and few would argue that the penal system should be absolved of the responsibility to provide food, clothing, and shelter to inmates. Yet, the inevitable results of such a situation work against the interests of society when prison sentences are as long as they are in Russia today. Possible consequences are clear from observations made by Russian psychologists working in the penal system. They claim that irreversible changes in personality emerge, on average, after five years of imprisonment.<sup>18</sup> These changes even include features suggesting that inmates develop sociopathic tendencies. Although it is not politically correct to say so, it is hard to ignore the fact that such people are much easier controlled via the blunt instruments of threats and indoctrination.

In fact, the practices of Russian labour colonies tend to socialise inmates in a way opposite to the stated purposes of deprivation of liberty, by undermining their level of law obedience. It should be kept in mind that hardened criminals constitute no more than 30–40 per cent of inmates in strict-regime colonies and a much lower percentage in general-regime colonies. Hypocrisy is, indeed, a key feature of the Russian penal system. Through encounters with corrupt law enforcement officials, court judges with a characteristically low level of professionalism, and the general harshness of daily life, prison life teaches all who come into contact with it that law is not a universal foundation of society in the Russian Federation.

The Russian legal system is formally based on a psychological, or subjective, model of guilt. This means that for the majority of crimes, a person can be found guilty if intent to commit a criminal action can be proven. (There are also some crimes which can be committed through negligence.) Russian jurisprudence views intent as the subjective aspect and the action itself as the objective aspect of the offence's *corpus delicti*. The so-called objective imposition, i.e., when a person is found guilty on the sole basis of the establishment that an action recognised as criminal has been committed, is strictly prohibited by Part 2 of Article 5 of the Russian Federation's Criminal Code, which states that "objective imputation, that is criminal responsibility for

---

<sup>18</sup> Personal communication from a colony psychologist.

innocent injury, shall not be allowed.” Article 8 of the Russian Criminal Code clearly states that only the establishment of all required aspects of the corresponding *corpus delicti*, including its subjective signs, should serve as a legal foundation for conviction. Both Articles 5 and 8 belong to the part of the Russian Criminal Code referred to as “principles.”

I often gave unofficial legal advice to my fellow inmates and thus was able to follow approximately one hundred criminal cases over the length of my term. In just one case did I witness an attempt by the judge to provide evidence of the subjective aspect of the corresponding *corpus delicti*. In all other cases, the court verdicts did not contain the evidence required by the Russian Criminal and Criminal Procedure (*ugolovno-protsessual'nyi*) Codes. On the basis of their own experience, my own lawyers confirmed that providing evidence of the subjective aspect of *corpus delicti* in verdicts was untypical of Russian courts.

Article 297 of the Russian Criminal Procedure Code states that only a sentence decided according to strict fulfilment of the legal requirements (including proof of the *corpus delicti*'s subjective aspect) is legal. The omission of the subjective aspect from verdicts is thus a fundamental violation of the Russian Criminal Procedure Code, possibly rendering the vast majority of Russian court verdicts illegal. Delivering such verdicts – due to either corrupt pressure from above or judges' neglect of the fulfilment of legal procedures – is, when all is said and done, a clear sign that the judges involved have not risen to professional standards.

For understandable reasons, the level of legal knowledge among inmates is much higher than on average within society. As a result, the fundamental contradiction between the requirements of criminal and procedural law, on the one hand, and the way courts issue sentences, on the other, is more or less obvious to many inmates. Needless to say, such a contradiction in the state's law-enforcement practices has a negative effect upon the inmates and their respect for the law.

Daily life in Russian colonies contributes to the impression that it is not the law that rules life. There is a widespread policy on the part of prison administrations of discouraging complaints by inmates about violations by officials. The common practice of punishing those who appeal their sentences or use legal channels to complain about violations by colony administration as “trouble-makers” teaches inmates the painful lesson that legal procedures are not best suited for defending individual rights and interests, and that opting for them tends merely to multiply inmates' problems. The negative social effect of discouraging inmates from challenging violations of law should not be underestimated, as it diminishes or destroys inmates' will and ability to act as responsible members of society. If the authorities do not observe the spirit and the letter of the law, why should the inmates? The erosion of inmates' faith in the law might be desirable to authoritarian politi-

cians, but it clearly goes against the fundamental interests of any healthy society.

Curiously, employment at enterprises within the colonies also contributes a great deal to negative socialisation of inmates. The negative effect has as its starting point the very fact that such enterprises are now coyly referred to as “professional education centres” in an attempt to conceal their real nature as enterprises which exploit inmates. The overwhelming majority of such enterprises within the Russian penal system entail low-tech production requiring manual labour of little or no technical skill. Lots of tricks are used to limit colonies’ expenditure on labour, the understatement of inmates’ workload being one of the most widespread ones. For example, any break in the production process due to irregularities in supply is used as an excuse to pay workers less, citing under-fulfilment of production plans. Inmates’ pay is then calculated on the basis of net production output. However, in the case of a steady flow of supply and high labour intensity (and therefore a high production output), an alternative method of pay calculation is applied, on the basis of hours worked. Inmates are paid on a monthly basis, and the two methods of calculating wages vary. At the end of the month, the colony administration is likely to choose the method which results in the lowest wages. This undermines the inmates’ work ethic, as well as their respect for federal officials and the law.

The combination of all the factors described above – loss of essential socio-economic skills, family connections, self-reliance, and faith in the law – leads, on average, after seven years of imprisonment to a loss of desire and inclination for self-improvement among inmates.<sup>19</sup>

## Punishment as a Crime

These are merely a few examples of the negative effects of current practices of the Russian penal system upon inmates. Furthermore, these practices present a clear threat to Russian society as a whole. The Russian penal system destroys the need for inmates to work productively, requiring instead dependency on others for basic needs, such as food and clothing. Inmates often lose the motivation to work, look after themselves, defend their rights, abide the law, and support their relatives, as prison authorities provide them with extremely low but still acceptable life standards.<sup>20</sup> Years spent in the penal system teach inmates that law obedience is unnecessary and counterproductive, and the most destructive outcome of this negative socialisation is that such an attitude becomes habitual for inmates.

---

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication from a colony psychologist.

<sup>20</sup> In this respect, the Russian penal system does not differ fundamentally from other ones. Russian prison terms are longer on average, however.

The most serious side effect is that inmates socialised in such a negative way bring these attitudes back to society upon their release. Prison officials, who spend their lives in the poisoned environment of the Russian prison, are deformed in generally the same way as inmates. Hence the Russian penal system, with its long terms of deprivation of freedom and its habitual lawlessness, potentially has far-reaching consequences for society as a whole. The current state of the penal system in the Russian Federation results in a permanent injection into Russian society of people educated in the ways of social irresponsibility and habitual lawlessness, lacking social skills and proper social connections, all of which erodes society's stability. Criminal culture and the socio-cultural environment of the Russian penitentiary system can be likened to a sort of poison which is dangerous for any society willing to reconcile itself to it. Russian society badly needs a radical reform of its penal system, but not the one that is currently being proposed.

### The Proposed Penal Reforms and Their Possible Effects

The current plan of penal system reform, accepted by the Russian government in October 2010, involves the elimination of existing correctional colonies. The proposal calls instead for the creation of prisons with "general," "strengthened" (*usilennyi*), and "special" regimes, as well as of settlement colonies with "common" (*obychnoe*) and "strengthened monitoring" (*usilennoe nabludenie*) ("Kontseptsiia"). As prison regimes are always harsher than those in correctional colonies, a general-regime prison is at best roughly equivalent to a correctional colony with a strict regime. In other words, the proposed reform, if implemented, will entail much harsher restrictions for inmates than those already in existence.

According to the document "Conception of the Development of the Penal System through the Year 2020" ("*Kontseptsiia razvitiia ugolovno-ispolnitel'noi sistemy Rossiiskoi Federatsii do 2020 goda*"), inmates sentenced for crimes categorized as "serious" or "extremely serious" will serve their terms in prisons. "Special regime" prisons are designated for four categories of inmates: (1) those sentenced to life; (2) those sentenced for extremely serious crimes to terms longer than five years (terms shorter than five years for "especially serious crimes" are virtually non-existent in Russian court practice); (3) "especially dangerous recidivists" (i.e., those serving at least a third term for serious crimes); and (4) serious violators of the penal system's internal regulations.<sup>21</sup> The "strengthened regime" prisons are designated for inmates sentenced for terms longer than five years for serious crimes and those serving less than five years for extremely serious crimes;

---

<sup>21</sup> It is enough to be punished twice, say, for an unbuttoned jacket, with brief spells in ShIZO, to be recognised by the administration as a "serious violator of internal regulations," and thus sent to a special regime prison.

the “general regime” prisons are designated for inmates serving terms shorter than five years for serious crimes (Iakovlev; Andreev). Currently, approximately 75 per cent of Russian inmates serve terms for “serious” and “especially serious” crimes.<sup>22</sup> The most common term is between five and ten years. FSIN plans to build 700 new prisons, including 58 special regime prisons, by 2030 for “more than 638,000 inmates” (settlement colonies are not included) (Andreev).

The proposed transition towards a new kind of prison system is likely to multiply the negative effects of prison life. Indeed, the proposed reforms do not entail, as many Western observers naïvely believe, Western-style prisons which allow inmates privacy in their cells at night, or the comparative freedom to leave the cells and socialize with other inmates during the day. On the contrary, the existing proposals prescribe that inmates will be kept locked in two- to eight-bunk cells for 22.5 hours a day, every day of the year. Some inmates will not even have the possibility of leaving their cells to work at the penal system’s enterprises, because under the existing reform model, employment for inmates is considered to be a reward, rather than a duty, and is excluded from two of the five types of regime suggested in the reform proposals.<sup>23</sup>

This feature of the penal reform, intended to keep inmates in permanent confinement, will clearly make the system harsher, not more humane. Indeed, long-term confinement in an extremely limited space – both physically and socially – will inevitably lead to a further reduction of the variety of inmates’ social contacts and, as a result, their social skills. The scale of this reduction might be estimated to be at least one, possibly two, orders of magnitude, since the amount of people available for contacts will be reduced from the population of one local area (40 to 300 people) to merely 1 to 7 people sharing the same cell. The degree of inmates’ privacy will inevitably decrease as well. It is currently possible for inmates to leave the dormitory for a walk in the local area in comparative privacy, preserving the inmate’s personal space of several feet. It is also possible to avoid some undesirable contacts by leaving certain rooms in the barracks. Inmates will be brutally deprived of both of these opportunities when locked in their cells.

It is a well-observed phenomenon that people are more subject to the influence of prison culture when confined to cells, than while serving their terms in the comparatively open space of penal colonies. The reason for this is obvious: the lack of privacy typical of cell conditions significantly increases the distress caused by deprivation of freedom, turning it directly into a psycho-traumatic factor. It is much more difficult for people traumatised

---

<sup>22</sup> In March 2013, there were 587,000 inmates in Russia (Esipov).

<sup>23</sup> In his extensive interview with *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, Alexander Reimer, the FSIN Director in 2009–2012, openly stated: “We will not provide the opportunity to work for those sentenced to life or to a strengthened-regime prison. Absence of labour is a factor which makes punishment harsher.”

by its influence to withstand the permanent pressure of the negative influence of prison culture.<sup>24</sup>

In such conditions, it is also much easier for prison administrators to maintain the status quo, to ensure the cooperation of inmates as and when necessary. It is therefore likely that the proposed prison system will force inmates as well as administrators to conform to the requirements of the well-established prison culture and traditions to a much greater extent than currently possible in the environment of penal colonies. Meanwhile, prison culture will continue to deform many inmates in an anti-social manner. As a result, the negative effect of its influence upon inmates – and society as a whole – will only increase with the adoption of the proposed transition of the Russian penal system to a new prison model.

---

<sup>24</sup> It would be naïve to expect that, with the completion of the announced penal reform, the well-tested suppression practices of the Russian penal system would be immediately abandoned. For example, prison administrators are unlikely to willingly reject the use of *press-khaty* (suppression cells, in which one group of inmates exerts pressure on other inmates in the interests of the prison administration).

## Works Cited

- Aleksandrov, Iurii. "Krasnaia i chernaia." *Politicheskii zhurnal* 44.47 (29 Nov. 2004). Web. 26 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.politjournal.ru/preview.php?action=Articles&dirid=67&tek=2651&issue=79>>.
- . *Ocherki kriminal'noi subkul'tury*. Institut psikhoterapii, n.d. Web. 25 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.psyinst.ru/library.php?part=article&id=1630>>.
- Andreev, Anton. "Tiur'ma osobogo rezhima poiavitsia v gorode Eniseiske Krasnoiar'skogo kraia." *Rossiiskoe agentstvo pravovoĭ i sudebnoĭ informatsii*. 16 July 2012. Web. 1 Mar. 2014. <[http://rapsinews.ru/incident\\_news/20120716/263812496.html](http://rapsinews.ru/incident_news/20120716/263812496.html)>.
- "Bunt v kolonii nesovershennoletnikh v Sverdlovskoi oblasti." *Criminalnaya.ru*. Kriminal'naia Rossiia, 17 Oct. 2007. Web. 28 Feb. 2014. <<http://criminalnaya.ru/news/2007-10-17-1005>>.
- "Cisco: Internet – udvoenie kazhdye piat' s tret'iu let." *iXBT.com*. iXBT.com, 24 Jan. 2012. Web. 25 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.ixbt.com/news/soft/index.shtml?15/45/24>>.
- Esipov, Sergeĭ. Interview. "FSIN: kazhdyĭ tretii osuzhdennyĭ inostranets v Rossii sidit za narkotiki." *RIA.ru*. RIA Novosti, 4 Mar. 2013. Web. 1 Mar. 2014. <<http://ria.ru/interview/20130304/925376615.html>>.
- Guberman, I. M. *Gariki na vse vremena*. Vol. 1. Moscow: Eksmo, 2008. Web. <<http://www.litmir.net/bd/?b=130784>>.
- Iakovlev, Valerii. Interview by Natal'ia Bykova. "Pered nami stoiat zadachi ne prosto reformirovaniia ugovovno-ispolnitel'noi sistemy, a kardinal'nogo ee izmeneniia." 6 Nov. 2009. Web. 1 Mar. 2014. <<http://63.ru/text/person/244141.html>>.
- Kirshin, I., and A. Titov. "Effektivnost' protsessa nakopleniia znaniĭ." *Ekonomicheskie nauki* 2.87 (2012): 33–37. Print.
- "Kontseptsiiia razvitiia ugovovno-ispolnitel'noi sistemy Rossiiskoi Federatsii do 2020 goda." *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 8 Mar. 2010. Web. 1 Mar. 2014.
- Kulikov, V., and Iu. Poliakova. "Krizis srednego vozrasta." *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 2 June 2011. Web. 26 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.rg.ru/2011/06/02/turmy.html>>.
- Lenin, V. I. "Party Organisation and Party Literature." *Collected Works*. Vol. 10. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962: 44–49. Print.
- Reimer, Alexander. Interview by Mikhail Barshchevskii. "Arestanty v otpuske." *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 15 Oct. 2009. Web. 1 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.rg.ru/2009/10/15/reymmer.html>>.
- "Ugovovno-ispolnitel'nyi kodeks RF" ["The Penal Code of the Russian Federation"]. *Advocate Moscow.ru*. Advokat v Moskve, n.d. Web. 26 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.advocatemoscow.ru/zakoni/uik-rf-2013-dejstvuyushhaya-redakciya/>>.



# Free and Forced Labor in the Soviet Economy: An Uncertain Boundary<sup>1</sup>

Martin Kragh

*“Large zone” – the Soviet Union (one large labor camp),  
in contrast to “small zone,” i.e., a particular labor camp<sup>2</sup>*

Joseph Stalin’s decision, towards the end of 1928, to fundamentally transform Soviet society through the dual policies of collectivization and forced industrialization had major repercussions for the country’s millions of agricultural and industrial workers. Stalin’s “great leap” coincided with the explosive growth of forced labor, the establishment of labor camps and special settlements, and the uprooting of traditional peasant households. For the remainder of Stalin’s rule, the Soviet labor market was to be characterized by two sectors: on the one hand, the civilian and nominally free labor force toiling in the factories; on the other hand, the unfree and highly regimented forced laborers mobilized via the networks of camps and settlements known to the world as the Gulag (*Glavnoe upravlenie lagereĭ i koloniĭ*; Main Administration for Camps and Colonies).<sup>3</sup> As pointed out by Donald Filtzer, the notion of “free” labor needs to be qualified. The period after 1928 saw increasing restrictions on workers’ ability to engage in various forms of collective action, and to defend their positions in the workplace and in society at large (Filtzer, “From Mobilized” 154). By 1940, the Soviet industrial labor force was the most regimented in the world, blurring usual distinctions between free and forced labor.

The Soviet economy under Stalin relied on a multitude of sometimes overlapping labor-coercive institutions. This applies also to the Gulag’s network of forced labor camps – in itself a constantly evolving patchwork of regimes established for the purpose of punishing different segments of the population. The Gulag system is not a phenomenon easily separated from the Soviet system as a whole; wherever the latter extended, so did the former. As noted by Jacques Rossi in his *Gulag Handbook*, inmates referred to their

---

<sup>1</sup> Financial support from the Jan Wallander and Tom Hedelius Foundation is gratefully acknowledged.

<sup>2</sup> “Большая зона” – Советский Союз (являющийся одним большим лагерем: в отличие от “маленькой зоны”, т. е. собственно лагеря) (Rossi 132).

<sup>3</sup> Although the acronym “Gulag” technically denotes a specific Soviet administrative institution tasked with the management of the country’s detention system, the term is used here to denote the entire Soviet penal system.

camps as the “small zone” (*malaia zona*), whereas freedom meant the transfer to the “large zone” (*bol'shaia zona*), i.e., the Soviet Union. Life in the larger zone was unmistakably better than in the smaller in virtually every respect, but the lines of demarcation between the two worlds were not always clear-cut. The smaller zone, inevitably, existed as an element of the larger.

Tracy McDonald has described the evolution of the Soviet repressive machinery as a pattern of “expanding and contracting circles,” whereby “the Bolshevik regime attempted to consolidate power” (1827). Beginning with the violence of revolution and civil war, followed by the temporary “retreat” of the New Economic Policy, repression reached its peak during the phases of collectivization, expansion of forced labor regimes, deportations, and mass executions. The timing of these different measures was not coincidental. As pointed out by Paul Gregory, repression and labor coercive measures were intricately linked with the Soviet government’s – and ultimately Stalin’s – vision of maximizing economic growth. In the long run, this would depend on physical and human capital formation, but if Soviet leaders wanted output right away, “it could only be brought about by more effort,” that is, coercion had to be increased (Gregory 84). It is against this background that the implementation of increasingly draconian legislation in the 1930s has to be framed.

This essay makes two primary and related arguments. The first is that the implementation of coercive legislation under Stalin was a process that evolved over time. One of the most salient challenges he faced was the information asymmetry arising from a simple principal-agent dilemma: Stalin (the principal) wanted his underlings (agents) to execute his orders, but he had no capacity to fully monitor their behavior, or to enforce his decrees. He also had no meaningful tool to assess the alternative cost of various decisions, and seemed to have relied to a large extent on previous experience and rules of thumb. Stalin refined his coercive system over time according to its own logic, without fully overcoming its inherent principal-agent dilemmas. The fact that the dictator’s closest associates dismantled key institutions of the Soviet repressive machinery immediately after his death suggests that we should also pay attention to the costs associated with the most ominous practices of this machinery.

My second argument is that the existence of forced labor in the Stalin era cannot be understood in isolation from the Soviet economy as a whole. Forced labor was not the exclusive prerogative of prisons or the Gulag system. Unfree labor existed also in several other spheres of the economy and in different forms.<sup>4</sup> As noted by Steven Barnes, the “Soviet penal system can

---

<sup>4</sup> The generic terms “unfree,” “coerced,” and “forced” labor are used throughout this essay to denote those work relations in which people were employed against their will through various types of threats such as destitution, detentions, and violence.

only be understood through careful consideration of its perpetually evolving range of institutions” (239). Furthermore, an examination of the sentencing practices of Soviet authorities reveals that enforcement was arbitrary – innocent people were convicted, whereas (purportedly) guilty people could escape persecution. My contention is that Stalin did not care, as he discounted the costs of excessive coercive practices. He applied legislation instrumentally as a disciplinary and regulatory force against groups or categories of people, rather than specific individuals. As his “loyal executioner” Nikolaï Yezhov remarked, it was “[b]etter that ten innocent people should suffer than one spy get away. When you chop wood, chips fly” (Montefiore 218).

This essay draws on previous scholarship and volumes of archival documents in order to provide a picture of different labor institutions and regimenting decrees issued under Stalin. Returning to McDonald’s metaphor of Stalinist terror as a pattern of “expanding and contracting circles,” we trace the pattern of how Soviet labor became increasingly coerced over time. The first section of the essay deals with the consequences of collectivization and forced industrialization when these programs were launched in the late 1920s. The second section deals with increasing regimentation of the nominally free and civilian labor force, whereas the third section deals with the major Gulag institutions proper. The penultimate section analyzes limitations to Stalinist repression, and the last one draws conclusions.

## Forced Industrialization and Collectivization

The building of socialism under Stalin, entailing the creation of new industries, strengthening of the defense capacity, and the collectivization of agriculture, was from its outset inseparable from the increased importance and sway of the security organs. They were necessary in order for Stalin to control and direct the tens of millions of agricultural and industrial workers who were affected by his policies of forced industrialization. Between 1929 and 1933, the workforce employed in industry and construction more than doubled. The government had foreseen an increase from 11.9 million employed in 1928–29 to 15.8 million by 1932–33, but already in 1932, the actual number of people employed in industry was 22.9 million (Davies 184–209, 236). Between 1926 and 1939, the number of persons involved in non-agricultural activities increased by a factor of more than three, from 11.6 to 38.9 million. Most of them had come from the countryside, where land and property were collectivized and millions of peasants were de-kulakized (i.e., had their property confiscated) and repressed (Kessler, “Work”; Markevich 443). On the eve of World War II, a number of regimenting decrees were in place in order to restrict the ability of Soviet citizens to migrate and settle freely in the country amid the social and political upheavals caused by Stalin’s policies.

Stalin could pursue his policies thanks to support from a team of loyal Stalinists, who in their internal correspondence self-consciously referred to themselves as *stalinisty*. He had helped to recruit them to positions of responsibility in the power struggle after Lenin's death. The existence of a loyal "Team Stalin" in the Politburo, the leading ministries, the security police, and the military was a political prerequisite for his "revolution from above" – a revolution which, in a primarily agricultural economy, would logically commence in the countryside. The collectivization of agriculture was the culmination of a conflict between the Bolsheviks and the peasantry going back to the Civil War, when in order to feed the towns and its army, the regime had appropriated foodstuffs from the peasants by force. In the mid-1920s, a brief period of relative calm, peasants had reacted to adverse market conditions by reducing their food supply and withdrawing from transactions with industry. The purpose of the outright collectivization of agriculture was to circumvent such an outside option (i.e., the ability to willfully forego economic transactions), essentially imposing on peasants what they themselves regarded as a second serfdom. The properties belonging to deported peasant households were intended to offset the costs of collective farm construction. As the enforcement of Stalin's collectivization decrees was the prerogative of the political police, these violent campaigns in the countryside also ensured that the OGPU would dominate Soviet policing for decades to come.

In closed Politburo meetings, Stalin described collectivization as a "tribute" to be paid by the peasants for industrialization (Viola, "The Other"). Collective farms constituted what Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson have labeled "extractive institutions" – i.e., institutions designed by the authorities to appropriate the peasants' produce at price levels they would otherwise not have accepted. Draconian measures were employed in order to enforce collectivization. On 30 January 1930, a Politburo commission headed by Viacheslav Molotov issued the decree "On Measures for the Liquidation of Kulak Farms in Districts of Wholesale Collectivization," which was immediately followed by executions, arrests, and deportations of the so-called kulaks and their family members.<sup>5</sup> In the three years that followed, somewhere around two million peasants were deported to peripheral and little-developed regions – all in all, 400,000 families – whereas some 150,000 families were resettled to lower-quality land outside their village. Their property was expropriated with no compensation, and they were forbidden to leave their place of residence (*Zemskov, Spetsposelentsya*; idem "Zakliuchennyie"; idem, "Spetsposelentsya"). The deportees came to constitute the first wave of so-called "special settlers" (*spetsposelentsya*) – a Soviet euphemism intended to conceal how the expansion of forced labor in the

---

<sup>5</sup> The Russian word "kulak" was a derogatory term for a wealthy peasant, but in practice it was applied to any peasant who resisted collectivization.

Soviet economy had intensified. By 1937, 93% of all peasant households had been brought into the collective farms (Ivnitskiĭ 27).

As noted above, collectivization policies explain a large share of the internal migration patterns to the towns and new industrial regions (primarily in the Urals industrial district), which expanded rapidly. There was also another, more immediate calamity, which exacerbated this trend. In 1932, aggressive procurement campaigns – in combination with a poor harvest – contributed directly to mass starvation in the countryside, killing at least six million people in two years' time (followed by 1.5 million people affected by famine-related diseases reducing average life expectancy). Historians have debated various causes of the famine, but three large epidemics in less than three decades – 1921–1922, 1932–1933, and 1946–1947 (excluding starvation during World War II) – signal the consequences of a systematic policy (Ellman, “The 1947”; Ellman, “Stalin”). When the Bolsheviks overturned their agricultural policy in the mid-1950s – moderating procurement campaigns, subsidizing collective farms, and allowing food imports – peasants stopped starving, although the state budget suffered.

A number of repressive decrees were issued in the early 1930s by Soviet authorities in order to contain politically the social crisis generated by their own policies. The most notorious decrees targeted property, trade, and migration. Archival documents confirm that Stalin personally outlined the so-called decree of 7 August 1932, an extrajudicial stipulation which officially targeted thieves, but in practice punished ordinary peasants. In a telegram to Kaganovich (dated 20 July 1932), Stalin remarked how “theft” from collective farms was being organized by “kulaks (de-kulakized) and other anti-social (*antiobshchestvennye*) elements, trying to destroy our new construction (*stroï*).” His suggested solution was that “theft” on the railways and collective farms henceforth be punished by death or a minimum of ten years in prison. Responsibility for the decree's implementation was given to the OGPU. In its final version in the statutes, the decree followed almost verbatim the text in Stalin's original telegram – including the peculiar comment that public property was “holy and inviolable” (Khlevniuk et al. 235). Over the course of the next two years, a quarter of a million people were charged by the OGPU under this legislation. Of those, 200,000 were given sentences of five to ten years of forced labor and at least 11,000 were executed.

On 22 August 1932, the Politburo issued a complementary edict entitled “On the Battle against Speculation” (Iakovlev et al. 316). It targeted economic crime, and granted the OGPU authority to sentence those guilty of “speculation” in consumer goods to five to ten years in a labor camp. This was an extremely coercive response to the problems of shortages and inflation that had emerged during the first five-year plan. As shown by Elena Osokina and Julie Hessler in their respective monographs on Soviet trade, shortages of all types of goods in the retail sector had become a constant under Stalin's program of forced industrialization. The edict on speculation,

therefore, was an attempt to curtail the informal markets that had arisen in response to the shortages. By seizing individual peasants' grain products offered on the market, and clamping down on phenomena such as queuing outside stores in the small hours before opening, authorities sought to strengthen the inadequate official retail channels. As of 1 April 1933, about 54,000 individuals had been apprehended by the OGPU for speculation, of whom more than 32,000 received a judicial or extrajudicial sentence (usually between five and ten years in a labor camp).

At the same time, a ban on migration from the North Caucasus and Ukraine kept millions of starving peasants in their original place of residence, which they could not easily leave. Those who attempted to leave were immediately returned to their villages, or in some instances sentenced to prison. The political signal for quarantine was unequivocal. "The Central Committee of the Communist Party," noted Stalin and Molotov in January 1933, "does not doubt that this exodus of peasants [...] has been organized by the enemies of Soviet power [...] Last year, the Party, Soviet, and Chekist organs in Ukraine overlooked this counter-revolutionary undertaking of the enemies of Soviet power. A repeat of last year's mistakes will not be permitted" (Iakovlev et al. 391). Harsh repression notwithstanding, the famine and de-kulakization campaigns continuously drove millions of peasants to cities and industrial sites, further exacerbating the crisis in the already poorly functioning distribution and retail networks. Of the 10–11 million people arriving in cities in the quinquennium 1929–1933 (although net inflows were smaller, taking into account the number of those who simultaneously left the cities), many managed to bypass registration permits and settle in urban areas without proper documentation.

In an attempt to contain this great influx, Soviet authorities issued, on 27 December 1932, a new internal passport law, requiring all citizens over the age of sixteen resident in certain, passportized areas (e.g., cities, towns, industrial sites, state farms) to hold an internal passport. Only with an internal passport was it possible to obtain a *propiska* (residence permit), and a passport was also necessary to obtain work in industry. The passport specified the areas in which its holder was allowed to settle, which was not a trivial issue, given the often privileged access to rations in urban districts, to say nothing of the so-called "regime" cities (i.e., cities with priority status due to strategic importance, requiring special permission to settle; among these Moscow, Leningrad, and Kharkov were the first). Disenfranchised citizens (such as former kulaks) could be denied passports altogether.

The passport law extended earlier extrajudicial prerogatives of the OGPU to punish and deport "socially harmful elements," further blurring distinctions between political and civil policing. The so-called "passport *troiki*" (ad hoc administrative courts) authorized the OGPU to sentence offenders for up to three years of forced labor. The unemployed, or so-called "labor shirkers" (*progul'shiki*), were typically deported from major cities if they were first-

time offenders. The so-called “former people” (*byvshie*, among whom were peasants who had been targets of de-kulakization campaigns) could be sentenced to three years in a special settlement camp (where they, according to an established pattern, “logically” belonged), whereas “criminals and other anti-social elements” could be sentenced to three years in a labor camp (see below for a more detailed explanation of the various Gulag institutions). Although statistical data remain incomplete, somewhere around 700,000 people had been deported from Moscow and Leningrad alone by 27 August 1933.

The case of the passport law and the ensuing campaigns against “socially harmful” citizens (*sotsvrediteli*) highlights the extent to which collectivization and forced industrialization campaigns were interrelated with the creation and administration of special regimes, labor camps, penal colonies, and settlements. The risk of deportation or, in the worst case scenario, imprisonment, for citizens seeking (or losing) work opportunities in the urban areas established a strong labor-coercive element in industry. As noted by Gijs Kessler, people without work “seem to have formed the principal category of persons that was evicted from the regime areas” (“The Passport” 285). Considering how, in the early 1930s, millions of people were moving in and out of different localities and workplaces on a yearly basis, the passport law spelled real danger for those who did not qualify for a passport or simply feared applying for one. Although one of the original purposes of the passportization campaign had been to create a detailed statistical picture of the urban population, in the hands of the OGPU the law became elastic enough to be applied selectively and against broad segments of the population as a disciplinary tool. When the passport law was modified in 1940, it was only because the needs and priorities of the authorities had changed.

## Coercive Legislation in Industry

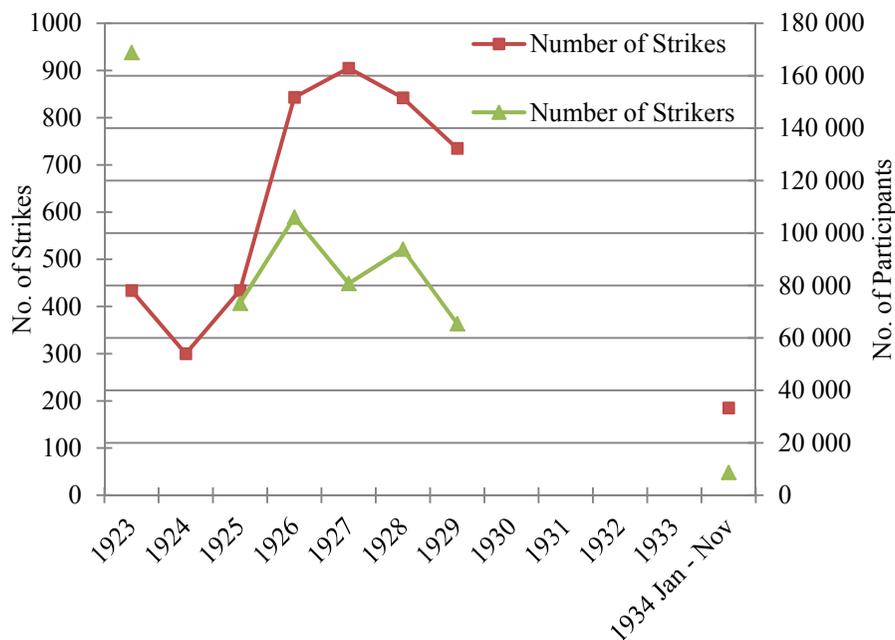
The regimenting policies enforced by the authorities in order to contain migration between urban and non-urban regions were intricately related to the parallel implementation of a number of coercive practices in the workplaces. In the late 1920s, a decisive purge was initiated by Team Stalin against leading “right deviationists” in the Party, ministries, and trade unions. In combination with a number of show trials against engineers (e.g., the “Shakhty Trial” of 1928), economists (e.g., the “Menshevik Trial” of 1931), and specialists in the oil industry and other sectors, resistance to policies of forced industrialization was effectively curbed. Secrecy and censorship were strengthened in several respects. In 1930, Glavlit – the main censorship organ of the Party – issued instructions to all ministries and publishers that henceforth no information “on strikes, massive anti-Soviet meetings and manifestations, disorders and unrest in places of imprisonment and concen-

tration camps, shall be published without the official permission of organs of power.” The document further specified that “organs of power” meant the OGPU (Boldyrev and Kragh).

The repressive policies had certain historical precedents in the early phases of revolution and civil war. The Russian economy had virtually collapsed in 1918, triggering high rates of absenteeism (*proguly*) and labor turnover, as industrial sites were abandoned. By Spring 1918, Bolshevik Party members were instructed by the Politburo to report to the Cheka on any anti-Bolshevik sentiments among the workers. Labor relations and labor disciplinary issues, therefore, came under the purview of the political police. Members of, and sympathizers with, the Socialist or Social Democratic opposition, and independent organizers of trade unions, were arrested and put on trial. In April 1920, the Council of People’s Commissars (*Sovnarkom*) agreed on the first resolution on absenteeism, according to which workers absent from work for more than three days in one month were held accountable for sabotage, and could be sentenced to labor camp. Minor infractions would lead to a reduction in the entitlement for days off work. These laws were successful in curbing absenteeism, but when the civil war ended, a more moderate regime was introduced. Nevertheless, this experience was not forgotten by the Stalinist leadership, which applied similar measures at a later point.

In March 1929, a new law expanded the authority of factory managers, who could now punish workers without consulting the trade unions. Shortly thereafter, tougher penalties were introduced for violations of disciplinary codes, making dismissals easier. The role of independent trade union organs was simultaneously curtailed, as leading activists were purged and arrested, and the security organs increased their presence at the factory level. Strike activity – as recorded by authorities – had shown a checkered tendency in the mid-1920s. Whereas an increase in the number of strikes was recorded, the number of participants seems to have declined. Although the application of source criticism might explain certain discrepancies in the data (e.g., biased and/or tendentious data), the overall decline is indisputable. Whereas approximately 168,000 workers had gone on strike in 1923, there were some 65,000 in 1929 and, judging by the available evidence, even fewer in the next year. During the first six months of 1930, about 147 strikes with about 12,000 participants were recorded (see Figure 1). The Russian historian A. N. Sakharov concludes that by 1934, collective action in industry was virtually non-existent (only 185 strikes with 8,707 participants occurred that year) (Kazantsev and Sakharov 45).

Figure 1. Strikes and Participation Rate



Sources (for the years 1924–26, 1928–29): Sevost'yanov et al. Vol. III, p. 112, vol. IV, pp. 1026–28, vol. VI, pp. 160, 206, 256, 315, 376, 415, 455, 503, 544, 603, 670, vol. VII, pp. 85, 173, 229, 279, 320, 365, 406, 478, 526, 564, 603. For 1927: Murphy 173. For 1934: Kazantsev and Sakharov 136.

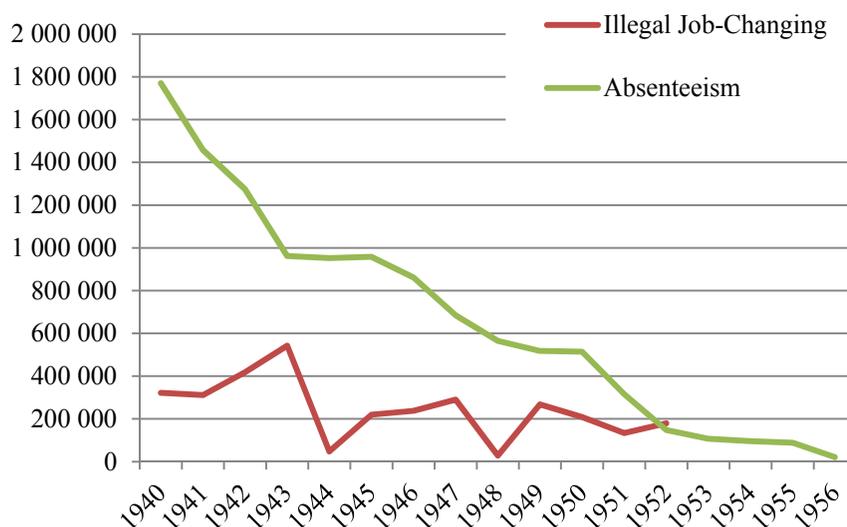
Jeffrey Rossman and Donald Filtzer have argued that behavioral patterns in industry and construction in the 1930s and 1940s were, to a large extent, framed by restrictions on workers' access to collective action at the workplace, in combination with increasingly coercive labor legislation. With no access to independent trade unions or the possibility of strikes, Soviet workers became more "atomized," instead resisting reductions in real wages and living standards through a withdrawal of effort, i.e., absenteeism, shirking on the job, and unauthorized job-changing (*tekuchka kadrov*). These covert behavioral patterns in the workplace continued in many ways until the collapse of the Soviet system. In order to contain these behavioral patterns (what James C. Scott termed "weapons of the weak") and to keep levels of effort stable, the Soviet authorities used a variety of carrots and sticks. Under Stalin, sticks prevailed over carrots.

Two particularly persistent phenomena, unauthorized job-changing and absenteeism, were considered by the Soviet authorities to represent major obstacles to Stalin's industrialization plans. Described in public discourse as issues of "labor discipline" and "remnants of capitalism," such phenomena

in reality had more to do with rapidly deteriorating conditions faced by the urban population. The economic policies pursued in the first five-year plan had resulted in severe food shortages and declining real wages in both urban areas and the countryside. Unexpected rises in wage debts due to money shortages at enterprises, as well as stricter budget regulations, put workers under economic strain. These aspects coalesced in driving a high level of labor turnover and absenteeism within industry and construction.

Stalin found a solution to the problems of shortages and falling real wages not in a reduction in the pace of industrialization, or in a general shift towards higher levels of consumption (although such attempts were made on various occasions). Rather, in a series of legislative acts, labor coercion was increased in order to preserve levels of effort at a lower level of remuneration than what would otherwise have been accepted. In an attempt to reduce absenteeism, it was legislated in 1932 that a worker who was absent for more than one day must be immediately dismissed from work and evicted from his or her residence. The linking of work to a place of residence was not coincidental. In the words of Mark Meerovich, the state utilized the shortage of housing as a “regulatory tool” against its own citizens (6–7). In combination with the passport law, dismissal from work could henceforth result in eviction from one’s home and even deportation. In December 1938, the rules were subsequently strengthened, with absenteeism redefined to include late arrival to work by more than 20 minutes, and partial loss of social benefits for those who were dismissed. In June 1940, absenteeism and job-changing without the management’s consent were made criminal offenses, punishable by corrective labor at one’s workplace (for absenteeism) or by detention (for job-changing). After the outbreak of the Soviet-German war in June of 1941, the law was strengthened in December of the same year, making job-changing in war industry punishable by forced labor. The simultaneous punishment of job-changing and absenteeism made sense for a regime striving to increase productivity. By criminalizing unauthorized job-changing, Soviet authorities removed workers’ outside option. By simultaneously criminalizing absenteeism, they limited the possibility of reducing individual work efforts in response to a perceived decline in welfare.

Figure 2. Number of Sentences for Job-Changing and Absenteeism



Source: Adapted from Kragh 1259.

On the eve of war with Nazi Germany, the Soviet labor market was the most regimented in the world. During the war years of 1940–1945, more than 7.3 million sentences were handed down for absenteeism in industry and construction. The figure for unauthorized job-changing was over 1.3 million sentences. The typical punishment for absenteeism was three months of corrective work at one’s workplace with reduced pay and rations, whereas job-changing could lead to two to four months in prison. Although the punishment for absenteeism might seem light by comparison, even a small reduction in food rations during the war – under conditions of total mobilization for the front – could prove life-threatening, especially considering that more calories were expended on the factory floor than before the war (Filtzer, *The Hazards*). The total number of sentences meted out by Soviet courts for these two offenses amounted to 11.2 million for absenteeism (this law was removed from the statutes in 1956), and 3.2 million sentences for unauthorized job-changing (removed from the statutes in 1952). Thus, labor disciplinary infractions became the most widespread crime to have existed in the entire history of the Soviet Union (see Figure 2).

The laws passed in June of 1940 against absenteeism and job-changing in industry were complemented in July of the same year by a campaign against the production of defective goods, increasing the length of prison sentences to a maximum of eight years. In August, the Politburo launched a campaign against petty theft in industry, with a minimum punishment of one year for all offenders. With the edict of 26 December 1941, war industry was subjected to draconian disciplinary measures. Unauthorized job-changing was

henceforth treated as desertion, punishable by up to eight years in a labor camp, with an additional edict stipulating up to ten years for railway transport workers. The same punishment was applied to workers in war industry, who could be treated as deserters after their third sentence for absenteeism. As the definition of war industry was constantly expanding during the war, the pool of potential offenders also widened. In total, about 980,000 workers were sentenced under the stricter edict on desertion between 1942 and 1948, as were about 130,000 workers in railway transport. Although the law on desertion had originally been implemented as a wartime decree, it remained on the statutes until 1948. When the law was subsequently repealed, it was simply replaced with the less draconian law from 1940 against unauthorized job-changing.

By 1940, labor recruitment, which had previously been a relatively unregulated activity organized at the level of individual enterprises, became subject to a number of centrally coordinated campaigns. One of the most significant institutions for recruitment and conscription was the Ministry of Labor Reserves, through which more than 8 million workers during the period of 1946–1952 were sent into industry and construction through vocational schools and organized recruitment (*orgnabor*). The majority of these recruits arrived from the countryside, and were usually required to accept four-year contracts in peripheral economic regions where conditions were harsh. This was, in effect, a form of indentured labor (Filtzer, *Soviet* 144). With peasants subjected to a “second serfdom,” the majority of workers tied to their workplaces by decree, and a large share of young workers mobilized in industry, the lines of demarcation between free and unfree labor were fundamentally blurred in the Soviet labor market under Stalin. By the 1940s, the Gulag camps housed not only former kulaks, “fifth columnists,” and “counter-revolutionaries,” but also ordinary workers and peasants, who in the different repressive campaigns of the previous decade had been sentenced for violations of the passport law or according to other draconian decrees concerning theft of socialist property, absenteeism, or unauthorized job-changing.

## Forced Labor and the Gulag System

At its peak in the 1940s, the Gulag consisted of at least five primary institutions: prisons, corrective labor camps, corrective labor colonies, special settlements, and corrective labor without deprivation of freedom (as stipulated by the 1940 law against absenteeism, discussed above). Prisons held primarily those under active interrogation and only a small segment of sentenced inmates, who were isolated and usually did not work. The corrective labor camps housed prisoners with a term of more than three years, and were usually large, whereas corrective labor colonies were smaller and kept prisoners

with sentences of one to three years. The camp and colony populations had the technical status of slaves – they were forced to work either *in situ* at a project managed by the penal administration (such as a canal or gold mine), or could be contracted out to other economic enterprises (where they would work side by side with nominally free workers). The special settlements housed families exiled during the collectivization campaigns and the forced resettlement of deported nationalities.<sup>6</sup>

Although a considerable segment of the Soviet population was sentenced to forced labor under Stalin, official NKVD statistics on the Gulag population are not always clear. Although we have archival data on sentences, statistics on prisoner turnover (releases) and mortality rates – both of which could be relatively high – are much patchier. Whereas sentences increased the camp population, deaths and releases reduced it, making it difficult to calculate the total camp population size. Archival data on sentences suggest that approximately 20 million people were sentenced to camps, colonies, and prisons between 1930 and 1952. To this must be added about 6 million people – primarily kulaks and individuals of minority nationalities – who were deported to special settlements during this period (Khlevniuk). These figures include individuals sentenced for all sorts of crimes as defined by Soviet authorities. Some of them (e.g., murder, arson, robbery) also occurred in other countries, whereas the majority of crimes for which Soviet prisoners were sentenced were specific to the Soviet context.<sup>7</sup>

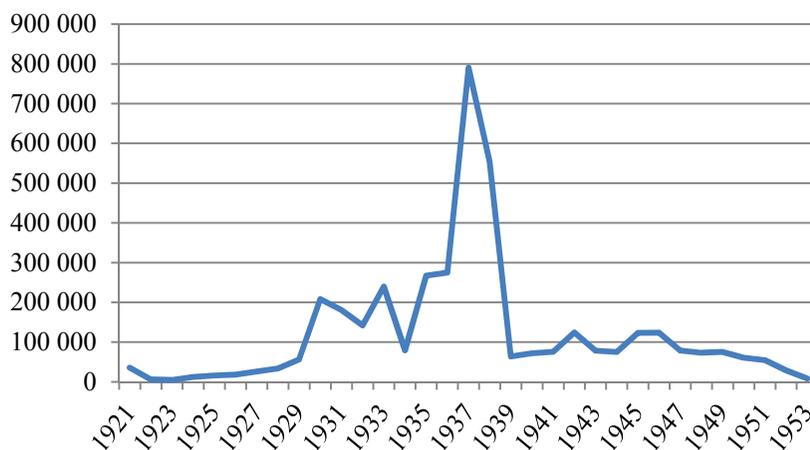
The most notorious of all Soviet crimes was Article 58 of the criminal code, detailing acts of “counter-revolutionary activity and anti-Soviet agitation.” During the period of 1930–1953, every year somewhere between 100,000 to 200,000 citizens were sentenced in accordance with this law to either death or forced labor (see Figure 3). In total, Soviet authorities estimated about 4 million sentences for “counter-revolutionary” activity during the period of 1921–1953. Although the Great Terror is unique in its scope and scale of repression (about 1.3 million sentences were pronounced and about 700,000 executions were carried out in less than two years, 1937–1938), the high rates of sentencing and incarceration throughout Stalin’s rule suggest that repression was more constant, rather than fluctuating dramatically. This interpretation becomes especially convincing if we include in the analysis the numerous people sentenced for other crimes (real or fraudulent) and those who simply disappeared in various campaigns and calamities.

---

<sup>6</sup> The institution of special settlements is not always included in discussions of the Gulag system, although the qualitative differences between conditions for special settlers and forced laborers were small. As noted by a Russian expert on the special settlements, “deportation policies in the USSR were strongly related to the general policies of forced labor [...] and may only be comprehended in connection with the practice of forced labor-exploitation of convicts in the Gulag” (Iakovlev, *Stalinskie* 8).

<sup>7</sup> Thus, the law on theft of socialist property was made possible by the Bolsheviks’ expropriation of the peasants’ private property. From the peasants’ point of view, it was the Bolsheviks stealing from them, and not the other way around.

Figure 3. Number of Sentences for Counter-Revolutionary Activity and Anti-Soviet Agitation, 1921–1953



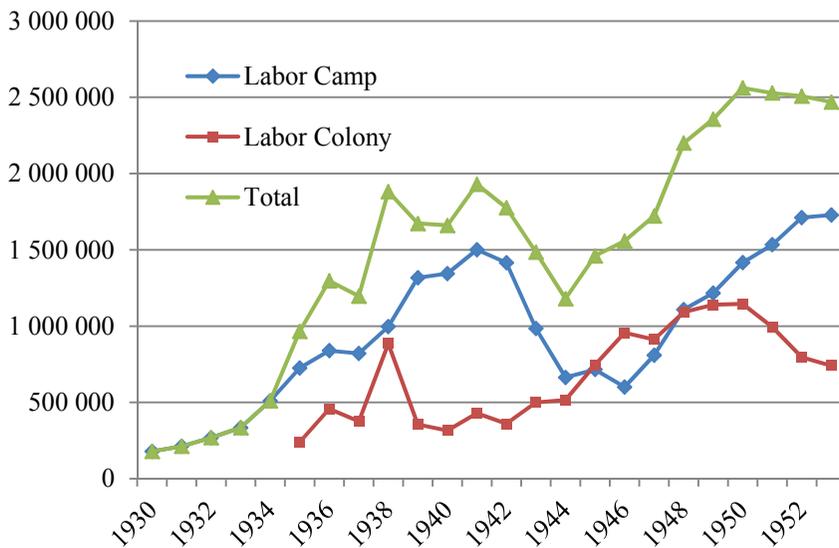
Source: Adapted from Harrison 14.

At the same time, the labor camp population was fluid. According to official NKVD statistics, more than 7 million prisoners were released in the years 1934–1952. In addition to these releases – which cover only those prisoners whose sentences had expired – there were prisoners who were amnestied at various points in time (Bezborodov and Khrustalev 135). The exact number of amnestied prisoners may never be established, although millions of people may have been affected. This is true for colonies and special settlements in particular. Colonies held only prisoners with shorter sentences (one to three years), and regularly released hundreds of thousands of prisoners, as their crimes were perceived as less serious. Elderly persons, invalids, and pregnant women were also subject to early release. Special settlements were typically not guarded or protected by barbed wire, making it possible, for those who could, to run away and reach nearby towns or cities. This flow between the “small” and the “large” zone worried Soviet authorities. It was not a coincidence that the launch of the Great Terror occurred simultaneously with the return of former kulak family members from their five-year exile. One of the reasons for the exceptionally large scale of the Great Terror was the specific, cyclical development of the Stalinist repressive machinery.

The Gulag’s fluidity was also generated by the system of forced labor as an integral part of the Soviet economy. Although historians have debated whether or not the NKVD ever wished to assume responsibility for various economic sectors such as mining and construction, by the time Stalin died, forced labor was widely used on a number of important projects. Forced labor was used exclusively in gold, silver, platinum, and cobalt mines, and

on about 10% of all construction projects. Hundreds of thousands of camp prisoners were leased by the Gulag authorities to work on projects run by other ministries. The rationale for exploiting forced labor was relatively straightforward. Unlike “free labor,” penal labor could be dispatched by administrative decree. In a situation with general food deficits, the sentencing of millions of citizens to camps also reduced the procurement burden of towns. And the use of force and punishment, rather than material rewards, was cheaper (or so the Soviet authorities assumed), as it saved vital resources which could then be reallocated elsewhere. As shown by Leonid Borodkin and Simon Ertz (“Coercion”; “Forced”), these assumptions were rapidly challenged by practical experience. Also, prison workers had to be given (very minimal) wages, which eventually grew larger and differentiated in order to avoid a decrease in levels of productivity, already low. Guards and bloated bureaucracy accounted for as much as 30–35% of all costs of the Gulag system. As a result, even forced labor projects, which had been intended by Team Stalin to be self-financing, eventually had to be subsidized out of the state budget.

Figure 4. Number of Prisoners in Labor Camps and Labor Colonies, 1930–1953



Source: Adapted from Mironenko 608–09.

The population dynamics of the Gulag evolved in two specific cycles: the first cycle lead up to World War II, and the second began during the last years of Stalin’s rule, when the total camp population reached its peak size (see Figure 4). This may seem paradoxical, as the war years witnessed a widespread destruction of Soviet society, including hundreds of thousands of camp inmates who died of starvation or were released to the war front,

where the majority faced certain death. The explanation for this lies in the dynamics of the immediate post-war period, when soldiers returning from the war, prisoners of war, minority nationalities, and “kulak” households in the new Soviet provinces (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, western Belarus, and western Ukraine) were introduced to different Gulag institutions. In 1950, the combined camp population totaled about 2.5 million forced laborers, plus a roughly equal number of “special settlers” (*spetsposeleltsy*). However, these figures regarding the total Gulag population at one specific moment in time should not be confused with the accumulated flow over time. The number of people who passed through the various Gulag institutions under Stalin was, as noted above, significantly higher.

## Enforcement and Resistance

Stalin applied coercion widely and instrumentally as a disciplinary measure. The hurried campaign-style operations and their ruthless implementation suggest that the Bolsheviks viewed their rule as a race against time. As Stalin explained to Kaganovich in 1932 (with regard to implementation of the law on theft of socialist property): “Without these (and similar) draconian *socialist* measures, it will be impossible to establish a new *social* discipline, and without this discipline – it will be impossible to defend and to strengthen our *new order*” (italics in the original) (Khlevniuk et al. 236). The enforcement of coercive legislation in the 1930s and 1940s, however, was not necessarily straightforward. The Gulag system was notoriously inefficient and increasingly a financial burden, and the regimenting decrees intended to keep agricultural and industrial workers in place were insufficient and occasionally challenged, at collective farms as well as in industry. The factors of 1) collusion at various levels of the state apparatus, 2) the costly nature of repression, and 3) bureaucratic inefficiencies, all functioned as various sorts of checks on Stalin’s repressive machinery. This issue can be framed as a classical principal-agent dilemma.

The principal (Stalin) wanted to increase output immediately and at minimal cost, yet he had to rely on a number of agents (civil and political police, party officials, factory managers, trade unions, courts, and tribunals) for the enforcement of his edicts. His agents had interests which were not necessarily the same or even aligned with those of their master, and they all faced various restrictions and restraints, making coercion costly and inefficient as a regulatory tool. As has been noted by Merle Fainsod in his study of *Smolensk under Soviet Rule*, the inefficiency of the state machinery had the contradictory effect of making the Stalinist system less repressive than what would have prevailed at a more “optimal” level of repression (450). Throughout Stalin’s rule, peasants managed to run away from collective farms, workers managed to defy disciplinary legislation, and the labor camps

were disorganized and inefficient. These were all systematic features of the Stalinist machinery that authorities subsequently tried to contain using various incentives and disincentives.

Firstly, the notion that punishment – no matter how draconian – might not in itself be a sufficient deterrent has long historical roots. One may likewise point to precedents in which a reluctant judiciary has been unwilling to sentence perpetrators in accordance with the strict code of the law. In seventeenth-century England, for example, judges and juries were hesitant to mete out the death penalty for counterfeiting. The severity of the punishment, making counterfeiting morally equivalent to murder or arson, deterred juries from actually convicting offenders (Wennerlind). As shown by Peter Solomon, the same resistance can be found in Soviet People's Courts (186). The edict of 26 June 1940, punishing absenteeism and unauthorized job-changing, was weakly enforced, as these civilian courts – staffed by ordinary workers – would opt for leniency if the infraction was deemed justified or the punishment considered disproportionate. Similar resistance was shown even by the OGPU *troiki* with regard to the decree of 7 August 1932, stipulating the death sentence for most kinds of theft. The Soviet judiciary sentenced the majority of those brought before the courts under this decree to forced labor, and Stalin had to fight the courts to make them implement the death penalty more often. The sentencing rates, which were notably high, would have been even higher if the People's Courts had not occasionally opted for leniency.

Resistance to strict enforcement also occurred in situations in which an otherwise loyal agent had to make a choice between two important but potentially conflicting goals. Soviet enterprise managers were obliged by law to fulfill plan targets, but were faced with chronic shortages of labor and other inputs to production. As noted by Alec Nove, managers would therefore often collude with their workers, ignoring breaches of labor discipline, rather than face a situation with too few workers, as plan targets had to be met.<sup>8</sup> At the end of the day, it was more important to keep even inefficient workers on staff (the origin of the Soviet phenomenon of “labor-hoarding”), than to risk falling short of legally binding output norms due to a labor deficit.<sup>9</sup> Soviet authorities would complain about managers ignoring the passport

---

<sup>8</sup> According to Nove, managers were constrained “by the unorganized response of the workforce,” which had replaced previously open expressions of discontent. Nove notes that the Soviet experience showed that “management [found] it difficult to cope with go-slows, absenteeism, drunkenness and petty pilfering,” suggesting that managers rather colluded with their employees than enforce strict regulations, even though this implied protecting workers of below-average efficiency (89).

<sup>9</sup> Labor-hoarding at Soviet enterprises was a result of Soviet firms operating under conditions of shortages of goods and soft budget restraint. The shortages meant that deliveries of inputs to production were typically late or insufficient. When the plan targets had to be met, firms had to reach output norms within a short time period, requiring additional labor power. Firms therefore had an incentive to keep more workers on their payroll than what would under

law, falsified workbooks, or breaches of other regimenting decrees, but were at the same time hesitant to take any action that would disrupt plan fulfillment. Under the extreme circumstances of World War II, the majority of those workers sentenced to a labor camp for desertion from war industry were in fact never caught and therefore tried only *in absentia*. There were a number of reasons for this: managers were reluctant to file reports; local police authorities did not have the resources to search for offenders; and war and massive mobilization gave rise to general chaos. As the war ended, hundreds of thousands of deserters who had never been caught were amnestied by decree, in order to relieve the country's bureaucracy of an unmanageable workload.

Secondly, a source of unpredictability with regard to the Soviet repressive machinery was the nature of Soviet campaign-style justice. As pointed out by Lynne Viola, "dekulakization struck widely and often arbitrarily" ("Popular" 27). In certain circumstances, poor and middle-income peasants found themselves reduced to the status of kulaks, as were families of Red Army soldiers and industrial workers (even though the OGPU stipulated that their status should remain unaffected). The first phase of peasant resettlements, Viola notes, were plagued by "administrative anarchy and poor coordination" ("The Other" 738). Various repressive campaigns by the security police against nationalist minorities would often target members of completely different nationalities, as the campaigns were usually based on quotas (a specific number of citizens to be arrested), which were in turn often based on artificial criteria imposed from above. It should also be noted that the so-called kulaks, "former people," "socially dangerous people," "counter-revolutionaries," and "loafers" were all invented categories. With sufficiently elastic categories, authorities ensured that the groups and individuals targeted were also arbitrary. For an NKVD agent in the Stalinist system, it was safer to err on the side of zeal and excess than to opt for compassion and legality. The apparent "overshooting" was to some degree deliberate – and as a result, "carpet bombing reigned over precision hits" (Weiner and Rahi-Tamm 39).

Lastly, bureaucratic inefficiency and backlogs were generated by the very nature of Stalin's campaign-style justice. As highlighted in the previous section, most victims of Soviet repression were targeted in specific extra-legal campaigns, designed by authorities with a specific purpose in mind. The campaigns are usually named after the date of their original decree (e.g., the 30 January 1930 law on the liquidation of kulaks, the 7 August 1932 law on theft of socialist property, the 22 December 1932 passport law, the 26 June 1940 law on absenteeism and job-changing), or the formal number of the decree (most notably the NKVD order 00447 against "former kulaks" and

---

"normal" circumstances have been necessary. They could do so, since they operated under soft budget restraints, meaning that authorities would cover additional costs of labor.

other “counter-revolutionary elements”). These laws were never intended to remain permanently on the statutes, but rather to permanently alter behavioral patterns. Some were intended to alter the very composition of society; the authorities spoke openly of *chistka*, i.e., permanent “cleansing” of unwanted individuals or groups such as kulaks, Volga Germans, and Mensheviks from society, until the very same laws would become redundant with the disappearance of a targeted group. In practice, the campaigns were enforced with calls for “vigilance” (*buditel'nost'*) for one or two years, after which incentives to pursue further action declined substantially at all levels of the state apparatus. The reasons were usually rationalistic and instrumental; as repression was costly, it eventually had to be scaled down, and as repressive decrees were usually widely defined and applied by fiat, they could potentially have targeted an ever-increasing numbers of citizens.

The system of forced labor, special settlements, and other regimenting institutions established under Stalin was never challenged during the dictator’s lifetime. Not until after his death in 1953 were the camps finally emptied and the most repressive labor legislation abrogated. Collective farmers were put on a normal (though low) salary, and benefitted from a modicum of financial subsidies intended to increase output. Nikita Khrushchev introduced a wage reform in industry, increased housing construction, and put in place social programs intended to ameliorate the situation for working mothers. No longer would authorities resort to violent campaign-style justice in order to alter behavioral patterns (with the short-lived exception of the relatively mild campaign in 1956 against “petty hooliganism”). Rather, they attempted to increase economic output through financial rewards. The leading members of the Politburo knew that forced labor as an institution was costly and economically unsound, and it was equally clear how regimenting decrees were being circumvented by enterprise managers, trade unions, and local authorities at the regional level. The shortages of consumer goods, or the overall inefficiency of Soviet industry, had very little to do with labor-disciplinary issues. Phenomena such as shortages, unauthorized job-changing, and absenteeism could therefore not be solved by coercive legislation. The deficiencies of the Soviet growth model were systemic and inherent to the institutions of the plan economy. Slowly but surely, Soviet leaders would discover that the system Stalin had built could not be easily reformed.

## Conclusion

A closer examination of the evolution of coercive legislation under Stalin reveals what Alessandro Stanziani, writing on Russian serfdom, befittingly labeled an “uncertain boundary.” The combined experience of increasingly repressive legislation facing the Soviet population in the 1930s and 1940s highlights the fluid boundaries between the “small” and the “large” zones

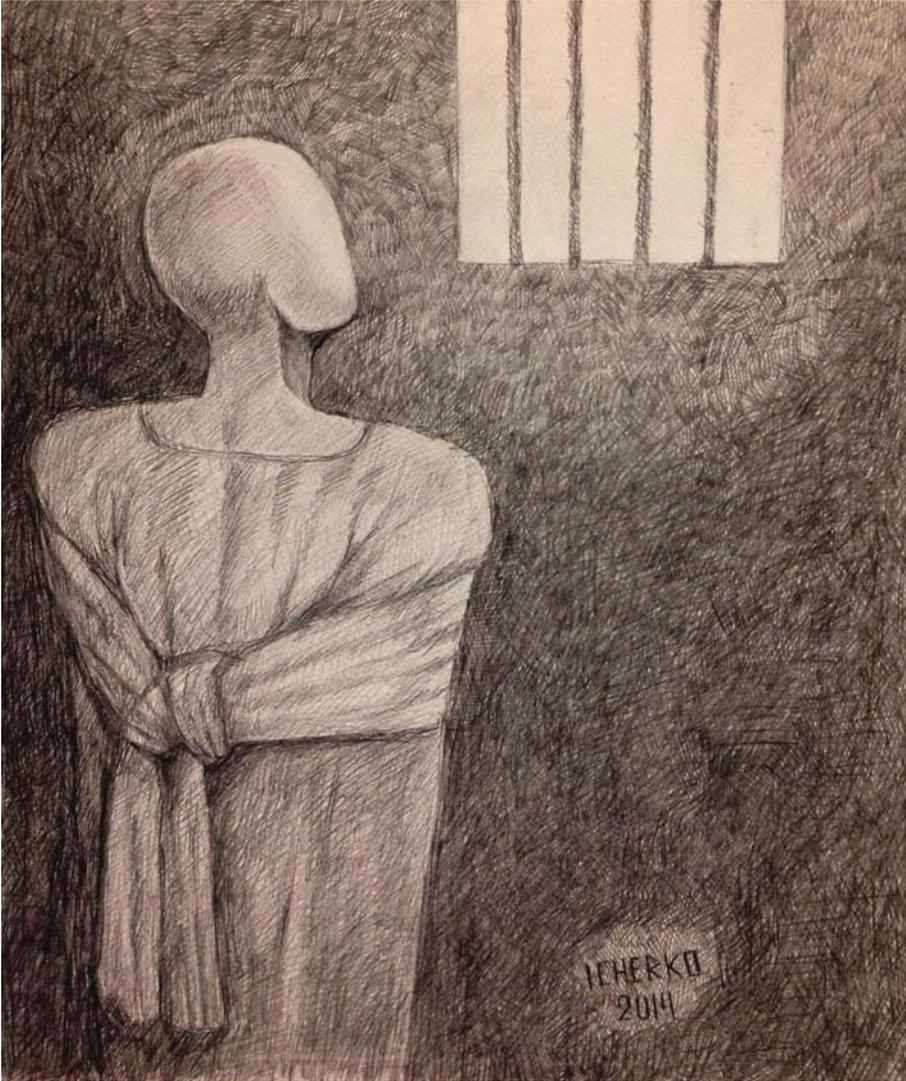
under Stalin. Beginning with the collectivization of agriculture in the late 1920s, the circle of potential categories subjected to repression was constantly being widened. The measures were intricately linked with Stalin's vision of maximizing economic growth. The collectivization of agriculture, labor-coercive legislation in industry, and the expansion of various forced labor institutions were all intended to provide the regime with the largest "surplus" possible at a minimal level of remuneration. The collective farms forced the peasants to sell their produce at prices they would otherwise not have accepted; coercion in industry made workers exert a higher level of effort in face of declining levels of welfare; and the expansion of the Gulag allowed the regime to exploit peripheral regions of the economy with minimal capital outlays. Stalin favored coercive measures as a means of achieving higher levels of effort, and he mandated his political police with increased responsibility for the enforcement of his decrees and the management of the labor camps. In the long run, however, his repressive machinery became increasingly costly and inefficient, which is illustrated by the fact that Stalin's disciples in the Politburo began to dismantle its main constituent parts so quickly after his death.

## Works Cited

- Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. New York: Crown, 2012. Print.
- Barnes, Steven A. "All for the Front, All for Victory! The Mobilization of Forced Labor in the Soviet Union during World War Two." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 58 (2000): 239–60. Print.
- Bezborodov, A. B., and V. M. Khrustalev, eds. *Istoriia stalinskogo GULAGa: Nase-lenie Gulaga: chislennost' i usloviia sodержaniia*. Vol. 4. Moscow: Rosspen, 2004. Print.
- Boldyrev, Ivan, and Martin Kragh. "Isaak Rubin: Historian of Economic Thought during the Stalinization of Social Sciences in Soviet Russia." *Journal of History of Economic Thought*, forthcoming 2015. Print.
- Borodkin, Leonid, and Simon Ertz. "Coercion versus Motivation: Forced Labor in Norilsk." *The Economics of Forced Labor: The Soviet Gulag*. Eds. Paul Gregory and Valery Lazarev. Stanford: Hoover Institution, 2003. 75–103. Print.
- . "Forced Labour and the Need for Motivation: Wages and Bonuses in the Stalinist Camp System." *Comparative Economic Studies* 47.2 (2005): 418–36. Print.
- Davies, R. W. *The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia: 4, Crisis and Progress in the Soviet Economy, 1931–1933*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996. Print.
- Ellman, Michael. "The 1947 Soviet Famine and the Entitlement Approach to Famines." *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 24.5 (2000): 603–30. Print.
- . "Stalin and the Soviet Famine of 1932–33 Revisited." *Europe-Asia Studies* 59.4 (2007): 663–93. Print.
- Fainsod, Merle. *Smolensk under Soviet Rule*. London: Macmillan, 1958. Print.
- Filtzer, Donald. "From Mobilized to Free Labour. De-Stalinization and the Changing Legal Status of Workers." *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*. Ed. Polly Jones. London: Routledge, 2006. 154–69. Print.
- . *The Hazards of Urban Life in Late Stalinist Russia: Health, Hygiene, and Living Standards, 1943–1953*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2010. Print.
- . *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism: Labour and the Restoration of the Stalinist System after World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. Print.
- Gregory, Paul. *The Political Economy of Stalinism: Evidence from the Soviet Secret Archives*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.
- Harrison, Mark. "The Dictator and Defense." *Guns and Rubles: The Defense Industry in the Stalinist State*. Ed. Mark Harrison. New Haven: Yale UP, 2008. Print.
- Hessler, Julie. *A Social History of Soviet Trade: Trade Policy, Retail Practices, and Consumption, 1917–1953*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004. Print.
- Iakovlev, A. N., et al., eds. *Lubianka. Stalin i VChK–GPU–OPGU–NKVD. Ianvar' 1922 – dekabr' 1936*. Moscow: Materik, 2003. Print.
- . *Stalinskie deportatsii 1928–1953*, Moscow: Materik, 2005. Print.
- Ivnitskiĭ, N. A. *Sud'ba raskulachennykh v SSSR*. Moscow: Sobranie, 2004. Print.

- Kazantsev, B. N., and A. N. Sakharov, *Trudovye konflikty v SSSR, 1930–1991: Sbornik statei i dokumentov*. Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 2006. Print.
- Kessler, Gijs. “The Passport System and State Control over Population Flows in the Soviet Union, 1932–1940.” *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 42. 2–4 (2001): 477–504. Print.
- . “Work and the Household in the Inter-War Soviet Union.” *Continuity and Change* 20.3 (2005): 409–42. Print.
- Khlevniuk, Oleg. “Stalin u vlasti: Priorityety rezultaty politiki diktatury.” *Istoriia stalinizma: Itogi i problemy izucheniia*. Moscow: Rosspen, 2011. Print.
- Khlevniuk, Oleg, et al., eds. *Stalin i Kaganovich: Perepiska. 1931–1936 gg*. Moscow: Rosspen, 2001. Print.
- Kragh, Martin. “Stalinist Labour Coercion during World War II: An Economic Approach.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 63.7 (2011): 1253–73. Print.
- Markevich, Andrei. “Soviet Urban Households and the Road to Universal Employment, from the End of the 1930s to the End of the 1960s.” *Continuity and Change* 20.3 (2005): 443–73. Print.
- McDonald, Tracy. “The Process of Collectivisation Violence.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 65.9 (2013): 1827–48. Print.
- Meerovich, Mark. *Nakazanie zhilishchem: Zhilishchnaya politika v SSSR kak sredstvo upravleniia liud'mi. 1917–1937*. Moscow: Rosspen, 2008. Print.
- Mironenko, S. V., ed. *Istoriia stalinskogo GULAGa: Konets 1920-kh – pervaiia polovina 1950-kh godov*. Vol. 1. Moscow: Rosspen, 2004. Print.
- Montefiore, Simon Sebag. *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003. Print.
- Murphy, Kevin. “Strikes during the Early Soviet Period.” *A Dream Deferred: New Studies in Russian and Soviet Labour History*. Eds. Donald Filtzer et al. Bern: Peter Lang, 2008. Print.
- Nove, Alec. *The Economics of Feasible Socialism Revisited*. London: Harper Collins, 1991. Print.
- Osokina, Elena. *Our Daily Bread: Socialist Distribution and the Art of Survival in Stalin's Russia, 1927–1941*. Ed. Kate Transchel. Trans. Kate Transchel and Greta Bucher. Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 2001. Print.
- Rossi, Jacques. *Spravochnik po Gulagu: Istoricheskiĭ slovar' sovetskikh penitentsiarnykh institutsii i terminov, svyazannykh s prinuditel'nym trudom*. 2 vols. London: Overseas Publications Interchange, 1987. Print.
- Rossmann, Jeffrey. *Workers' Resistance under Stalin: Class and Revolution on the Shop Floor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002. Print.
- Scott, James C. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1985. Print.
- Sevost'ianov, G. N., et al., eds. “Sovershenno sekretno”: *Lubianka – Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1922–1934 gg.)*. 8 vols. Moscow: RAN, 2001–. Print.
- Solomon, Peter. *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. Print.
- Stanziani, Alessandro. “Free Labor – Forced Labor: An Uncertain Boundary? The Circulation of Economic Ideas Between Russia and Europe from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century.” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9.1 (2008): 27–52. Print.
- Viola, Lynne. “The Other Archipelago: Kulak Deportations to the North in 1930.” *Slavic Review* 60.4 (2001): 730–55. Print.

- . "Popular Resistance in the 1930s: Soliloquy of a Devil's Advocate." *Contending with Stalinism: Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s*. Ed. Lynne Viola. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2002. 17–43. Print.
- Weiner, Amir, and Aigi Rahi-Tamm. "Getting to Know You: The Soviet Surveillance System, 1939–57." *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 13.1 (2012): 5–45. Print.
- Wennerlind, Carl. *Casualties of Credit: The English Financial Revolution, 1620–1720*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011. Print.
- Zemskov, Viktor N. "Spetsposelelentsy (po dokumentatsii NKVD-MVD SSSR)." *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia* 11 (1990): 1–12. Print.
- . *Spetsposelelentsy v SSSR: 1930–1960*. Moscow: Nauka, 2003. Print.
- . "Zakliuchennyye, spetsposelelentsy, ssyl'noposelelentsy, ssyl'nye i vyslannyye: Statistiko-geograficheskiĭ aspekt." *Istoriia SSSR* 5 (1991): 152–53. Print.



Part II  
Reactions and Representations



# Criminalizing Creativity: Language, Performance, and the Representation of Convicts in Imperial and Soviet-Era Prisons and Penal Colonies

Sarah J. Young

Narratives of the Soviet labour camp experience frequently incorporate comparisons with the works of their pre-revolutionary counterparts, in particular Fedor Dostoevsky's *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* (*Notes from the House of the Dead*, 1861), which is generally considered the foundational text of the genre of Russian prison writing.<sup>1</sup> While certain writers, such as Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, view the relationship between the two eras as primarily one of continuities, most Gulag survivors emphasize instead the differences between the Soviet and tsarist penal systems. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn comments, in one of a number of such references in *Arkhipelag GULag* (*The Gulag Archipelago*, 1973):

Что до омской каторги Достоевского, то там вообще бездельничали [...] Работа у них шла в охотку, впритруску [...]. После работы каторжники «Мертвого дома» подолгу гуляли по двору острога – стало быть не примаривались. Впрочем, «Записки из Мертвого дома» цензура не хотела пропустить, опасаясь, что *легкость* изображенной Достоевским жизни не будет удерживать от преступлений. И Достоевский добавил для цензуры новые страницы с указанием, что «*все-таки* жизнь на каторге тяжка!»<sup>2</sup> (Solzhenitsyn, *Sobranie* 5: 186)<sup>3</sup>

On the subject of hard labour in his tale “Tatarskiĭ mulla i chistyĭ vozdukh” (“The Tartar Mullah and Fresh Air,” 1955), Varlam Shalamov puts it more

---

<sup>1</sup> For more details on references to Dostoevsky in Gulag narratives, see my blog, “Dostoevsky and the Gulag.”

<sup>2</sup> “As for Dostoevsky’s hard labor in Omsk, it is clear that in general they simply loafed about [...]. The work was agreeable and went with a swing [...]. After work the hard-labour convicts of the “House of the Dead” would spend a long time strolling around the prison courtyard. That means that they were *not* totally exhausted! Indeed, the tsarist censor did not want to pass the manuscript of *The House of the Dead* for fear that the *ease* of the life depicted by Dostoevsky would fail to deter people from crime. And so Dostoevsky added new pages for the censor which demonstrated that life in hard labour was *nonetheless* hard!” (Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag* 200; translation amended).

<sup>3</sup> The author’s source for the claim that Dostoevsky amended his manuscript in this way is a letter from I. A. Gruzdev to Maksim Gor’kiĭ, in *Arkhiv Gor’kogo* (11: 157).

succinctly: “Время Достоевского было другим временем, и каторга тогдашняя еще не дошла до тех высот, о которых здесь рассказано”<sup>4</sup> (Shalamov 1: 129).<sup>5</sup> In particular, Shalamov sees the status, behaviour, and social hierarchies of the professional criminals as a notable difference between the two systems, as he describes in the sketch “Ob одной oshibke khudozhestvennoĭ literatury” (“About an Error in Belles Lettres,” 1959?):

с блатными Достоевский не встречался. [...] По-видимому, в каторге Достоевского не было этого “разряда”. [...] Ни в одном из романов Достоевского нет изображений блатных. Достоевский их не знал, а если видел и знал, то отвернулся от них как художник<sup>6</sup> (Shalamov 2: 8–9)

In terms of the historical context, this perception of a discontinuity between pre-revolutionary and Soviet-era prison conditions is correct. The *Vory v zakone* (thieves in the law), the secret fraternity of professional criminals akin to the Japanese Yakuza or Sicilian Mafia that operated in the Stalinist Gulag, were a twentieth-century phenomenon, albeit with antecedents in the pre-revolutionary period (Varese 14–15). The elaborate code of “honour” professed by an established network of “thieves in the law” that adopted a deliberately outcast position through their refusal to participate in society’s institutions was therefore not a feature of tsarist prison life (Varese 10; Chalidze, *Criminal* 35; Glazov 40).

However, I would argue that with respect to literary depictions of creativity in the context of Russian prison life, and particularly the role of language in the construction of the criminals’ identities, there are more similarities than differences between Imperial and Soviet-era texts. The aim of this article is to examine the effect of contact with the criminal population, from the peasant convicts and vagrants (*brodiagi*) of the Imperial era to the non-political convicts and professional thieves that populated Soviet prison colonies, on the artistic personae of four writers: Dostoevsky, Vlas Doroshevich, Shalamov, and Andreĭ Siniavsky (Abram Tertz). Focusing on the preoccupation with criminal language shared by both pre-revolutionary and Soviet-era writers on labour camps and the carceral system, the analysis will also explore two parallel lines of development of this theme. For Dostoevsky and Siniavsky, a sense of identification with the verbal creativity of criminals posits a connection between freedom and the artistry inherent in the playful

---

<sup>4</sup> “Dostoevsky’s time was a different time, and *katorga* [penal servitude] then had not yet reached the heights described here.”

<sup>5</sup> For Shalamov’s stories, dates of writing are also given where known; question marks following dates indicate that the year given in the collected works has been deduced by the editors. Translations of Shalamov’s works are my own.

<sup>6</sup> “Dostoevsky never encountered thieves [...] Apparently, in Dostoevsky’s *katorga* this ‘category’ did not exist. [...] In not a single one of Dostoevsky’s novels is there any representation of the thieves. Dostoevsky did not know them, or if he did see them and know them, then he turned away from them as an artist.”

use of language. For Doroshevich and Shalamov, by contrast, a critique of convict creativity as lacking true emotion or artistry denies any possible identification with criminals, and associates creativity with the very crimes the artist-convicts commit. In both cases, however, connections between the convicts and artists as outcasts contribute to the reshaping of the authors' identities, as well as their work.

## Representation of Convicts' Verbal Play in Dostoevsky and Tertz

Whilst in the Omsk stockade, Dostoevsky collected examples of the prisoners' speech in his *Sibirskaiia tetrad'* (*Siberian Notebook*), which he later incorporated in his fictionalized memoir *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma*. He viewed this component as an essential part of his artistic plan; a letter to his brother of 9 October 1859 emphasizes that giving voice to the prisoners themselves is what endows his narrative with the authenticity that makes it unique (Dostoevskii, *Polnoe* 28/1: 349).<sup>7</sup> Over a hundred years later, Siniavsky's *Golos iz khora* (*A Voice from the Chorus*, 1973), the product of his own incarceration written under the name of his alter ego Abram Tertz,<sup>8</sup> likewise interpolates genuine examples of the convicts' speech between his musings on multiple subjects evoked by the camp experience. The two texts are in many ways very different, as Tertz' collection of reflections on aspects of Russian culture and the process of artistic creation is very far removed from the largely chronological narrative form employed by Dostoevsky. However, the inclusion of the words of the criminal, rather than the political, convicts who lived alongside the authors, gives voice in both texts to a community that is seldom heard, and indicates a common approach.<sup>9</sup> This is particularly evident in the emphasis on the creativity of the criminals' verbal play.

In both works, the criminals' utterances frequently appear nonsensical. This sense is heightened in Tertz because of the presentation of the "chorus," as he describes the collection of overheard phrases of anonymous convicts, which he intersperses in his own writing.<sup>10</sup> This deprives words of their con-

---

<sup>7</sup> The commentary and notes to *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* give full details of the use of this notebook (Dostoevskii 4: 301–10).

<sup>8</sup> The name Abram Tertz was "[b]orrowed from Abrashka Tertz, a legendary Jewish outlaw whose exploits were celebrated in a thieves' song popular in Odessa in the 1920s" (Nepomnyashchy 1).

<sup>9</sup> I discuss a different aspect of Dostoevsky's depiction of the peasant convicts in "Knowing Russia's Convicts," focusing on the narrator's inability to understand his fellow prisoners.

<sup>10</sup> According to Nepomnyashchy (166), the use of word repetitions and reprisals of thematic clusters gives the presentation of the convicts' utterances a sense of melodic variation that resembles an orchestrated choral work. The title *Golos iz khora* is taken from a 1914 poem by Aleksandr Blok.

text, as, for example, in the following extract, which is positioned immediately after a recollection of various creatures encountered in the camps:

- А всего хуже, что ничего не скушаешь. Если б мясокомбинат или кондитерская. А то – одни железяки!
- Ремонтируй эти машины – они не пожалуются.
- [...]
- В шахте у человека развивается характер мечтательный.
- Мужик лаял на трактор.
- А контейнеры волнистые – как на сопках Маньчжурии.
- Сорвал нарезку на сердце (Siniavskii, *Sobranie* 1: 572).<sup>11</sup>

Common strands running throughout the text often indicate loose connections between individual utterances from the chorus, and between these and the wider text. Such coincidences reinforce the sense that language, rather than meaning, is the main point here. In *Zapiski*, whole conversations seem absurd in their lack of connection to the surrounding events being described, as when the following confrontation arises out of a description of daily life and practical arrangements in the barracks:

- Да ты что за птица такая? – вскричал тот вдруг, раскрасневшись.
- То и есть, что птица!
- Какая?
- Такая!
- Какая такая?
- Да уж одно слово такая!
- Да какая? [...]
- Все это было довольно характерно и изображало нравы острога [...]
- Каган!... [...]
- То есть что он птица каган (Dostoevskii, *Polnoe* 4: 23).<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> “But the worst of it is there's nothing here you can eat. If it was a meat factory or a confectionery... But there's nothing apart from a lot of old iron.”

“Repair these machines – they won't complain.” [...]

“In the mines a man develops a dreamy kind of mentality.”

“The peasant was barking at a tractor.”

“The containers are all wavy – like the hills in Manchuria.”

“He wore down the thread on his heart” (Tertz, *Voice* 190).

<sup>12</sup> “What kind of bird are you anyway?” he shouted suddenly, turning red in the face.

“Just a bird!”

“What kind?”

“This kind.”

“What kind's this kind?”

“Just this kind.”

“What kind?” [...]

All this was fairly typical, and illustrative of the way men behaved in prison. [...]

“King cockerel!”

Meaning that he ruled the roost (Dostoyevsky, *House* 46–47).

The prisoners' language in both Dostoevsky and Tertz more closely resembles poetry than everyday speech, with the frequent use of rhyme (e.g., "Богат Ерошка, есть собака и кошка"<sup>13</sup> (Dostoevskii, 4: 200), which appears, apropos of nothing, in the midst of the discussion about who has the right to protest about food) and poetic imagery, as in the example given above ("сорвал нарезку на сердце"<sup>14</sup> (Siniavskii, 1: 572). Indeed, Dostoevsky's narrator, Gorianchikov, characterizes the elaborate swearing practiced by the convicts as "artistic": "Ругались они утонченно, художественно"<sup>15</sup> (Dostoevskii, 4: 13). Tertz states that the prisoners in this mode are akin to poets: "Почти как у поэтов, в воровском этикете первенство отдано зрелищу и зрелищному пониманию личности и судьбы человека"<sup>16</sup> (Siniavskii 1: 543). For the criminals in both works, expression takes precedence over meaning, as language becomes a signifier without a signified, the primary aim being delight in pure creativity: "Да и сами враги ругаются больше для развлечения, для упражнения в слоге"<sup>17</sup> (Dostoevskii 4: 25).

Robin Feuer Miller notes that in Dostoevsky's novel, creativity and art for art's sake, in which verbal artistry takes first place, are crucial as expressions of freedom (31–32). Gorianchikov makes it clear that the other main source of feelings of liberty amongst the prisoners is the pursuit of money: "Весь смысл слова 'арестант' означает человека без воли; а, тратя деньги, он поступает уже *по своей воле*"<sup>18</sup> (Dostoevskii 4: 66).<sup>19</sup> Money and the means of gaining financial freedom acquire an aura of artistry in Gorianchikov's perception. Of the money earned from the crafts and trades practiced by the convicts, he states:

Контрабандист работает по страсти, по призванию. *Это отчасти поэт.* Он рискует всем, идет на страшную опасность, хитрит, изобретает, выпутывается; иногда даже действует по какому-то вдохновению. Это страсть столь же сильная, как и *картежная игра*<sup>20</sup> (Dostoevskii, 4: 18; my emphasis)

<sup>13</sup> "Eroshka's well off, he's got a dog and a cat" (Dostoyevsky, *House* 310).

<sup>14</sup> "He wore down the thread on his heart" (Tertz, *Voice* 190).

<sup>15</sup> "They swore with finesse, with artistic skill" (Dostoyevsky, *House* 33).

<sup>16</sup> "Almost as in the case of poets, what counts most in the thieves' code of behaviour is performance and a performative understanding of the personality and fate of man" (Tertz, *Voice* 147; translation amended).

<sup>17</sup> "Indeed it was rather for the sake of entertainment and as a verbal exercise that the two enemies swore at one another" (Dostoyevsky, *House* 49).

<sup>18</sup> "The whole meaning of the word 'convict' implies a man without a will of his own; when he spends money, however, he is acting from *his own will*" (Dostoyevsky, *House* 109).

<sup>19</sup> Dostoevsky's emphasis. Gorianchikov describes this as "coined freedom" (*chekannaia svoboda*) (Dostoevskii 4: 17).

<sup>20</sup> "The smuggler works passionately, with a sense of vocation. *He's something of a poet.* He risks everything, faces terrible dangers, employs cunning, inventiveness, gets himself out of scrapes; sometimes he even acts according to some kind of inspiration. This passion is as strong as the *passion for cards*" (Dostoyevsky, *House* 6–7; my emphasis).

In *Golos*, Tertz reinforces this connection by comparing the persona of the gambler to that of the artist: “Игровой человек не постыжается рассказать о себе любую гадость. С удовольствием даже расскажет: вот я какой! Он отделяет себя от себя и созерцает свои непотребства в третьем лице – как художник. Судьба для него лишь сюжет, требующий занимательности. Но сколько в этом сюжете он бед натворил!..”<sup>21</sup> (Siniavskii 1: 530; my emphasis). The connection Mikhail Bakhtin establishes between penal servitude and roulette<sup>22</sup> completes the circle of identification, marrying the figures of the convict to those of the gambler and the artist, through the common striving for freedom that unites these different personae.

The theme of freedom is also apparent in the markedly theatrical dimension of the criminals’ verbal creativity. Gorianchikov notes that, “Диалектик-ругатель был в уважении. Ему только что не аплодировали, как актеру”<sup>23</sup> (Dostoevskii 4: 25; my emphasis).<sup>24</sup> His long description of the prison theatrics, in which so many of the convicts are involved, emphasizes their propensity for and enjoyment of performance as an escape from the everyday reality of incarceration that has a transformative potential: “Только немного позволили этим бедным людям пожить по-своему, повеселиться по-людски, прожить хоть час не по-острожному – и человек нравственно меняется, хотя бы то было на несколько только минут...”<sup>25</sup> (Dostoevskii 4: 129–30).<sup>26</sup>

Tertz characterizes the criminals’ habit of boasting about their own exploits as a performance: “Театральная поза и репутация вора породили сотни легенд, которые до сих пор, когда воровской закон уже поломан,

<sup>21</sup> “A gambler will have no compunction in telling the vilest things about himself. He will even do it with gusto: that’s the sort I am! He stands aside from himself and examines his own outrageousness in the third person – like an artist. Fate for him is merely the subject matter for a tale that must be entertaining. But how much trouble he causes with his tale!..” (Tertz, *Voice* 129; my emphasis; translation amended).

<sup>22</sup> “Both the life of convicts and the life of gamblers – for all their differences in content – are equally ‘life taken out of life’” (Bakhtin 172).

<sup>23</sup> “The dialectician of the curse was held in great esteem. He was applauded almost like an actor” (Dostoyevsky, *House* 49; my emphasis).

<sup>24</sup> Serman notes that “Достоевский подчеркивает зрелищность, театральность этих сцен, которые разыгрывались ‘для всеобщего удовольствия’” (“Dostoevsky emphasizes the audience appeal, the theatricality of this scene [referring to the “king cockerel” argument cited above], which is played out ‘for everybody’s enjoyment’”) (133). The highly theatrical behaviour of Isaï Fomich in the bathhouse scene (Dostoevskii 4: 92–96) also indicates the role of performance in establishing this character’s identity. My thanks to Elena Katz for pointing out this connection.

<sup>25</sup> “All that was needed was for these poor men to be allowed to live in their own way for a bit, to enjoy themselves like human beings, to escape from their convict existence just for an hour or so – and each individual underwent a moral transformation, even if it only lasted for a few moments...” (Dostoyevsky, *House* 203).

<sup>26</sup> Mørch cites the Christmas theatrics as a space engendering the chronotope of freedom, transporting the convicts temporarily beyond the confines of the prison camp (59–60).

на добрую половину составляют поэзию лагеря”<sup>27</sup> (Siniavskii 1: 544; my emphasis).

Dmitrii Likhachev’s early article on criminal speech, which was written shortly after his release from incarceration on Solovki, highlights the role of performance in the verbal creativity of criminal society in four ways.<sup>28</sup> Firstly, he likens the thieves’ boasts about their feats (*podvigi*) to shamanistic rituals (*kamlanie*), the aim of which is to increase the speaker’s own strength by impressing his powers on his audience (“Cherty” 63–64). Secondly, he shows that the thieves’ unconscious belief in the magic power of the word – the effect it can have, its “active” (*deistvennyi*) nature, and its ability to act upon the world and the listener – derives from an emotional relationship to language, in which the absence of a gap between feeling and pronouncement indicates a diminished sense of differentiation between the word and its reference (“Cherty” 62, 68–69). This is in contrast to the more literary nature of intellectuals’ speech, which forms the basis of the bulk of memoirs we have on the labour camp experience. Thirdly, Likhachev suggests that the importance of gesture in thieves’ speech demonstrates the action of the word upon the muscular system, endowing it with a physical character (“Cherty” 87–88). Finally, he characterizes thieves’ speech as a “collective performance,” its improvisational aspects not only underlying its transitory nature (“Cherty” 77), but also, significantly, being used to demonstrate belonging to the larger whole of “thieves in the law.”<sup>29</sup> The role of language in shaping the thieves’ collective, in addition to serving as a determinant of action, points to a performative process that places the verbal creativity of the criminals at the centre of identity construction.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, this identity, by virtue of its performed nature, also contains an element of artifice. Likhachev notes that “истинность происшедших событий не играет в этом рассказе [о своих подвигах] особой роли”<sup>31</sup> (“Cherty” 63; my emphasis). Shalamov also observes a tendency toward embellishment in these stories, which he interprets as part of

---

<sup>27</sup> “The thief’s *theatrical panache* and reputation has given rise to hundreds of legends, which even now, when the thieves’ law is not what it was, make up a good half of all *labour camp poetry*” (Tertz, *Voice* 148; my emphasis; translation amended).

<sup>28</sup> In his memoirs, Likhachev observes that for intellectuals on Solovki, “questions of language and linguistic culture became one of the most important topics of our conversation”; (*Reflections* 139). He also notes that the cultural historian N. P. Antsiferov worked in *Krimkab* on Solovki, where letters, drawings, and verses by criminal prisoners were collected, in order to “come to understand the psychology of the people of Dostoevsky’s *The House of the Dead*” (346).

<sup>29</sup> On the role of performance in belonging, see Fortier (42).

<sup>30</sup> Austin outlines the basis of performative theory. On the linguistic character of action and the performative nature of identity, see in particular Butler. This performative aspect of criminal slang relates to the wider Russian folk belief, derived from paganism, which equates words with deeds. See Harrison (218), cited in Smith (177–78).

<sup>31</sup> “*The truth* of the events that had taken place plays no particular role in this story [of the criminal’s feats].”

the creation of the thieves' self-image (Shalamov, "Apollon sredi blatnykh" ["Apollo among the Thieves," 1959] 2: 95). The idea of the promotion of a false identity by the thieves is significant because of its relation to another criminal type that resonates strongly in the Russian cultural imagination: the imposter. In *Progulki s Pushkinym* (*Strolls with Pushkin*, 1975), Tertz connects the imposter with the artist and poet: "Самозванец! А кто такой поэт, если не самозванец?"; "Но самозванцы у Пушкина не только цари, они – артисты"; "Самозванщина берет начало в поэзии и развивается по ее законам"<sup>32</sup> (Siniavskii 1: 422, 424, 425).<sup>33</sup> Thus Tertz suggests through this image that the writer is both an outsider and a criminal. Moreover, by linking this idea to the figure of Pushkin, who "stands behind the back" (Siniavskii 1: 387) of every writer in Russia who came after him, Tertz emphasizes the artist's ability and need to create new persona.<sup>34</sup>

The idea of adopting a criminal persona for artistic reasons is evident in Siniavsky's creation of his alter ego as a legendary criminal. Introduced in earlier works, it is employed in *Golos iz khora* for the first time as part of Siniavsky's autobiographical project (Nussbaum 240), further erasing the boundaries between Siniavsky and Tertz (Rat'kina 90–91). The separation of the authorial persona from the biographical figure suggests that the writer's identity is at least in part dependent on or shaped by incarceration and the outcast status this imposes. The merging of different voices within the text of *Golos iz khora* suggests a loss of a separate identity between the author and the criminals who surround him. The result is that "[i]f the writer is an outlaw, then the act of writing literature becomes a crime and the text a site of transgression" (Nepomnyashchy 2).

Similarly, Dostoevsky creates the narrative persona of a criminal. His letter to his brother cited above claims "личность моя исчезнет"<sup>35</sup> (Dostoevskii 28/I: 349), and his narrator, Gorianchikov, is imprisoned not for political crimes, as the author was, but for killing his wife. However, the discrepancies in the text, suggesting that the narrator is in fact a political prisoner, serve to place Dostoevsky in the frame as well.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Gorianchikov emerges as neither Dostoevsky himself, nor as an entirely fictional character; here too, the author is developing the image of his narrator as a type of imposter. Underlining his status as an outsider, in the labour camp as well as at

<sup>32</sup> "An imposter! But what is a poet if not an imposter?"; "But Pushkin's imposters are more than just tsars – they are artists as well"; "Imposture has its source in poetry and unfolds according to its laws" (Tertz, *Strolls* 133, 136).

<sup>33</sup> Nepomnyashchy also notes that "*A Voice from the Chorus* affirms art's vocation to transform the 'I' into the 'not-I.' It celebrates the text as imposture" (150).

<sup>34</sup> In this context it is worth noting Likhachev's comment about "what a typical prison or camp invention [Tertz's] whole idea of Pushkin is" (*Reflections* 85).

<sup>35</sup> "my personality will disappear"

<sup>36</sup> These discrepancies are usually cited as evidence that the adoption of a fictional persona was merely a convention to appease the censors (Frank 219–20).

liberty,<sup>37</sup> Gorianchikov-Dostoevsky, like Tertz, is both criminal and artist, and an artist because he is a criminal. For both authors, the subversion of their identities, through their identification both *as* criminals and *with* the criminals, implies that the creation of their texts derives from their participation in and emulation of the verbal creativity of the criminals. Giving the latter a voice enables their self-transformation, which in turn engenders their literary work.

## Poet-Murderers in Doroshevich and Shalamov

For many writers and commentators on the Russian prison system and its inhabitants, in both the Imperial and Soviet eras, the role of language in constructing the identity of the criminals is prominent.<sup>38</sup> Vlas Doroshevich's *Sakhalin (Katorga) (Sakhalin: Hard Labour)*, which began to appear in feuilleton form in 1897 during the author's visit to the penal colony, is a prime example of a text that emphasizes criminal language. He uses criminal slang to enable the prisoners to tell their own stories (Doroshevich 1: 75–80), but also employs it himself in his categorization of the hierarchy of convicts (1: 269–86), and more analytically in a section devoted to the terms used to denote crimes (1: 350–59).<sup>39</sup> Here it is apparent that the criminals prefer to refer to their acts indirectly, with euphemism and metaphor playing a significant role.<sup>40</sup> However, while Doroshevich agrees with Dostoevsky, whom he cites frequently (e.g., Doroshevich 1: 136, 129; 2: 183), on the general significance of language in the prison settlement, his approach departs from that of his predecessor in relation to the crucial question of the criminals' creativity as a route to identification for the author. Instead, he develops a critique of their creativity, which, as with that advanced by Dostoevsky and Tertz, underlies his own analysis of the construction of the prisoners' identities, as well as his position in relation to them. I would suggest that this alternative line of development can be traced from Doroshevich's *Sakhalin* to Shalamov's *Kolymskie rasskazy (Kolyma Tales, 1954–73)*.

In the case of Dostoevsky and Tertz, we know that the latter was fully conversant with Dostoevsky's text, and in conscious dialogue with it. The same, however, cannot be said of Shalamov with regard to Doroshevich.

---

<sup>37</sup> Ruttenburg analyses the trope of the outsider in relation to the unbridgeable gulf between Gorianchikov and the peasant convicts he encounters in the Omsk stockade (51).

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Dikselius [Dixelius] and Konstantinov, relating the concept of the criminal fraternity to its development of its language system (9). The Russian edition of Chalidze's *Ugolovnaia Rossiia* contains an appendix of criminal slang (348–74).

<sup>39</sup> Gentes notes that Doroshevich has been unfairly criticized for his "sensational" use of prisoners' slang (xxvii).

<sup>40</sup> Likhachev also notes the tendency towards euphemism, as an indication of a fear of the word that derives from belief in its performative power ("Cherty" 67–68).

Various mentions of memoirs of the *narodovoltsy*<sup>41</sup> incarcerated in tsarist prisons, such as those by Vera Figner and N. A. Morozov,<sup>42</sup> as well as his dialogue with Dostoevsky, indicate Shalamov's interest in the history of Russian penal servitude. In contrast, no references are made to Doroshevich in any of his writing. This is perhaps not surprising, as *Sakhalin* was not reprinted in the Soviet Union (Gentes xxvii), but it does make the coincidence of the two writers' approaches all the more striking, and suggests that the similarities between the two texts derive from common features they encountered in the criminals.<sup>43</sup>

In the context of a general absence of information about the essentially closed society of the thieves' fraternity of the Soviet era, which remained impenetrable to outsiders because of the use of identifying marks such as tattoos, and a constantly evolving language that only insiders would know, Shalamov's depiction of the criminal world is generally considered among historians, criminologists, and sociologists to be both reliable and valuable in its detail (Chalidze, *Criminal* 35–36; Varese 10–13). The collection *Ocherki prestupnogo mira* (*Sketches of the Criminal World*, 1959), in which Shalamov collates many of his ideas about the criminals he encountered, has, in contrast, been comparatively neglected within literary and cultural studies, and is not always included in consideration of the collections that make up *Kolymskie rasskazy*.<sup>44</sup>

While Shalamov's overall emphasis is on the brutality and lack of humanity of the criminal world, what is particularly significant about *Ocherki prestupnogo mira* is the importance of art and literature to the author's understanding of thieves. This forms the subject of half of the eight sketches. The collection begins with "Ob odnoi oshibke khudozhestvennoi literatury" ("About an Error in Belles Lettres"), which argues that previous depictions of criminals in literature have been incorrectly romanticized and immediately alerts us to the aim of this collection to dispel such romantic myths. It ends with descriptions of their own culture, focusing on thieves' songs ("Apollon sredi blatnykh"), the "appreciation" of poetry among criminals

---

<sup>41</sup> *Narodovoltsy* were members of the left-wing terrorist organisation *Narodnaia volia* (The People's Will).

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, "Pervyi zub" ("First Tooth," 1964): "Огромные ледяные своды пугали меня, и я – неопытный юнец – искал глазами подобие печки, хотя бы такой, как у Фигнер, у Морозова"; "The huge icy vaults frightened me, and I – an inexperienced youth – searched with my eyes for the semblance of stove, as in Figner or Morozov" (Shalamov 1: 618).

<sup>43</sup> Although they fall outside the scope of the current article, structural parallels between Doroshevich's work as a collection of feuilletons and Shalamov's collections of short stories, both of which rely on forms of fragmentation to convey aspects of the experience of imprisonment, would be worth examining. It is the strength of the similarities I have observed that leads me to compare these two works, despite the very different circumstances of their writing and the fact that Doroshevich was not, unlike the other writers who are the subject of this essay, a convict.

<sup>44</sup> For example, it is excluded from the overview of the collections in Toker (161).

(“Sergeĭ Esenin i vorovskoi mir” [“Sergeĭ Esenin and the Thieves’ World”]), and the role of “novelists” or storytellers who narrate improvised tales for the thieves’ entertainment (“Kak tiskaiut romany”; “How Novels are Spun,” 1959).<sup>45</sup> The performance of the “novelist” is mirrored by the theatricality of the thieves in other respects, which is emphasized on several occasions.<sup>46</sup> This again suggests the role of performance in the construction of identity, which breaks down the boundary between art and life: “границы искусства и жизни неопределимы, и те слишком реалистические “спектакли,” которые ставят блатари в жизни, пугают и искусство, и жизнь”<sup>47</sup> (Shalamov, “Apollon” 2: 80).

Doroshevich likewise alludes frequently to performance, describing *katorga* as a whole as a spectacle (Doroshevich 1: 43).<sup>48</sup> He links performance not only to the prisoners’ habit of telling stories and bragging about their exploits (Doroshevich 1: 387–88), but also to the art of forging documents.<sup>49</sup>

А вот Валентин, настоящий Валентин, которому вы так горячо аплодируете по окончании 4 акта “Фауста.” [...] Своего Валентина я увидел тоже на подмостках, – на нарах кандалного отделения Онорской тюрьмы. Он встал передо мной с опухшим, опившимся лицом. Обдал меня запахом перегорелой водки. Обвинялся, уже на каторге, в неоднократной подделке и сбыте документов<sup>50</sup> (Doroshevich 1: 328).

But it is on the question of poetry that the similarity of Shalamov’s and Doroshevich’s views of criminals’ verbal artistry becomes most apparent. In

<sup>45</sup> Although thieves feature in numerous stories in the other collections, such as “Krasnyi Krest” (“Red Cross,” 1959), two notable examples, “Zaklinatel’ zmei” (“The Snake Charmer,” 1954) and “Bol” (“Pain,” 1967), also focus on the figure of the “novelist” who entertains the criminals.

<sup>46</sup> “Для перехода в новый воровской закон был изобретен обряд, театральное действо. Блатной мир любит театральность в жизни”; “In order to introduce a new thieves’ law, a rite was contrived, a theatrical act. The thieves’ world loves theatricality in life” (Shalamov, “Such’ia voina” [“The Bitches’ War,” 1959] 2: 66).

<sup>47</sup> “the boundaries between art and life are indeterminate, and those all too real ‘dramatics’ that the thieves stage in life menace both art and life”

<sup>48</sup> Gentes notes that Doroshevich’s interest in the theatre can be seen in his extended description of the Easter performances (Doroshevich, *Russia’s Penal Colony* 85–94), which rivals the parallel Christmas scene in Dostoevsky (xvi). However, it is clear from the language of performance he frequently employs that Doroshevich perceives the theatrical elements of *katorga* as going far beyond this.

<sup>49</sup> Shalamov also refers to forgery as an art form (“Zhenshchina blatnogo mira” [“Women of the Criminal World,” 1959], 2: 41).

<sup>50</sup> “This is Valentin, the veritable Valentin you so warmly applaud at the end of act four of [Gounod’s] Faust. [...] I, too, saw my Valentin ‘onstage’ – on the sleeping platform in Onor Prison’s chains division. He stood before me with a puffy debauched face, the stench of warmed-over vodka washing over me. Since entering *katorga* he’s been repeatedly charged with forging and selling documents” (Doroshevich, *Russia’s Penal Colony* 225).

“Sergei Esenin i vorovskoi mir,” Shalamov insists that the thieves’ love of Esenin has nothing to do with real appreciation of art, as they reject all of his spiritual verse and poetry about nature, to focus purely on the drunken carousing, *khuliganstvo* (hooliganism),<sup>51</sup> and contempt for women (Shalamov, “Esenin” 2: 90–91). He emphasizes the absence of real emotion that their attitude to Esenin reveals: “Какие же родственные нотки слышат блатари в есенинской поэзии? Прежде всего, это нотки тоски, все, вызывающее жалость, все, что роднится с ‘тюремной сентиментальностью’”<sup>52</sup> (Shalamov, “Esenin” 2: 90). He views the cult of the mother figure among thieves, likewise related to the popularity of Esenin, as a product of sentimentality that precludes genuine feeling (Shalamov, “Zhenshchina blatnogo mira” [“A Woman of the Criminal Underworld”] 2: 51–52). The sentimental and touching performance of prison songs gives the impression that the singer is “не актер, а действующее лицо самой жизни. Автору лирического монолога нет надобности переодеваться в театральный костюм”<sup>53</sup> (Shalamov, “Apollon” 2: 79). Thus, Shalamov connects sentimentality to the artifice of performance in the self-image projected by the thieves.

Doroshevich comes to the same conclusion in relation to the “poet-murderers” he encounters, comparing them to the French poet and murderer Pierre François Lacenaire.<sup>54</sup> Posing the supposed “riddle” of Lacenaire’s cruelty combined with the ability to produce such delicate poetry, he asks:

Как помирить такие два контраста: жестокость и мягкость, нежность, сентиментальность? “Сентиментальность” – вот в чем и объяснение загадки. Если даже “гений и злодейство” несовместимы, то жестокость и сентиментальность уживаются отлично. Люди, когда у них нет масла, довольствуются маргарином. А сентиментальность – это маргарин чувства. Люди добрые бывают часто грубы в своей доброте, люди сентиментальные чаще других жестоки<sup>55</sup> (Doroshevich 2: 144).

<sup>51</sup> The link between *khuliganstvo*, art, and performance is explored in Neuberger (142–52).

<sup>52</sup> “What kindred notes do thieves hear in Esenin’s poetry? Above all, melancholy notes, everything that arouses pity, everything that is born from ‘prison sentimentality’.”

<sup>53</sup> “not an actor, but a character in his own life. The author of a lyrical monologue has no need to change into a theatrical costume”

<sup>54</sup> Pierre François Lacenaire (1803–36), an army deserter who became a thief, was ultimately executed for double murder. He became famous for the poetry he wrote in prison, and for portraying himself as a principled fighter against social injustice during his trial. Lacenaire is depicted, most famously, in the 1944 film *Les Enfants du Paradis* (*Children of the Gods*), directed by Marcel Carné, which is, notably, set around the Parisian theatre scene. He is also mentioned in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* (8: 350) as a prime example of the criminal mind. For further details, see Demartini, or Foucart.

<sup>55</sup> “How does one reconcile the contrast: cruelty and softness, delicacy, sentimentality? Sentimentality – in this lies an explanation to the riddle. Even if genius and villainy are incompatible, cruelty and sentimentality get on exceedingly well. When people don’t have butter they’ll settle for margarine, and sentimentality is the margarine of emotion. Kind people are often rough in their kindness; but sentimental people are crueler than others” (Doroshevich, *Russia’s Penal Colony* 417).

Reviewing the “*zhalostnye stikhi*” (“mournful poetry”) that a Sakhalin murderer such as Pashchenko has written in a literally and metaphorically blood-soaked little notebook (Doroshevich 2: 147), Doroshevich emphasizes the self-pity inherent in much of the verse. Sentimentality is also apparent in the prisoners’ performances, from their singing,<sup>56</sup> to the stories they tell Doroshevich about their own fates: “Жалко! Этот мотив постоянно звучит в разговорах Полуляхова, убившего топором восьмилетнего ребенка. И когда он говорит это ‘жалко,’ в его лицо есть что-то умиленное, кроткое. Он сам трогается своей добротой”<sup>57</sup> (Doroshevich 2: 30). Noting that “С ‘бахвальством,’ с рисовкой, с гордостью рассказывают о своих преступлениях только ‘Иваны’”<sup>58</sup> (Doroshevich 1: 391), he suggests this type of performance is used to mask true feelings: “Часто, однако, за этим бахвальством кроется нечто другое. Часто это только желание заглушить душевные муки, желание нагнать на себе ‘куражу.’ Желание смехом подавить страх”<sup>59</sup> (Doroshevich 1: 391–92).

Thus Doroshevich, like Shalamov, defines the convicts’ self-projection in terms of the artificial emotion that underlies its creative expression. But this conception of play-acting and artifice is also used to elucidate the authors’ positions in relation to the criminals they portray. Doroshevich emphasizes the powerful physical effect of the revulsion he experiences when placed in the role of audience to the criminals’ performance of their own stories. This is particularly apparent in the case of Poluliakhov: “Я чувствовал, что все плывет у меня в глазах. Что еще момент, – я упаду в обморок. И только нежелание показать свою слабость перед каторжником удерживало меня крикнуть: ‘Воды!’”<sup>60</sup> (Doroshevich 1: 388). His horror at such moments indicates a strong sense of separation from the prisoners, which is also apparent in his interventions and moral exhortations, as when he visits an exile-settler and his female co-habitant: “‘Да ведь срам! Ты бы встала, поработала!’ [...] Становилось прямо невыносимо слушать эту наглую,

<sup>56</sup> “Говорят, что песня – это ‘душа народа.’ И каторга поет песни, от которых [...] веет сентиментальностью”; “They say that songs are the ‘soul of the people,’ and *katorga* sings songs that exude sentimentality” (Doroshevich, 1: 365; *Russia’s Penal Colony* 253).

<sup>57</sup> “‘A pity!’ This motif resounds constantly throughout the stories of Poluliakhov, axe-murderer of an eight-year-old child. When he says this word ‘pity’ there is something gentle and meek in his face. He himself is moved by his own kindness” (Doroshevich, *Russia’s Penal Colony* 331).

<sup>58</sup> “Ivans [the top rank of the prisoners’ hierarchy, and forerunners to the Thieves in the Law – SJY] speak of their crimes only with braggadocio, play-acting, and pride” (Doroshevich, *Russia’s Penal Colony* 269).

<sup>59</sup> “Often, however, this braggadocio excises something else. Often, there is simply a desire to smother spiritual torments, the desire to instil oneself with ‘courage.’ A desire to suppress the horror with laughter” (Doroshevich, *Russia’s Penal Colony* 270).

<sup>60</sup> “I was having difficulty breathing. I would have shouted ‘Water!’ if I hadn’t feared showing weakness before a criminal. It felt like everything was swimming before my eyes” (Doroshevich, *Russia’s Penal Colony* 324).

циничную болтовню, эти издевательства опухшей от сна и лени бабы”<sup>61</sup> (Doroshevich 1: 91–92). Doroshevich’s sense of alienation when faced with a sort of convict morality which he does not understand and of which he does not approve indicates a lack of identification with the convicts. This is in sharp contrast to Dostoevsky’s construct regarding the depiction of the common criminals, which posits a similarity with them on the question of verbal artistry.

For Shalamov, as well, there can be no question of identifying with the criminals in the way that Dostoevsky’s and Siniavsky’s narrators appear to. Indeed, Shalamov perceives the closeness of Dostoevsky-Gorianchikov to the other convicts he describes: “С точки зрения блатных – убийцы и воры Петров и Сушилов гораздо ближе к автору ‘Записок из Мертвого дома,’ чем к ним самим”<sup>62</sup> (Shalamov, “Ob одной oshibke” 2: 8). In his own work, by contrast, he separates his sketches about the criminal world from the other tales by placing them in their own collection, suggesting a strong desire to designate the thieves as different; as he states in *Vospominaniia* (*Memoirs*, 1961?), “Понял, что воры – не люди”<sup>63</sup> (Shalamov 4: 627). Shalamov’s denial that there is any humanity in the criminals, or any similarity between them and convicts like himself, is significant because he encountered them in their native context. As Varese shows, “the *vory* were a peculiar brand of criminals produced by prison culture”; although criminal gangs existed in the tsarist era, it was the conditions in the Soviet penal system, where they were brought together, viewed as “socially friendly” (9), and allowed control over other groups, specifically the political prisoners convicted under Article 58 of the Stalinist penal code, that enabled their power to grow and their code to develop (Varese 15).<sup>64</sup>

Shalamov, as is well known, views the camps as inhumane places where only the inhuman can flourish:

Лагерь – отрицательная школа жизни целиком и полностью. Ничего полезного, нужного никто оттуда не вынесет [...]. Каждая минута лагерной жизни – отравленная минута. Там много такого, чего человек не должен знать, не должен видеть, а если видел – лучше ему умереть”<sup>65</sup> (Shalamov, “Krasnyi krest” [1959] 1: 185–86)

---

<sup>61</sup> “‘This is really a disgrace!’ I say. ‘You should get up and do some work!’ [...] It becomes absolutely unbearable to listen to this insolent, cynical chatterer, to the mockeries bursting from this sleepy indolent woman” (Doroshevich, *Russia’s Penal Colony* 64–65).

<sup>62</sup> “From the thieves’ point of view, the murderers and robbers Petrov and Sushilov are closer to the author of *Notes from the House of the Dead* than they are to the thieves themselves”

<sup>63</sup> “I understood that thieves are not people”

<sup>64</sup> Chalidze sees the connection between pre-revolutionary Bolshevism and brigandage as a factor in their development (*Criminal Russia*, 25); Dikselius [Dixelius] and Konstantinov relate this question to the notion of revolutionary legality (59–63).

<sup>65</sup> “The camp is a wholly and entirely negative school of life. No one will take anything useful or necessary from there. [...] Every minute of camp life is a poisoned minute. There is a great

One of the reasons he sees the camp experience as so negative is because it engenders this criminal world. But more than this, I would propose that in the brutality bred by the camps, he perceives that anyone forced to exist in such conditions, himself included, risks becoming like the thieves. When he describes the feelings that have been lost, what remains appears to place the convict in closer proximity to the thieves than to “normal” human beings.<sup>66</sup>

Shalamov’s insistence on the negative effects of the camps, which punctuates the stories, even if this is frequently contradicted by small acts of kindness and honesty, suggests a fear about what that loss of humanity means, and what type of person might emerge from this environment. The criminals provide a constant and terrifying reminder of what could happen; their performance is all too real in its effects, and the author’s emphatic rejection of identification with them seems to originate in anxieties about identification being actualized.<sup>67</sup> It is also for this reason that Shalamov focuses so strongly on the criminals’ artistic mores; his own role as poet and particularly an admirer of Silver-Age poetry<sup>68</sup> bears little resemblance to the crude and sentimental preoccupations of the thieves. This, therefore, becomes a means of asserting an identity that survives their assault on his humanity and sensitivity. Thus it is the fear of resembling the criminals, and the assertion of difference from them, that inform his representation of the camps and the self within that system.

## Identifying the Outsider

Dostoevsky and Siniavsky, and Doroshevich and Shalamov, exhibit markedly different attitudes towards the criminals, in particular on the question of their verbal creativity. While the former writers celebrate the wit demonstrated by the criminals’ verbal play as potentially engendering a crucial sense of freedom, the latter perceive it as a symptom of cruelty that may infect others. For both lines of interpretation, however, the question of identification remains central. I would suggest this is because of a perception that the outcast status of a writer is akin to that of the convict. Prisoners were

---

deal there that man should not know, should not see, and if he has seen it, then it’s better for him to die”

<sup>66</sup> “Все человеческие чувства – любовь, дружба, зависть, человеколюбие, милосердие, жажда славы, честность – ушли от нас с тем мясом, которого мы лишились за время своего продолжительного голодания”; “All human feelings – love, friendship, envy, concern for one’s fellow man, charity, longing for fame, honesty – had left us with the flesh we had lost during our starvation” (Shalamov, “Sukhim paikom” [“Dry Rations,” 1959] 1: 75).

<sup>67</sup> As I have suggested elsewhere, the idea of an intellectual attempting to identify with criminals leads to disaster in the story “Bol” (Young, “Recalling the Dead” 366–67).

<sup>68</sup> See “Afinskie nochi” (“Athenian Nights,” 1973), in which Shalamov describes the poetry evenings he organized with two fellow convicts at the hospital in Debin (Shalamov 2: 414–16).

physically cut off from the rest of society, not least by the remoteness of most of the penal settlements in both the tsarist and Soviet eras, and the figure of the convict as outcast was emphasized by the “thieves in the law” through their non-participation in Soviet society. Each of the writers exemplifies in their own way an aspect of the outcast persona. For Dostoevsky, the outsider status he acquired through his imprisonment was compounded, as he was treated as an outcast by the other convicts as well.<sup>69</sup> Siniavsky adopted a criminal persona long before his conviction in order to define himself as an outcast in Soviet society. The difficulties Shalamov had in reintegrating after his return became increasingly apparent in his later life, as he gradually isolated himself from friends and associates in the community of writers and dissidents. Although not a convict, Doroshevich, writing about Sakhalin as an outsider, also had ‘an outcast status among intellectuals’ because of his popular style, and was seeking to gain more serious literary credentials through his work on the island (*Gentes xvii, xxii*).<sup>70</sup>

For the criminals, being an outcast is related to remaining free from society’s rules and restrictions, but it also, because of the close association between *vory* and *brodiagi*,<sup>71</sup> provides an opportunity to shape a new identity, akin to that of the imposter discussed above.<sup>72</sup> The *brodiaga* habit of adopting a pseudonym, frequently overtly challenging the authorities with the aggressively anonymous ‘Nepomniashchii’ (literally, ‘don’t remember’), appears repeatedly in Doroshevich, as it does in other works on the penal system from the late imperial era, such as Anton Chekhov’s *Ostrov Sakhalin* (*Sakhalin Island*, 1895; Chekhov XIV-XV:69) and George Kennan’s *Siberia and the Exile System* (1: 293). The *brodiagi* whom Doroshevich depicts, and whose guise he was even prepared to adopt,<sup>73</sup> may share with those encountered by Chekhov and Kennan the romantic notion of “changing one’s fate” by taking on a new identity. However, they are in other respects not the benign outcasts portrayed in other works; they threaten those whom they suspect may reveal their identity, and are surrounded by an aura of fear (Doroshevich 1: 268, 348). They more closely resemble some of Shalamov’s thieves, in particular the *blatar*’ Kononenko, who has adopted the name Kazakov, and threatens Golubev (one of the author’s alter egos) not to give away his true identity (Shalamov, “Kusok miasa” [“A Piece of Meat,” 1964],

<sup>69</sup> Serman notes the impossibility of *tovarishchestvo* (comradeship) and a sense of alienation engendered in the prison camp (129–30).

<sup>70</sup> See also Bukchin on Doroshevich’s status as a journalist writing himself into the literary tradition (264).

<sup>71</sup> Chalidze notes the similarities between the *Vory v zakone* and earlier *brodiaga* artels (*Criminal Russia*, 40–44). See also Galeotti, “Criminal Russia” 5.

<sup>72</sup> Doroshevich (2: 187), emphasizes the connection between the figures of the *brodiaga* and the imposter when he mentions a *brodiaga* called Boris Godunov.

<sup>73</sup> Doroshevich contemplated declaring himself a *brodiaga* to police in Vladivostok in order to gain access to Sakhalin through the six-month sentence this would have incurred (Bukchin 255).

1: 336–38). Thus the *brodiaga* ideal of anonymity, as a means of attaining freedom, acquires a menacing dimension as it is taken on by the thief. The idea of transformation, and of art as transformation, remains, but its morally precarious aspects are foregrounded, not only in the violent behaviour of the criminals, but also as a dangerous potential within the authors.

The freedom of creativity consists not only in the positive element that allows the convicts to take on a new guise and temporarily break off their shackles, but also in the destructive side that led to their incarceration in the first place, and that has the potential to deprive others of their freedom, or even their lives.<sup>74</sup> The ambivalent nature of both the writer's art and freedom is inscribed in each work by authors at transformative moments in their lives and careers through their comparisons with the criminal convicts. Whether they identify with the criminals, or reject any such possibility, their contact with the thieves' sub-culture is instrumental in shaping their own artistic personae and their work.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Miller suggests that the flip side of creativity, the artistic cruelty of executioners, relates to the amorality of "everything is permitted" (32).

<sup>75</sup> The initial stage of my research on Russian labour camp narratives was funded by a Leverhulme Special Research Fellowship at the Department of Russian and Slavonic Studies, University of Nottingham. I acknowledge the support of the Leverhulme Trust and the University of Nottingham with thanks. I would also like to thank the participants in the 2012 Uppsala University workshop on Russian prison experience, at which I initially presented my paper, for their comments and suggestions.

## Works Cited

- Arkhiv Gor'kogo*. 14 vols. Moscow: Gos. izd. khudozh. lit-ry, 1966. Print.
- Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1962. Print.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1984. Print.
- Bukchin, S. V. *Vlas Doroshevich: sud'ba fel'etonista*. Moscow: Agraf, 2010. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Chalidze, Valery. *Criminal Russia: Essays on Crime in the Soviet Union*. Trans. P. S. Falla. New York: Random House, 1977. Print.
- . *Ugolovnaia Rossiia*. New York: Khronika, 1977. Print.
- Chekhov, A. P. *Polnoe sobranie sochineniĭ i pisem*. 30 vols. Moscow: Nauka, 1978. Print.
- Demartini, Anne-Emmanuelle. *L'Affaire Lacenaire*. Paris: Aubier, 2001. Print.
- Dikselius, Mal'kol'm [Dixelius, Malcolm], and Andreĭ Konstantinov. *Prestupnyĭ mir Rossii*. St. Petersburg: Bibliopolis, 1995. Print.
- Doroshevich, V. M. *Sakhalin (Katorga)*. 2 vols. Moscow: Tipografiia tovarishchestva I. D. Sytina, 1903. Print.
- . *Russia's Penal Colony in the Far East: A Translation of Vlas Doroshevich's "Sakhalin"*. Trans. Andrew A. Gentes. London: Anthem, 2009. Print.
- Dostoevskiĭ, F. M. *Polnoe sobranie sochineniĭ*. 30 vols. Moscow: Nauka, 1972–90. Print.
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *The House of the Dead*. Trans. David McDuff. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- Fortier, Anne-Marie. "Re-Membering Places and the Performance of Belonging(s)." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 16.2 (1999): 41–64. Print.
- Foucart, François. *Lacenaire, l'assassin démythifié*. Paris: Perrin, 1993. Print.
- Frank, Joseph. *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860–1865*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986. Print.
- Galeotti, Mark, "Criminal Russia: The Traditions Behind the Headlines." *Russian and Post-Soviet Organized Crime*. Ed. Mark Galeotti. Dartmouth: Ashgate, 2002. 3–5. Print.
- , ed. *Russian and Post-Soviet Organized Crime*. Dartmouth: Ashgate, 2002. Print.
- Gentes, Andrew A. Introduction. *Russia's Penal Colony in the Far East: A Translation of Vlas Doroshevich's "Sakhalin"*. Trans. Andrew A. Gentes. London: Anthem, 2009. Print.
- Glazov, Yuri. "'Thieves' in the USSR: A Social Phenomenon." *Russian and Post-Soviet Organized Crime*. Ed. Mark Galeotti. Dartmouth: Ashgate, 2002. 31–46. Print.
- Harrison, Jane. "The Head of John Baptist." *Classical Review*. 30.8 (1916): 216–19. Print.
- Herling, Gustav. *A World Apart*. Trans. Joseph Marek. London: Heinemann, 1986. Print.

- Kennan, George. *Siberia and the Exile System*. 2 vols. New York: Century, 1891. Print.
- Likhachev, D. S. "Cherty pervobytnogo primitivizma vorovskoi rechi." *Iazyk i myshlenie* 3–4 (1935): 47–100. Print.
- . *Reflections on the Russian Soul: A Memoir*. Trans. Bernard Adams. Ed. A. R. Tulloch. Budapest: Central European UP, 2000. Print.
- Miller, Robin Feuer. *Dostoevsky's Unfinished Journey*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2007. Print.
- Mørch, Audun J. "The Chronotope of Freedom: *House of the Dead*." *Aspects of Dostoevskii: Art, Ethics, and Faith*. Ed. Robert Reid and Joe Andrew. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012. 51–65. Print.
- Nepomnyashchy, Catharine Theimer. *Abram Tertz and the Poetics of Crime*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1995. Print.
- Neuberger, Joan. *Hooliganism: Crime, Culture, and Power in St. Petersburg, 1900–1914*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993. Print.
- Nussbaum, Andrew J. "Literary Selves: The Tertz-Sinyavsky Dialogue." *Autobiographical Statements in Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*. Ed. Jane Gary Harris. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990. 238–59. Print.
- Rat'kina, T. E. *Nikomu ne zadolzhav... Literaturnaia kritika i esseisika A. D. Siniavskogo*. Moscow: Sovpadenie, 2010. Print.
- Ruttenburg, Nancy. *Dostoevsky's Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008. Print.
- Serman, Il'ja, "Tema narodnosti v 'Zapiskakh iz mertvogo doma'." *Dostoevsky Studies* 3 (1982): 101–44. Print.
- Shalamov, Varlam. *Sobranie sochineniĭ*. 6 vols. Moscow: Terra, 2004. Print.
- Siniavskii, Andreĭ. *Sobranie sochineniĭ*. 2 vols. Moscow: Start, 2002. Print.
- Smith, Alexandra. "Jane Harrison as an Interpreter of Russian Culture in the 1910s–1920s." *A People Passing Rude: British Responses to Russian Culture*. Ed. Anthony Cross. Cambridge: Open Book, 2012. 175–88. Print.
- Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *Sobranie sochineniĭ*. 9 vols. Moscow: Terra, 2000. Print.
- . *The Gulag Archipelago*. Vol. 2. Trans. Thomas P. Whitney. London: Collins Harvill, 1976. Print.
- Tertz, Abram. *Strolls with Pushkin*. Trans. Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993. Print.
- . *A Voice from the Chorus*. Trans. Kyril Fitzlyon and Max Hayward. London: Quartet, 1994. Print.
- Toker, Leona. *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000. Print.
- Varese, Federico. "The Society of the *Vory-v-zakone*, 1930s–1950s." *Russian and Post-Soviet Organized Crime*. Ed. Mark Galeotti. Dartmouth: Ashgate, 2002. 7–30. Print.
- Young, Sarah J. "Dostoevsky and the Gulag." *Sarah J. Young*. 6 May 2012. Web. 29 Apr. 2013. <<http://sarahjyoung.com/site/2012/05/06/dostoevsky-and-the-gulag/>>.
- . "Knowing Russia's Convicts: The Other in Narratives of Imprisonment and Exile of the Late Imperial Era." *Europe-Asia Studies* 65.9 (2013): 1700–15. Print.
- . "Recalling the Dead: Repetition, Identity, and the Witness in Varlam Shalamov's *Kolymskie rasskazy*." *Slavic Review* 70.2 (2011): 353–72. Print.



# Gulag Humour: Some Observations on Its History, Evolution, and Contemporary Resonance

Andrea Gullotta

Nearly three decades after the end of the Soviet Gulag system in 1986 (Applebaum 582), much work still remains to be done on its social and cultural aspects. While many historians have researched the Gulag, studies on culture and *byt* (everyday life) within the Gulag have not been as frequent, although some extremely interesting works have been published on literature, theatre, and art within the camps. Notable studies include Leona Toker's book on Gulag literature (*Return from the Archipelago*, 2000), Natalia Kuziakina's work *Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp* (1995), Vladimir Bakhtin and Boris Putilov's edited volume *Fol'klor i kul'turnaia sreda Gulaga* (1994) and the catalogue *Tvorchestvo i byt GULAGa: Katalog muzeinogo sobraniia Obshchestva "Memorial"* (edited by Valentina Tikhanova, 1998). Among topics deserving more scholarly attention is that of Gulag humour. While the functions of humour as a mechanism to cope with the horrors of Nazi concentration camps have been studied by Steve Lipman, Chaya Ostrower, and Stephen Feinstein, among others, little has been published on the topic of humour in relation to the Gulag.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to speak of a specific aspect of the history of the Gulag without considering its context, following its evolution both diachronically and synchronically in order to avoid generalizations. Every topic is challenging in its complexity, as the Gulag is not a coherent phenomenon. Even within the same historical period, there are variations among individual camps. As Tat'iana Okunevskaia observes in her memoirs, "Every camp is a world unto itself. A whole world, a separate city, a separate country" (391).<sup>2</sup>

This article offers some tentative reflections on the topic of Gulag humour, with the aim of charting a path for future research. I define Gulag humour broadly, taking into consideration all types of action aimed at stimulating laughter within the Gulag, and I also consider humour about the Gulag or, more broadly, about Soviet repression. Such examples occur within vari-

---

<sup>1</sup> The following works, while they do not directly focus on Gulag humour, each contain a few passages relevant to the topic: Arkhipova and Mel'nichenko; Graham; and Gheith and Jolluck.

<sup>2</sup> "Каждый лагерь – свой мир, да, целый мир, отдельный город, отдельная страна." Tat'iana Okunevskaia (1914–2002) was a theatre and cinema actress. She spent six years in prisons and camps. (Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own).

ous genres, including comedy, satire, *chastushki* (humorous singable two- or four-line folk doggerels), and *anekdoty* (jokes). I will examine a selection of material, including fiction, memoirs, texts published in the Gulag press, and theatre plays performed in the camps. Finally, I will consider this material in the light of theories of humour, such as Aristotle and Plato's "superiority theory," the theory of "aggressive humour," Mikhail Bakhtin's interpretation of carnival, and Henri Bergson's conception of laughter as a social phenomenon.

## Before the Five-Year Plans

The evolution of Gulag humour can be seen to correspond to different stages in the historical evolution of the Gulag system, the first traces of which date back to the very origins of the Soviet state and its repressive system.<sup>3</sup> From the moment the Soviet state started implementing coercive actions against its enemies, prisoners were able to find in humour a way of coping with the repressive situations to which they were subjected. For instance, memoirs by political prisoners reveal how jokes in Soviet prisons, camps, and internal exile go back to the first arrests of members of leftist parties (Olitskaia 1: 238, 255, 261). These prisoners, some of whom were arrested several times between 1917 and 1923, were finally sent to the Solovki prison camp (known as SLON, *Solovetskiĭ Lager' Osobogo Naznacheniiia*). This prison camp is viewed by historians as a prototype of the Gulag, in that it was the first concentration camp run by the OGPU (*Ob"edinennoe Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie*; Joint State Political Directorate) and later served as a model for the creation of the system of camps in the USSR (Applebaum 47–69). Because of the SLON's leading role in the repressive history of the Soviet Union, the characteristics of humour which developed within it deserve particular attention.

Upon arrival at the Solovki archipelago, the *politzakliuchennye* (political prisoners) were put together in the Savvat'evo hermitage, where they remained isolated from the rest of the prisoners. The memoirs of the few political prisoners who survived the Gulag describe the period which they spent in the Savvat'evo hermitage as a brief moment of serenity.<sup>4</sup> The political prisoners organized themselves rapidly: within the small society they had formed in the hermitage, they devoted themselves, amongst other activities,

---

<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, humour behind bars is not limited to the Gulag. This chapter will not deal with the question of laughter behind bars in general, nor trace possible parallels with humour in tsarist prisons.

<sup>4</sup> This is evident from the memoirs by Vladimir Rubinshteĭn, Ekaterina Olitskaia, and David Batser. They have all been recently published in the first volume of a series of memoirs by prisoners of the Solovki prison camp, edited by the Solovki monastery (Umniagin, *Vospominaniia solovetskikh uznikov*).

to theatre, staging improvised shows that included instances of satire. Unfortunately, these examples of camp satire were not recorded by any memoirist and cannot therefore be recounted in detail (Rubinshtein 33).

Humour was also widespread amongst the regular (i.e., non-political) prisoners of the SLON, as many memoirs by former inmates testify.<sup>5</sup> Due to its experimental status, the SLON became one of the most peculiar camps in the history of the Gulag. The camp administration tested the effectiveness of exploiting prisoners' forced labour, causing thousands of deaths by physical exhaustion, as well as by undernourishment and arbitrary violence, while permitting the prisoners to organize cultural activities as a means of political re-education. Due to unofficial support from the staff who administered the camp, as well as the high level of education of the SLON prisoners, a veritable cultural community led by *intelligenty* (intellectuals) formed within the camp.

Within this context, humour became apparent early on, as expressed in the pun “À lager, comme à lager,” authored by Georgiï Osorgin, an officer of the Tsarist Army who was later shot in the Solovki prison camp in 1929 (Solzhenitsyn, *Arkhipelag* 2: 44). Osorgin's pun is a typical example of what I call “underground Gulag humour,” i.e., actions aimed to stimulate laughter first and foremost amongst prisoners. While this type of humour was common to all camps, another type of humour, which I call “authorized Gulag humour,” was typical of specific situations in many Soviet camps. Authorized Gulag humour consisted of actions by prisoners aimed at stimulating laughter in staged performances for a wider audience or in the camp press, with the permission and under the supervision of the authorities (e.g., theatre plays within the camps, satire in the Gulag press). This latter type of humour was a fundamental ingredient of SLON culture, which developed separately from other camps, granting a high degree of freedom of expression for the prisoners involved in sanctioned cultural activities. For this reason, authorized Gulag humour in SLON is a unique phenomenon within the overall spectrum of Gulag humour.

Many shows performed in the camp's theatre, called the Solteatr, included sketches and brief comic interludes, set mainly in the camp. In these interludes by talented authors such as Boris Glubokovskii,<sup>6</sup> the authorities sometimes even served as the object of humour. For example, on the arrival of a

---

<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Rozanov's book *Solovetskii kontslager' v monastyre, 1922–1939: Fakty – Domysly – «Parashi»: Obzor vospominanii solovchan solovchanami*, which the author wrote as an essay, in which he compared all the memoirs published up to 1979 by former SLON prisoners – contains an entire chapter (entitled “Even the muses are taken to work” [2: 16–35]) devoted to art (music, theatre, literature, etc.) in the camp, where there are a few hints at humorous situations.

<sup>6</sup> Boris Glubokovskii (1894–1935?) was an actor in Aleksandr Tairov's Chamber Theatre. At Solovki, he became one of the leaders of the cultural scene of the camp.

commission from Moscow, which included some of the most prominent members of the OGPU, an actor of Solteatr sang the following ironic lines:

To all who sentenced us to Solovki  
We say: please, feel free to come here  
Stay here three years or even five  
You'll remember this with delight! (Tiukhina 181)<sup>7</sup>

The many publications of the camp, including the satirical journal *Solovetskiĭ krokodil*, were filled with satirical vignettes, some of which were critical of camp authorities. One such vignette, published in a 1924 issue of the journal SLON, depicts the symbolic path of the detainees as a walk on a rope above the sea and towards the sun of freedom. Some of them fall in the water, where a giant fish and stones with words such as “isolation prison” await them; some manage to stay on the rope, but no one reaches freedom. The most prolific author in the camp press during the years 1929–1930<sup>8</sup> was Iurii Kazarnovskiĭ, a humour columnist. Kazarnovskiĭ's poems, puns, and short stories filled the pages of the camp press during this period.<sup>9</sup> In his caustic parody of Mayakovsky's work, Kazarnovskiĭ wrote: “My slogan is / ‘Take everything from life’. / But I / am not ready / to do so: / I leave you / not criticism / from a fat person / but ten years in the Solovki!” (“Iumor” 65).<sup>10</sup>

In the years before the first five-year plan, cultural activities in Soviet camps other than the SLON were subjected to stricter control by camp authorities, as testified by correspondence between camp administrations and the Moscow institution of GUMZ (*Glavnoe Upravlenie Mestami Zakliucheniia*; Main Administration of Places of Confinement).<sup>11</sup> While humour within the SLON, even in its supervised moments, was characterized by a high

---

<sup>7</sup> “Всех, кто наградил нас Соловками, / Просим: приезжайте сюда сами! / Посидите здесь годочков три иль пять / Будете с восторгом вспоминать!”

<sup>8</sup> The SLON press began in 1923. Its history can be divided into two phases: the first phase ended in 1926, when all publications were interrupted. The second phase started in 1929 and ended in 1930, when publications were closed for good.

<sup>9</sup> Iurii Kazarnovskiĭ (1904–56) is best known for being the last person to see Osip Mandel'shtam before his death (Mandel'shtam 444).

<sup>10</sup> “Мой лозунг: / – «От жизни все берите». / Но все / Я / Брать не готов: / Это вам – / Не какой-нибудь / Толстый критик – / А 10 лет Соловков!”

<sup>11</sup> An internal disposition issued in May 1925 stated that it was “necessary to take into consideration that types of entertainment which are normally permissible for ordinary citizens, such as, for example, films depicting adventurous escapades, plays with violence or murder scenes, light entertainment, farcical comedies, etc., are ABSOLUTELY INADMISSIBLE IN PLACES OF DETENTION, where spectacles are a means of corrective influence on criminals” (необходимо принять во внимание, что зрелища вполне допустимые для граждан вообще, как, напр. киноленты изображающие авантюристические похождения, спектакли со сценами убийств, насилий, зрелища легкого жанра, комедии фарсового характера и т.д. СОВЕРШЕННО НЕДОПУСТИМЫ В МЕСТАХ ЗАКЛЮЧЕНИЯ, где зрелища являются одним из средств исправительного воздействия на преступников) (Postanovleniia 118).

degree of freedom of expression, in the other camps authorized Gulag humour was more institutionalized, i.e., aimed mainly at praising the successes of the Soviet state and, above all, the re-education of the prisoners. This became prominent during the increasing Stalinization of the country, which had direct effects on the camps, their culture, and humour, as will be shown below.

## The Stalin Era

From 1928 onwards, conditions for prisoners in Soviet concentration camps deteriorated considerably. Political control tightened, camps were organized into a larger and more structured system, and repressive methods became more prominent. Within a few years, the launch of the great construction projects, such as the Belomorkanal (White Sea-Baltic Canal) or the BAM (*Baikal-Amurskaia Magistral'*; Baikal-Amur Mainline Railway), and the expansion of the Gulag system into the most peripheral regions of the USSR, led to the beginning of what is generally considered to be the most violent period in the history of the Gulag (Applebaum 70–120; Khlevniuk 199–202). In this context, authorized Gulag humour lost any chance of freedom from ideological requirements.

All intellectual activities were strictly politicized: camp journals and theatre plays became increasingly filled with jokes and humour controlled by the authorities and aimed mainly at ridiculing anti-Soviet hypostases, such as the bourgeois, priests, and counter-revolutionaries, or at praising the successes of *perekovka* (reforging)<sup>12</sup> and of the *velikiĭ perelom* (the Great Turn).<sup>13</sup> This change is visible in works by the above-mentioned Iurii Kazarnovskii, who, after being moved from the Solovki to the building sites of the Belomorkanal,<sup>14</sup> started composing ideological poems. His refined puns were no longer permitted, and the rare humorous moments in his texts after 1931 are always ideological and clearly less amusing than those published in the SLON press. In a poem written for a poetry collection in celebration of the Belomorkanal entitled “Moria soedinim” (“We’ll Unify the Seas”), his only humorous verses are: “Grishka did not know what a canal was / He stopped just like a fool / ‘A canal? I once heard a doctor say / It’s some part of the oesophagus.”<sup>15</sup> This type of institutionalized Gulag humour was widespread

---

<sup>12</sup> The concept of *perekovka* was fundamental in these years. In order to become Soviet citizens, prisoners needed to be not merely “re-educated,” but “re-forged.”

<sup>13</sup> The Great Turn refers to the forced industrialization of the USSR promoted by Stalin from 1928 onwards.

<sup>14</sup> The Belomorkanal was a canal dug between the White Sea and the Baltic Sea. It was completed in twenty months through the forced labour of Gulag prisoners and at the cost of thousands of lives. For a more detailed history of the Belomorkanal, see Ruder and Chukhin.

<sup>15</sup> “Гришка не знал, что такое канал, / застыл остолопа вроде: / “Канал? – Я слышал, где-то доктор сказал: / какая-то часть в пищеводе.”” (Kazarnovskii, “O Grishke” 31).

in camp theatres, where most of the pieces staged were ideological, such as Nikolaï Pogodin's comedy *Aristokraty* (*The Aristocrats*), which describes the adventures of a team of prisoners within the Belblatlag, the camp built for the construction of the Belomorkanal. The aristocrats of the title are a gang of criminals who come to a realisation of the importance of political re-education by the means of forced labour.<sup>16</sup>

However, the camp's directors were sometimes indulgent with non-ideological plays. Isolated from society, camp administrators welcomed the possibility of being entertained by the prisoners of the camp they were running, sometimes allowing theatre shows for their own pleasure (Applebaum 291). The daughter of the writer Igor' Terent'ev<sup>17</sup> recalls the success of her father's vaudevilles, staged by the theatre of the Belomorkanal's Gulag: "Terent'ev wrote and staged amusing and clever vaudevilles on themes related to camp life. The prisoners enjoyed these plays so much that they started to exceed the plan solely for the sake of being allowed to watch them" (Terent'eva 56).<sup>18</sup> Similarly, we know that Gulag theatre groups staged non-ideological comedies (e.g., Gogol's *Revizor* [*The Inspector*] or Aleksandr Ostrovskii's *Na vsiakogo mudretsa dovol'no prostoty* [*Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man*], Dvorzhetskii 83). Some shows even featured clowns and marionettes (Kleïn 192; Tsulukidze 34–44).

At the same time, underground Gulag humour continued to spread amongst prisoners, despite the strict control of the authorities in the Stalinist camps. Jokes, songs, and *chastushki*, composed by prisoners during their detention in the camps, circulated mainly in the *baraki* (prison huts). Many of these serve as proof of the dissemination of underground Gulag humour in these years, as recounted in memoirs and literary works reflecting events in camps. In her memoir *Krutoï marshrut* (*Into the Whirlwind*), Evgeniia Ginzburg explains how those arrested used to give funny names to the agents of the Iaroslavl' prison.<sup>19</sup> In her book, she also quotes a joke that Kolyma prisoners would tell each other: "Only the first ten years are hard" (176).<sup>20</sup>

Even in the Kolyma camps, among the harshest for prisoners, jokes or humorous moments appeared every now and then, judging by Shalamov's tales, which show how, in extremely brutal conditions, prisoners could

---

<sup>16</sup> Nikolaï Pogodin (1900–62) was a Soviet playwright. His comedy *Aristokraty* was very popular. It was later made into a film, *Zakliuchennye* (1936), by the director Evgenii Chervikov. In Anne Applebaum's *Gulag: A History*, there is a quote from Jerzy Glikzman's memoirs in which a performance of *Aristokraty* is described. Applebaum writes: "At the time, this sort of thing was hailed as a new and radical form of theatre" (98–99).

<sup>17</sup> Igor' Terent'ev (1892–1937) was close to the LEF group. Arrested in 1931, he was shot in 1937 in the Butyrka prison in Moscow.

<sup>18</sup> "Терентьев придумывал и ставил смешные, острые водевили на темы лагерной жизни. Заключенные так любили эти выступления, что только ради них начинали перевыполнять план."

<sup>19</sup> See the chapter "Time of Great Expectations" (Ginzburg 166–70).

<sup>20</sup> "Трудно только первые десять лет."

sometimes resort to black humour.<sup>21</sup> Solzhenistyn's *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha* (*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*) contains similar moments. For example, there are humorous exchanges between prisoners, such as the discussion between Ivan Denisovich and Buĭnovskii on the exact time of the day, the movement of the sun, and the decrees of the Soviet government ("Odin den'" 143). Solzhenitsyn's *V krughe pervom* (*The First Circle*) shows how humour spread also in the *sharashki* (research laboratories within the camps). For instance, in the chapter entitled "Litseĭskii stol" ("A Banquet with Friends") ("V krughe pervom" 402–12), Nerzhin, Sologdin, and other inmates, enjoying a "banquet" consisting of a few biscuits and some alcohol with cocoa, have an amusing conversation. Adamson invites Nerzhin to distribute the remaining alcohol among all the others, with the following phrase: "Кому охота сидеть в карцере?" ("Who is willing to go to the isolation cell?") ("V krughe pervom" 406).

## After Stalin's Death

After the death of Stalin, Beria reorganized the entire repressive machine of the USSR. This reorganization entailed the interruption of work on many building sites of the Gulag and the delocalization of the power structures of the Gulag under different ministries. After Beria's execution in 1953, the Party no longer invested in the Gulag on the same scale as in Stalin's time (Applebaum 499–501). The subsequent release of a large number of political prisoners from the camps at the beginning of the Thaw (1954–57) brought about significant changes in the demography of the Gulag.<sup>22</sup> The release of the "old" political prisoners (i.e., the thousands of individuals who had been condemned under Article 58<sup>23</sup> of the criminal code without ever having actively participated in opposition to the regime), together with the introduction, over a period of many years, of a new type of political prisoner (i.e., the political activists and intellectuals who fought openly against the Soviet regime), changed to a certain extent the way prisoners used humour. Unlike their predecessors, who were frequently subjected to violence at the hands of common prisoners (Brodskiĭ 417), these new political prisoners were mainly

---

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, the passage in the story "The Green Procurator," in which a doctor says to an overseer involved in a massacre after an attempted escape: "How many escapees were there? – Twelve. – You could have called in airplanes and bombarded them with atomic bombs." ("– Сколько же беглецов? – Двенадцать. – Да вы бы вызвали самолеты и бомбили их, бомбили. Атомными бомбами.") (Shalamov 1: 571).

<sup>22</sup> Beria's reforms had already included an amnesty that freed the majority of political prisoners. After Beria, Khrushchev promoted similar reforms, such as the rehabilitations of prisoners (Applebaum 528–33).

<sup>23</sup> Article 58 of the Soviet Penal Code under Stalin was aimed at punishing so-called counter-revolutionary acts. It was divided into fourteen parts, part 10 on anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation being most frequently used.

activists and dissidents who had openly fought the Soviet regime. For this reason, they were treated differently by common prisoners, who saw them as active opponents of the regime and not random victims of a repressive machine, and thus felt kinship with them in the fight against the Soviet authorities.

Many Gulag memoirs of this period recount scenes of cooperation between common and political prisoners, and also a shared humour, whereas prior to Stalin's death their humour had remained mainly separate. An example of this new attitude is found in the memoirs by the poet Vadim Delone,<sup>24</sup> who describes the common prisoners' reaction to the arrival of a new official in charge of the camp, a soldier nicknamed "Liza" in accordance with a practice among common prisoners of calling their enemies by female names: "Did you hear, *politik* [political prisoner], they've appointed a new head of the camp. They say that he's very literate, a real intelligent, he even sleeps on books!" (Delone 115).<sup>25</sup> At the same time, political prisoners became fascinated by the subculture of the *urki* (criminals) and other common prisoners, as reflected in Andreĭ Siniavskii's *Golos is khora* (*A Voice from the Chorus*), a book comprised of letters the author sent to his wife during his detention in the Dubravlag camp (1966–71), where he was confined for publishing satirical texts abroad without permission. The letters contain the author's thoughts during detention, scenes from camp life, and, above all, words, songs, poems, and jokes by anonymous fellow prisoners. They thus provide an indication that humour was widespread inside the Gulag during the years of the *zastoĭ* (Stagnation). An example from this collection of texts is: "He's a good boy. In five years, apart from 'Up' and 'Down' I never heard a word from him. // There's a doctor in a white coat. I tell him: 'I am going blind.' He replies: 'You are imagining it' (in the madhouse)" (Siniavskii 178).<sup>26</sup>

Sergeĭ Dovlatov's *Zona: Zapiski nadziratel'ia* (*The Zone: A Prison Camp Guard's Story*) also depicts a frequent use of humour within the camps. This book, which comprises an account of Dovlatov's experience as a guard in a camp for common prisoners, is filled with passages that show a spectrum of humorous situations. An example of a humorous moment is given in a chat between a guard and a common prisoner, the robber Kuptsov. Here Kuptsov says to the narrator, referring to Dostoevsky's novel *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* (*Crime and Punishment*):

---

<sup>24</sup> The poet Vadim Delone (Delaunay, 1947–83) was one of nine people who, on 25 August 1968, demonstrated on Red Square in Moscow in support of the Czechoslovak people after the Warsaw Pact invasion. After many months of confinement, he was forced to emigrate in 1975. He died in Paris in 1983.

<sup>25</sup> "Слышал, политик, нового начальника поставили, говорят, шибко грамотный, интеллигент; прямо спит на книжках!"

<sup>26</sup> " – Хороший парень: за пять лет, кроме «майна» и «вира», я ничего от него не слышал. – И врач стоит в белом халате. Я говорю: – Слепну. Он говорит: – Мания. (В дурдоме)"

You tell me, boss. Here it is written that a man killed an old lady for money. He was so tormented by guilt that he went voluntarily to do forced labour. I, indeed, knew this gangster from Turkmenistan who had committed about 30 murders and was never condemned. [...] And history shows that it's possible to commit even more. For example, you can kill about ten million people and light a "Herzegovina Flor" cigarette [a reference to Stalin's smoking habits. – AG]. (Dovlatov 55)<sup>27</sup>

The guards had their humour, too. An example occurs in a passage in which the narrator returns from hospital after having been stabbed by the prisoners. Upon seeing him, his mate Bogoslovskii starts laughing and says in surprise, "We had already put you in the category of 'R.I.P'..." (Dovlatov 59).<sup>28</sup>

During the Thaw and Stagnation, political prisoners brought political humour into the camps, mainly by spreading jokes about Khrushchev and Brezhnev that circulated in Soviet society. Brezhnev, in particular, was the subject of many *anekdoty*, some of which deal with the Gulag. One of the most famous of these goes: "Leonid Il'ich, what's your hobby? – I collect *anekdoty* about myself. – And did you manage to collect many? – Two and a half camps worth" (Arkhipova and Mel'nichenko 170).<sup>29</sup>

Perestroika marked the end of the Gulag system and, consequently, of Gulag humour. However, echoes of it can arguably still be heard in political jokes told in Russia today. Gulag songs, such as "Vaninskii port," still enjoy popularity in Russia, constituting a large part of the repertoire of *ruskii shanson*, a musical genre appreciated by the Russian audience. Among them are the humorous *blatnye pesni*, a genre of criminal songs about the Gulag. They are an example of the persistence of Gulag humour in contemporary Russia,<sup>30</sup> as much as the *anekdoty* about the camps. However, it must be said that humour about Soviet repression in general is more widespread than Gulag humour in Russia today. In particular, the *anekdoty* on Stalin (including those about the camps) are well known, and they have recently been collected and analysed by Aleksandra Arkhipova and Mikhail Mel'nichenko. The authors were able to reconstruct the common structure of *anekdoty* about

---

<sup>27</sup> "Вот рассуди, начальник. Тут написано – убил человек старуху из-за денег. Мучился так, что сам на каторгу пошел. А я, представь себе, знал одного клиента в Туркестане. У этого клиента – штук тридцать мокрых дел и ни одной судимости. [...] Более того, история показывает, что можно еще сильнее раскрутиться. Например, десять миллионов угробить, или там сколько, а потом закурить 'Герцеговину флор'."

<sup>28</sup> "А мы тебя навечно в списки части занесли..."

<sup>29</sup> "Леонид Ильич, какое у Вас хобби? – Я собираю анекдоты о себе. – И много удалось собрать? – Два с половиной лагеря." Aleksandra Arkhipova and Mikhail Mel'nichenko note that this joke, usually associated with Brezhnev, had circulated in earlier versions featuring Stalin as the protagonist. For example, in V. Khlopotov's 1948 memoir, the same joke is cited with reference to Stalin (Arkhipova and Mel'nichenko 170).

<sup>30</sup> The actor Aleksandr Vilkov, who works for the Moscow theatre *U Nikitskikh vorot*, often performs *blatnye pesni*, including some humorous songs that speak of Soviet repression or camps, such as Iuz Aleshkovskii's "Pesnia o Staline" ("Song about Stalin") or Evgenii Kliachkin's "Iuzhnaia fantaziia" ("Southern Fantasy").

Stalin, its roots in the tradition of Russian humour, and its role as an expression of political metaphors.

## Considerations on Gulag Humour: A Preliminary Analysis

As this brief overview shows, Gulag humour has been a varied phenomenon, changing continuously along with the contexts in which it arose. While it is impossible to assess Gulag humour in its entirety within the space of this chapter, some observations on aspects of Gulag humour can be made. Firstly, although Gulag humour displays features that occur in other prison systems and/or social contexts (e.g., ridiculing the authorities by calling them funny names),<sup>31</sup> a peculiarity of Gulag humour lies in underscoring the cruelty of the authorities and the repressive Soviet system on the whole, mainly through black humour, but also, as seen in the examples quoted above, through use of irony and satire. Secondly, certain established cultural features were re-modelled according to different repressive contexts. Such is the case of *chastushki*, whose composition was common in Russia, both inside and outside Russian prisons, well before 1917. Within the Gulag, the authors of *chastushki* were mainly ordinary prisoners. In addition, the large number of Ukrainian peasants sent to the camps after the *raskulachivanie* (dekulakization, denoting the repressive campaign against kulaks, i.e., rich farmers) helped to diversify the contents of such texts. Here is an example of a humorous *chastushka* circulating in the camps during this period:

When Lenin was dying,  
He ordered Stalin:  
'Give them [the people] less bread,  
Don't show them the meat!'

Stalin is riding on a cart  
And the cart tips over.  
Where are you going, Comrade Stalin?  
'To the peasant for the taxes!'

Stalin is riding a cow,  
The cow has one horn.  
Where are you going, Comrade Stalin?  
'To dekulakize the people!'<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, the habit of giving guards nicknames in US prisons in the appendix "A Note on Nicknames" in Bruce Jackson's *Wake Up Dead Man* (305-06).

<sup>32</sup> "Когда Ленин умирал, / Сталину наказывал: / – Меньше хлеба им давай, / Мяса не показывай! // Едет Сталин на телеге, / А телега на боку. / Ты куда, товарищ Сталин? / –

Such texts raise a number of interesting questions about humour within the camps. It is possible to see the need for laughter in relation to the relief theory of humour, according to which laughter is generated by the release of excessive energy.<sup>33</sup> According to this view, the enormous stress which prisoners had to endure in the camps could be seen as a typical example of accumulation of energy, which was released through laughter. The *chastushki*, as well as some of the jokes that are part of Gulag humour, can also be seen as specimens of what I would call carnivalized humour, according to Bakhtin's theory of carnival. With regard to the extreme social context comprised by the Gulag, Bakhtin's theory of carnival can help us to better understand some examples of Gulag humour. As Bakhtin states in the introduction to his *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura srednevekov'ia i Renaissance (Rabelais and His World)*, medieval carnivals arose in opposition to official feasts of the Middle Ages, which,

whether ecclesiastic, feudal, or sponsored by the state, did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it. [...] This is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it. [...] The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling [...] and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age (9–10).

Bakhtin states that carnival laughter is a “festive laughter [...] the laughter of all the people” (11): it is “utopian” and oriented “toward the highest spheres” (12). As both fictional and testimonial accounts of the Gulag reveal, Soviet camps comprised hierarchical societies, based on a static social pyramid, in which guards ruled over prisoners with the help of some inmate collaborators, called *suki* (bitches). This hierarchical structure bears similarities to the one at the core of Bakhtin's analysis of laughter.

Gulag prisoners were typically subjected to harsh living conditions, while being forced, at the same time, to publicly praise the very authorities who were repressing them. This is evidenced by the many initiatives within the

---

За налогом к мужику! // Едет Сталин на корове, / У коровы один рог. / Ты куда, товарищ Сталин? / – Раскулачивать народ!” (Bakhtin and Putilov 49).

<sup>33</sup> “Relief theories attempt to describe humor along the lines of a tension-release model. Rather than defining humor, they discuss the essential structures and psychological processes that produce laughter. The two most prominent relief theorists are Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud. We can consider two versions of the relief theory: (1) the strong version holds that all laughter results from a release of excessive energy; (2) the weak version claims that it is often the case that humorous laughter involves a release of tension or energy” (Smuts).

camps aimed at glorifying the Soviet authorities in publications, theatre, and parades. Official celebratory events in the camps bear many similarities to the official feasts described by Bakhtin. Moreover, prisoners were subjected to a kind of constant ceremony in the everyday life of the camps, which was organized according to strict regulations enforced by the guards. Helpless in their situation, the prisoners carnivalized their reality through humour, thus symbolically treating the representatives of the “ruling class” (i.e., the prison guards) as equals. In contrast to “ceremonies” (i.e., routine and official initiatives) imposed by the authorities, they created carnivalized hypostases of the authorities (e.g., the image of Stalin riding a cow) in jokes or puns. This also served to create common ground between groups of prisoners otherwise separated by cultural, social, and ethnic differences, although humour within the camps differed strongly according to prisoners’ backgrounds, as seen above with popular and intellectual Gulag humour. This is why laughter can be interpreted as a fundamental coping mechanism within the Gulag – as it was within Nazi concentration camps, according to testimony by the psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl (1905–97):

Humor was another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds. [...] The attempt to develop a sense of humor and to see things in a humorous light is some kind of a trick learned while mastering the art of living. Yet it is possible to practice the art of living even in a concentration camp, although suffering is omnipresent (Frankl 63–64).

An additional feature of Gulag humour was thus its trans-social nature, which united various social strata of the prison population. In the sources at our disposal, there is no record of any other activity produced spontaneously or enjoyed by all the different types of prisoners.

As the above overview of Gulag humour shows, humour was a prerogative of all prisoners, regardless of their social and cultural origin, although puns and jokes seem to have been created more by intellectuals and political prisoners while *chastushki* and *blatnye pesni* were apparently composed mainly by ordinary prisoners. There emerged a clear difference between what I would call intellectual Gulag humour, on the one hand, and popular Gulag humour, on the other. They developed out of different cultural traditions and differed in their content, popular Gulag humour being more “aggressive” than intellectual Gulag humour (Di Cioccio 93–108).<sup>34</sup> An example of the aggressiveness of popular Gulag humour is found in the criminals’

---

<sup>34</sup> In the chapter “Humor as Aggressive Communication” in her book *Humor Communication: Theory, Impact, and Outcomes*, Rachel di Cioccio considers humour as a “form of aggressive expression” drawing on earlier theories such as the Aggressive Communication Model (ACM), which analyzes the implication of aggressive behaviour in communication, in order to show how humour can be aimed at embarrassing or offending the object of the joke.

linguistic humour. As is known, *lagernyi zhargon*, the slang used by prisoners, mainly comprised terms created by *urki*. Concepts from *lagernyi zhargon* include the notion of “cow” (a prisoner involved in escapes and cannibalised by other escapees in case of food shortage), or that of “Muslim” (a prisoner dying of hunger, whose skin blackens). In addition to di Cioccio’s theory of aggressive humour, it is possible to explain such a feature by applying the idea that humour is generated by a feeling of superiority, a theory that dates back to Aristotle and Plato, who commented on laughter as an anti-social and often improper phenomenon (Morreal 22–23, 51). *Urki* used black humour as a means of showing their superiority towards political prisoners, or simply weaker prisoners, by laughing at their misfortunes. Even when the differences between intellectuals and ordinary prisoners became less significant in post-Stalin times, their humour – although shared – retained its separate popular and intellectual roots.

Another defining feature of Gulag humour lies in the requirement of a degree of semiotic proficiency in order to understand it. As Leona Toker explains in her seminal work *Return from the Archipelago*, the acquisition of the ability to interpret the particular sign system of the Gulag was a fundamental step for prisoners. Perhaps for this reason, accounts by former Gulag prisoners often provide the reader with clues to the new semiotic system, even when fictionalizing the narratives. An example of this is the beginning of Solzhenitsyn’s *Odin den’ Ivana Denisovicha*, which within the space of a few pages gives the reader many elements necessary to understand the semiotic system of the camp (*Odin den’ 5–7*). According to Toker, this practice “may both enhance the direct cognitive process of the reader and bring him or her emotionally closer to those aspects of the camp ordeal that are unavailable to discursive testimony” (124).

Gulag humour generated within the camps, by contrast, is perhaps the only type of cultural text related to the Gulag that does not need to solve the problem of semiotic proficiency, because the addressee of the communication is always someone already able to interpret the signs, as he or she lives within the semiotic system of the camp. Today it is difficult to decipher some humorous texts originating from the camps, because they were not composed for external reception. This is why some of the heritage of Gulag humour can be considered forever lost.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> An example of this problem is found in Dmitriĭ Likhachev’s memoirs. Likhachev recalls how he had to help readers understand the comical context of Iurii Kazarnovskii’s parodies when some were published in the journal *Ogonek* (Likhachev 254). Without his intervention, the comic effect of Kazarnovskii’s texts would have been incomprehensible.

## *Anekdoty* and Gulag Humour Today

The view of laughter as a coping mechanism directed against the ruling authorities can help to explain the diffusion of *anekdoty* about the Gulag (and, more generally, Soviet repression) within the camps. Strictly speaking, these *anekdoty* cannot be considered Gulag humour (i.e., humour generated within the camps). This is rather humour about the Gulag – or humour about Soviet repression – which can also be generated outside of the camps. *Anekdoty* about arrests and life within the camp were popular throughout Soviet society (Graham 54),<sup>36</sup> and they arguably belong to a longer tradition of the Russian *anekdot*, as described by Seth Graham in his study *Resonant Dissonance*.<sup>37</sup> *Anekdoty* about arrests, purges, etc. first appeared in the camps together with the influx of new prisoners as a result of the waves of arrests during the Great Terror. Typical *anekdoty* of the time reflected the arbitrary nature of the arrests, as recounted by Solzhenitsyn in *Arkhipelag GULag* (*The Gulag Archipelago*) (*Arkhipelag* 2: 269), and as testified by the following *anekdot* quoted in Graham's study:

Three gulag inmates are telling each other what they're in for. The first one says: 'I was five minutes late for work, and they charged me with sabotage.' The second says: 'For me it was just the opposite: I was five minutes early for work, and they charged me with espionage.' The third one says: 'I got to work right on time, and they charged me with harming the Soviet economy by acquiring a watch in a capitalist country.'<sup>38</sup>

*Anekdoty* that referred to the absurdity of laws, the arbitrariness of power, and the cruelty of the system can be seen as examples of "actions against rigidity," as described by Henri Bergson in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, in which Bergson interprets laughter as a social phenomenon. In the section entitled "The Comic Element in Forms and Movements," Bergson states that everything ceremonial in society seems ridiculous in its rigidity, since it is "mechanic" and therefore opposes the real essence of life, i.e., its "suppleness":

---

<sup>36</sup> Although Graham observes that they were not "as numerous as one might expect" (54).

<sup>37</sup> The author dedicates a good part of his book (in particular, chapters 1 ["Generic Provenance," 20–43] and 2 ["Tradition and Contemporaneity," 44–62]) to a discussion of the fact that *anekdoty* belong to a well-established tradition. "The *anekdot* reflects the entire tradition of characterological types. Folktales (and, by extension, *anekdoty*) are part of a tradition of profane texts that arose parallel to sacred narrative tradition" (22).

<sup>38</sup> "Трое русских в Гулаге рассказывают, кого за что посадили. Первый: – Я на пять минут опоздал на работу, и меня обвинили в саботаже. Второй: – А я, наоборот, пришел на пять минут раньше, и меня обвинили в шпионаже. Третий: – А я пришел точно вовремя, и меня обвинили в подрыве советской экономики путем приобретения часов в капиталистической стране." The English version of the joke is taken from Graham 54.

Any image, then, suggestive of the notion of a society disguising itself, or of a social masquerade, so to speak, will be laughable. Now, such a notion is formed when we perceive anything inert or stereotyped, or simply ready-made, on the surface of living society. There we have rigidity over again, clashing with the inner suppleness of life. [...] For, as soon as we forget the serious object of a solemnity or a ceremony, those taking part in it give us the impression of puppets in motion. Their mobility seems to adopt as a model the immobility of a formula. It becomes automatism. But complete automatism is only reached in the official, for instance, who performs his duty like a mere machine, or again in the unconsciousness that marks an administrative regulation working with inexorable fatality, and setting itself up for a law of nature (27–28).

The *anekdoty* on the arrests describe precisely an “automatized event”: the repressive laws make reality rigid and interrupt the “suppleness of life.” *Anekdoty* on the Gulag and arrests usually exaggerate these “automatisms,” thus mimicking the reality linked to the dynamics of arrests in the Soviet Union. An example of this is provided by the following *anekdot*, reported in Arkhipova and Mel'nichenko's book:

Stalin lost his pipe and rang NKVD asking to find it. In a while, the pipe comes out. Stalin rings back the NKVD to say not to search it anymore. From the NKVD, they reply that they already arrested ten people for stealing the pipe:

Free them, says Stalin.

It's impossible, they reply.

Why? asks Stalin.

Because they all confessed to having stolen it.

(Arkhipova and Mel'nichenko 166).<sup>39</sup>

In Bergson's terms, this type of *anekdot* can be seen as a social activity that acts in opposition to the rigidity of the system.

Although many aspects of Gulag culture disappeared together with the system which engendered them, *anekdoty* about Soviet repression remain widespread, continuing the long tradition in Russia of black humour.<sup>40</sup> As Federica Visani explains, the tradition of the Russian *anekdot* is based on a few recurring characters that she defines as “types.” These types have stereotypical features that reappear in many jokes, such as Vovochka, the nasty kid and the foreigner (or Soviet spy) who fails his mission (Visani 164–221).

---

<sup>39</sup> Сталин потерял трубку и позвонил в НКВД, чтобы нашли. Через некоторое время нашлась трубка, и Сталин опять звонит в НКВД, чтобы больше ее не искали. Из НКВД отвечают, что за трубку уже арестовано десять человек.

– Выпустите, – говорит Сталин.

– Нельзя, – отвечают из НКВД.

– Почему? – спрашивает Сталин.

– Потому, что все десять признались в том, что украли трубку.

<sup>40</sup> Il'ia Kukul'in's e-mail to the author, 12 June 2012. I would like to thank Il'ia Kukul'in for his advice and kind help with my article.

These types also include historical figures; for example, Khrushchev is typically depicted as an arrogant and ignorant person, while Brezhnev becomes the epitome of an incompetent leader.

In this view, the continued popularity of *anekdoty* about Soviet repression can be seen as a consequence of the existence of a common semiotic ground – or, simply, a widespread perception – that links Stalin and Putin.<sup>41</sup> This is evident from a typical phenomenon of the *anekdoty*, i.e., their capacity to shift from one “type” to another, depending on the context.

Stock situations recur in Soviet *anekdoty* [...] and are acted out by a limited number of characters, whose system is continuously changing, since the “old” characters, i.e., those linked to past events and moments, are not used anymore and are substituted by more relevant characters (Visani 240).

This explains the fact that, at times, the same *anekdoty* have been transferred from Lenin to Stalin and then to Brezhnev at different moments in the history of the Soviet Union. In this way, variations of the same joke serve to underscore particular features of various national leaders. In contemporary Russia, *anekdoty* highlighting the cruelty and coarseness of a political leader tend to focus on Putin, while previously they often had Stalin as their subject. An example of this tendency is apparent in the following joke:

Putin is holding a press conference. The first journalist stands up:

– I am from the Washington Post. What do you say about the mass graves and the disrespect of human rights in Chechnya?

Putin:

– Next question.

The second journalist stands up:

– I am from the Daily Mirror. Is it true that there are concentration camps in Chechnya and that every day peaceful citizens are murdered in them?

Putin:

– Next question, please.

The third journalist stands up:

– I am from *Suddeutsche Zeitung*. Please clarify what is currently happening on the Strait of Kerch', if Tuzla is an isthmus or an island, and why Russians are building an embankment there.

Putin thinks for a moment, then looks at the first journalist:

– What did you ask about Chechnya? (“Sidit Putin...”)<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> An interesting analysis of *anekdoty* about Putin has recently been published by Aleksandra Arkhipova, who argues that jokes about Putin in the early to mid-2000s partly emerged on the back of the old jokes about Stalin and the sometime KGB chief Andropov.

<sup>42</sup> “Сидит Путин на пресс-конференции. Встает один журналист: – Я из газеты “Вашингтон Пост”. Что Вы скажете про массовые захоронения и несоблюдение прав человека в Чечне? Путин: – Следующий вопрос. Встает другой журналист: – Я из газеты “Дейли Миррор”. Правда ли, что в Чечне есть концлагеря и что там ежедневно гибнут мирные люди? Путин: – Следующий вопрос, пожалуйста. Встает третий журналист: – Я из газеты “Зюддойче Цайтунг”. Проясните, пожалуйста, что происходит сейчас в Керченском проливе, что такое Тузла, коса или остров, и зачем русские строят

The image of Putin is characterized in this *anekdot* by features typical of a repressive context, namely the creation of concentration camps, mass killing, and a disregard for human rights. Another popular *anekdot* features both Stalin and Putin. Here, Stalin visits Putin in a dream and offers him some advice.

Stalin asks Putin:

– Can I help you in any way?

– Why is everything so bad in our country? The economy is collapsing, the people are poor... What should I do?

Stalin replies without hesitation:

– Shoot the government and paint the Kremlin’s walls blue.

– Why blue?

– Just as I thought, we will only be discussing the second issue. (“Spit Vladimir Vladimirovich...”)<sup>43</sup>

This *anekdot* draws a parallel between Stalin and Putin precisely with regard to state repression. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that, in the popular imagination, the semiotics of Putinism shares many features with the semiotics of Stalinism, such as the image of the strong leader and the relationship between the leader and the opposition.

At the same time, the current popularity of *anekdoty* about Soviet repression could be a consequence of the fact that the semiotic system of Soviet repression, unlike the semiotic system of Gulag humour, has been absorbed by contemporary Russian society and therefore does not need much explanation. The level of semiotic proficiency about Soviet repression among contemporary Russian audiences is such that the author does not need to intervene in order to increase it. Therefore, a joke about Stalin shooting dozens of people because of a sneeze<sup>44</sup> can lead to laughter without any additional nar-

---

там дамбу? Путин задумывается, потом смотрит в сторону первого журналиста: – Что Вы там спрашивали про Чечню?”

<sup>43</sup> “Спрашивает Путина Сталин: – Могу я тебе как-нибудь помочь, а? – Почему у нас всё плохо, экономика разваливается, народ нищенствует... Что мне делать? Сталин, не задумываясь, отвечает: – Расстрелять всё правительство и покрасить стены Кремля в голубой цвет. – А зачем их в голубой красить? – Я так и думал, что дискуссия будет только по второму вопросу.”

<sup>44</sup> I am referring to the following *anekdot*: “Stalin is giving a speech. Suddenly someone in the audience sneezes. ‘Who sneezed?’ demands Stalin. (Silence.) ‘First row, stand up. Take them out and shoot them all!’ (Thunderous applause.) ‘Who sneezed?’ (Silence.) ‘Second row, stand up. Take them out and shoot them all!’ (A long ovation.) ‘Who sneezed?’ (Silence.) ‘Third row, stand up. To the firing squads!’ (Thunderous applause, the whole audience is on its feet, shouts of ‘Glory to the Great Stalin!’) ‘Now, who sneezed?’ At the back of the audience, a man says ‘I did! I did!’ and collapses in tears. Stalin looks at him and says: ‘Gesundheit, comrade!’” (В ходе торжественного заседания один из участников чихает. – Кто чихнул? В ответ молчание. – Товарищ Берия, расстреляйте первый ряд. – Еще раз спрашиваю, кто чихнул? Снова молчание. – Лаврентий, расстреляй второй ряд. Так кто же чихнул? Встаёт трясущийся от страха человек: – Я-я-я. – Доброго вам здоровья, товарищ!). The English translation of the joke (slightly different from the Russian original

rative strategy. While the semiotics of Soviet repression in general seems to be part of the contemporary Russian cultural package, the semiotics of life within the camps is arguably not as well known today. This could explain why, in contemporary Russia, Gulag humour (as opposed to humour about the Gulag) is unpopular, and also why a significant aspect of Gulag culture is instead linked to the long-standing tradition of *ruskiĭ shanson* and *blatnaia pesnia*. These traditions, just like some *anekdoty*, are well established in Russian popular culture, irrespective of a particular historical context.

Gulag humour has largely ceased to be a productive cultural phenomenon since the Gulag system was dismantled. Gulag humour is therefore infertile (mainly because of chronological distance to the events), although echoes of it can be heard in the peculiar contexts noted above, such as the *ruskiĭ shanson*, and some of its features have been absorbed by the broader Russian cultural tradition (*anekdoty*, *chastushki*, etc.). It remains a fertile field for research, however: to study Gulag humour means to discover yet another perspective on the cultural history of the Soviet camps.

---

text quoted here and from other versions of the *anekdot* contained in Arkhipova and Mel'nichenko 176–78) is taken from Graham 3.

## Works Cited

- Applebaum, Anne. *Gulag*. Milano: Mondadori, 2004. Print.
- Arkhipova, Aleksandra. "Anekdoty o Putine i vyborakh 10 let spustia, ili Est' li fol'klor 'Snezhnoi revoliutsii'?" *Antropologicheskii forum* 16 (2012): 208–52.
- Arkhipova, Aleksandra, and Mikhail Mel'nichenko. *Anekdoty o Staline: Teksty, kommentarii, issledovaniia*. Moscow: OGI, 2010. Print.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984. Print.
- Bakhtin, Vladimir, and Boris Putilov, eds. *Fol'klor i kul'turnaia sreda Gulaga*. Moscow: Fond za razvitie i vyzhivanie chelovechestva, 1994. Print.
- Batser, David. "Solovetskiĭ iskhod." *Zven'ia* 1 (1991): 288–98. Print.
- Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Trans. Cloudsley Brereton and Fred Rothwell. Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008. Print.
- Brodskiĭ, Iurii. *Solovki: Dvadsat' let osobogo naznacheniia*. Moscow: Mir iskusstv II, 2008. Print.
- Chukhin, Ivan. *Kanaloarmeĭtsy: Istorii stroitel'stva Belomorkanala v dokumentakh, tsifrakh, faktakh, svidetel'stvakh uchastnikov i ochevidtsev*. Petrozavodsk: Kareliia, 1990. Print.
- Delone, Vadim. *Portrety v koliucheĭ rame: Roman. Stikhi*. Omsk: n.p., 1993. Print.
- Di Ciuccio, Rachel. *Humor Communication: Theory, Impact, and Outcomes*. Dubuque: Kendall Hunt, 2012. Print.
- Dovlatov, Sergeĭ. "Zona: Zapiski nadziratel'ia." *Sobranie sochineniĭ*. Vol. 2. St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 2000: 5–168. Print.
- Dvorzhetskiĭ, Vatslav. *Puti bol'shikh etapov: Zapiski aktera*. Moscow: Vozvrashchenie, 1994. Print.
- Feinstein, Stephen. "Art from the Concentration Camps: Gallows Humor and Satirical Wit." *Journal of Jewish Identities* 1 (2) (2008): 53–75.
- Frankl, Viktor. *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York: Pocket, 1997. Print.
- Gheith, Jehanne M., and Katherine R. Jolluck. *Gulag Voices: Oral Histories of Soviet Detention and Exile*. New York: Palgrave, 2011. Print.
- Ginzburg, Evgeniia. *Krutoĭ marshrut: Khronika vremen kul'ta lichnosti*. Moscow: Sovetskiĭ pisatel', 1990. Print.
- Graham, Seth. *Resonant Dissonance: The Russian Joke in Cultural Context*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2009. Print.
- Jackson, Bruce. *Wake Up Dead Man: Hard Labor and Southern Blues*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1990. Print.
- Kazarnovskiĭ, Iurii. "Iumor. Literaturnye parodii." *Solovetskie ostrova* 1 (1930): 65. Print.
- . "O Grishke, Belmorstroe i karmane prirody." *Moria soedinim. Stikhi i pesni na Belmorstroe*. Medvezh'ia gora: Izdanie kul'turno-vospitatel'nogo otdela BelBaltLageria OGPU, 1932: 29–33. Print.

- Khlevniuk, Oleg. "La dittatura staliniana. Priorità politiche e risultati." *Società totalitarie e transizione alla democrazia. Saggi in memoria di Victor Zaslavsky*. Ed. Tommaso Piffer, Vladislav Zubok. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011: 197–216. Print.
- Kleĭn, Aleksandr. *Kleĭmenye, ili odin sredi odinokikh: Zapiski katorzhnika*. Syktyvkar: Komi resp. tip., 1995. Print.
- Kuziakina, Natalia. *Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp*. Luxembourg: Harwood Academic, 1995. Print.
- Likhachev, Dmitriĭ. *Vospominaniia*. St. Petersburg: Logos, 1995. Print.
- Lipman, Steve. *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor during the Holocaust*. London: Aronson, 1993. Print.
- Mandel'shtam, Nadezhda. *Vospominaniia*. Moscow: Soglasie, 1999. Print.
- Morreal, John. *Filosofia dell'umorismo: Origine, etica e virtù della risata*. Milano: Sironi, 2011. Print.
- Okunevskaia, Tat'iana. *Tat'ianin den'*. Moscow: Vagrius, 1998. Print.
- Olitskaia, Ekaterina. *Moi vospominaniia*. 2 vols. Frankfurt/M: Posev, 1971. Print.
- Ostrower, Chaya. "Humor as a Defense Mechanism in the Holocaust." Diss. Tel Aviv U, 2000. Print.
- Pogodin, Nikolaĭ. "Aristokraty." *Sobranie sochineniĭ*. 4 vols. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1977: 327–412. Print.
- Postanovleniia Sovnarkoma RSFSR i Vseukrainskogo tsentral'nogo ispolkoma i Sovnarkoma Ukrainskoĭ SSR, doklady gubernskikh inspektsiĭ mest zakliucheniia i perepiska s nimi ob izdaniĭ gazety "Golos zakliuchennogo", ob uvolnenii sotrudnikov, o periodicheskikh izaniakh - 17/05/1924. GARF, f. 4042, op. 4, d. 63, l. 118. Archival document.
- Rozanov, Mikhail. *Solovetskiĭ kontslager' v monastyre. 1922–1939: Fakty – Domysly – "Parashi": Obzor vospominaniĭ solovchan solovchanami*. SSHA: Izd. avtora, 1979. Print.
- Rubinshteĭn, Vladimir. *Vospominaniia*. Private archive of Tsetsiliia Mel'nikova. Typescript.
- Ruder, Cynthia. *Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1998. Print.
- Shalamov, Varlam. *Sobranie sochineniĭ*. 4 vols. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, Vagrius, 1998. Print.
- "Sidit Putin..." *Anekdoty iz Rosii*. Comp. Dima Verner. Web. 25 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.anekdot.ru/id/63482/>>.
- Siniavskiĭ, Andreĭ. *Goloz iz khora*. London: Stenvalli, 1973. Print.
- Smuts, Aaron. "Theories of Humor." The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Web. 25 Apr. 2013.
- Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *Arkipelag GULAG, 1918–1956: Opyt khudozhestvennogo issledovaniia*. 3 vols. Moscow: Sovetskiĭ pisatel', 1989. Print.
- . "Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha": *Est' vsiudu svet...* Ed. Semen Vilenskii. Moscow: Vozvrashchenie, 2001. 105–211. Print.
- . *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha*. Moscow: Azbuka, 2010. Print.
- . "V krughe pervom." *Sobranie sochineniĭ*. Vol. 2. Moscow: Vremia, 2007. Print.
- "Spit Vladimir Vladimirovich..." *Anekdotov.mnogo.ru*. Web. 25 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.anekdotov-mnogo.ru/politiks.html>>.
- Terent'eva, Tat'iana. "Moĭ otets Igor' Terent'ev." *Teatr GULAGa: Vospominaniia, ocherki*. Ed. Marlen Korollov. Moscow: Memorial, 1995. 52–59. Print.
- Tikhanova, Valentina, ed. *Tvorchestvo i byt GULAGa: Katalog muzeĭnogo sobraniia Obshchestva "Memorial"*. Moscow: Zven'ia, 1998. Print.
- Tiukhina, Svetlana. "Teper' vy v Solovkakh (lirika vremen SLONa)." *Solovetskoe more* 2 (2003): 181–86. Print.

- Toker, Leona. *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000. Print.
- Tsulukidze, Tamara. "Kukol'naia tragikomeidiia." *Teatr GULAGa: Vospominaniia, ocherki*. Ed. Marlen Korollov. Moscow: Memorial, 1995. 34–44. Print.
- Umniagin, Viacheslav, ed. *Vospominaniia solovetskikh uznikov*. Vol. 1. Solovki: Izd. Solovetskogo monastyria, 2013. Print.
- Visani, Federica. *La satira in Unione Sovietica (1970–1990)*. Torino: L'Harmattan Italia, 2004. Print.



# Complicity in the Illicit? Liube's Rock Band Bond with the Criminal *Zona*

Helena Goscilo

*Music expresses that which cannot be said and about which it  
is impossible to be silent.*

*Victor Hugo*

*Society prepares the crime; the criminal commits it.*

*Henry Thomas Buckle*

*Crime is a product of social excess.*

*Vladimir Lenin*

## Music behind Bars

Released in the relatively early phase of American rock'n'roll, Richard Thorpe's celluloid musical drama *Jailhouse Rock* (1957) was memorable for two reasons: its marriage of rock and prison life,<sup>1</sup> inscribed in the film's title, and its status as a vehicle for Elvis Presley (1935–77), cultural icon and unchallenged "King" to besotted fans whose adulation accounted for his international stardom and posthumous induction into four halls of fame.<sup>2</sup> One of the most influential figures in popular music of the twentieth century, Presley could do little wrong when crooning or performing songs to the rhythm of his controversial pelvic gyrations. Problems arose, however, when he had to act, which, unfortunately, was unavoidable in Thorpe's mawkish tale of an ex-con's successful attempt to break into show business – a cautionary parable of ambition, fame, egotism, and final redemption (Hollywood's for-

---

<sup>1</sup> What distinguished *Jailhouse Rock* from typical instances of the prison film genre in the late 1950s was its use of prison experience as the catalyst for a narrative that absorbed sundry features of the musical. On the Hollywood musical, see Feuer. My thanks to Andrei Rogatchevski for his extraordinary kindness in providing several sources that I could not access in the US.

<sup>2</sup> Such is Presley's celebrity status that today, almost forty years after his death, he "earns" millions. According to *Forbes*, in 2006–2007 his estate generated \$49 million (Goldman and Paine).

mulaic palliative of “all’s well that ends well”). As an actor Presley was embarrassingly hapless, his dramatic range seldom venturing beyond sneers and shrugs. Singing, which Elvis-as-Vince learns in prison, occupies comparatively little time on screen,<sup>3</sup> and while the film poster proclaimed, “Elvis Presley at his greatest!” and the era’s Elvis-mania ensured success at the box office, several critical assessments of his thespian abilities verged on the annihilating: “amateurish and bland” (*Down Beat*) and “dangerously near being repulsive” (*The Spectator*).

Approximately four decades later, post-Soviet Russia produced its quirky answer to *Jailhouse Rock*: Igor’ Matvienko and Dmitrii Zolotukhin’s “musical drama” *Zona Liube* (Liube Zone, 1994), drawing on the rock-pop group Liube’s album by the same title, completed a year earlier.<sup>4</sup> Notably, the film obviated Thorpe’s error of mixing rock’n’prison with a moralistic narrative by strictly confining the role of the pop-rock group,<sup>5</sup> which appears as itself, to entertaining contemporary Russian prisoners and their overseers. Moreover, the film eschews the overdetermined happy ending cemented into Hollywood traditions, chiefly because it restricts its frame of reference to the Russian penitentiary system and its inmates’ histories – hardly categories conducive to sanguine reassurance. Yet, its dissimilarities to *Jailhouse Rock* notwithstanding, like its American predecessor, *Zona Liube* was undertaken to capitalize on the band’s popularity, despite the euphemistic contention of its vocalist, Nikolaï Rastorguev (b. 1957), that the goal was “to leave the group’s mark on film” (“*nasledit' v kinematografe*”) (Titov 143).<sup>6</sup> If financial considerations catalyzed the project, however, on first glance the choice of a penitentiary as the film’s setting seems counterintuitive – for the interiors of Russian prisons are notoriously, depressingly grim, utterly devoid of the glamour that seems a prerequisite for popularity with post-Soviet audiences.

---

<sup>3</sup> Presley sings six of the film’s seven songs, while Mickey Shaughnessy, who plays the prison music teacher, contributes “One More Day,” a forgettable and soon forgotten number.

<sup>4</sup> The album comprises ten songs: “Sirota Kazanskaia” (Sympathy Seeker), “Na vole” (Free), “Luna” (The Moon), “Mladshaia sestrenka” (Little Sister), “Mama” (Mama), “Kon” (A Horse), “Doroga” (The Road), “Belyi lebed” (White Swan), “Babu by” (I Wanna Woman), and “Shpariu” (I Fuck Around). The film omits the last two and incorporates the first number on the band’s 1992 release *Liube*, titled “Naiarivaï” (Play On) and renamed “Davaï naiarivaï” (Come On, Play On) in the 1996 *Sobranie sochinenii* (Collected Works). According to one source, the release of the album *Zona Liube* was delayed by more than a year, so as to coincide with the film’s appearance in theaters, but the group’s website lists 1993 as the date for the album (“Lubeh”).

<sup>5</sup> As with practically all music that derives from early rock, defining the genre of Liube’s music is difficult, inasmuch it draws not only on pop, but also on folk traditions – a situation that explains why some commentators on Liube refer to the group’s style as folk-rock.

<sup>6</sup> Apparently, the film fared well at the box office, despite some crushing reviews, such as Anton Bublikov’s (“*chudovishchnyi polutorachasovoi klip*”; “monstrous hour-and-a-half-long clip”) and Elena Veselaia’s, which dismissed the film as naïve, with Rastorguev its sole redeeming factor (Veselaia). Indeed, as Aleksandr Kolbovskii comments, some journalists considered Rastorguev’s performance in *Zona Liube* the best film debut of the year (Kolbovskii).

## Romancing the *Zone*

While the prison drama has flourished in Hollywood since the 1930s, under Soviet rule the very notion of such a screen genre was inconceivable,<sup>7</sup> though isolated films portrayed criminality in a lighthearted, satirical, or slapstick vein, such as *Beregis' avtomobilia* (Watch Out for the Car, 1966), *Dzhentl'meny udachi* (Gentlemen of Fortune, 1971),<sup>8</sup> and *Kalina krasnaia* (Snowball Berry Red, 1973). This is not the case, however, in print, which boasts a rich, longstanding tradition in depicting a range of penalties for genuine or perceived transgression against the moral, social, or political order. As early as the twelfth century, the prisoner-author of the signally titled *Molenie Daniila zatochnika* (Supplication of Daniel the Prisoner)<sup>9</sup> beseeches his prince for protection and aid, not unlike the female Gulag prisoners who trustingly wrote letters to Stalin in the expectation of his benign intervention (Vilensky 22). Nineteenth-century literati and journalists dramatized and documented the imprisonment, exile, and execution of Russians for insurrections against the state, such as the eighteenth-century Pugachev rebellion and the Decembrist uprising of 1825.<sup>10</sup> Exiled to Siberia for his involvement with the utopian Petrashevsky Circle, Dostoevsky in his landmark *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* (*Notes from the House of the Dead*, 1861) pioneered the literary treatment of incarceration, which acquired special features during the Soviet period, when political imprisonment in the extended network of labor camps (popularly referred to as *zona* – the zone, i.e., penal colonies) effloresced, above all under Stalin. Numerous literati with first-hand experience of the zone – Varlam Shalamov, Evgeniia Ginzburg, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Andrei Siniavsky, and Irina Ratushinskaia – published revelatory eyewitness accounts from diverse perspectives and in various registers,<sup>11</sup> while the incorrigible Iuz Aleshkovsky – the author of, most recently, *Malen'kii tiuremnyi roman* (A Small Prison Novel, 2011) – recorded, among several ribald anti-Stalin songs, the famous “Okurochek” (Cigarette Butt) and “Sovetskaia lesbiiskaia” ([The] Soviet Lesbian [Song]) about mores and sexual

<sup>7</sup> Evgenii Chervikov's *Zakliuchennye* (Prisoners, 1936), in which Mark Bernes (1911–69) made his screen debut, was a one-off and certainly did not give birth to a cinematic prison genre in the Soviet Union.

<sup>8</sup> Scripted by Georgii Daneliia and Viktoriia Tokareva, and directed by Aleksandr Seryi, who had just been released from prison (!), the film was the top hit of 1972. In plot it echoes John Ford's *The Whole Town's Talking* (1935).

<sup>9</sup> Also called *Poslanie* or *Slovo*. On the dating and variants of the text, as well as speculation about Daniil's addressee, see Gudziĭ 164–74.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, Pushkin's *Istoriia Pugachevskogo bunta* (*The History of Pugachev*, 1834) and *Kapitanskaia dochka* (*The Captain's Daughter*, 1836), Lermontov's *Vadim* (1832–34), and various memoirs by Decembrist exiles and their wives (Sutherland), in addition to scholarly studies by John Alexander, Anatole Mazour, and many others.

<sup>11</sup> Though most found the camps tragically inhumane, Dostoevsky underwent a spiritual awakening there, and Siniavsky found internal freedom during his term. See his remarkable *Golos iz khora* (*A Voice from the Choir*, 1974). For a discussion of this work, see Sarah J. Young's chapter in this volume.

intimacies in the camps, with which he became personally acquainted in the 1950s.<sup>12</sup> Vladimir Vysotsky's first musical composition, "Tatuirovka" (Tattoo, 1961), launched a cycle of stylized criminal underworld songs that led not only credulous fans but also former prisoners to romanticize him as a survivor of the zone. Despite his repeated disclaimers, this identification persisted, contributing to his image of rebellious machismo. To a lesser extent, Aleksandr Galich's songs encouraged a kindred misprision, especially among the intelligentsia, for whom imprisonment by the authorities constituted a badge of honor, certifying courageous resistance to the regime's flagrant injustices. Certain kinds of crime under the Soviets, in other words, sooner signified heroic integrity than moral infraction.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union, which witnessed the indiscriminate elimination of Soviet taboos, ushered in what one might legitimately label "the decade of crime." Under Yeltsin, the government, institutions, organizations, the New Russians, and other individuals took extravagant, unmonitored advantage of the lawless transition to an announced market economy. After Putin's accession to the presidency, prison sentences and other punitive measures crushed the oligarchs and perpetrators of illegal financial acquisitions that interfered with Putin's statist agenda. But during the tumultuous 1990s, crime freely permeated all layers of society, simultaneously influencing cultural production. Dictionaries of prison argot<sup>13</sup> and studies of prisoners' tattoos<sup>14</sup> proliferated, as did anthologies of criminal songs (*blatnye pesni*) from earlier periods;<sup>15</sup> crime came to dominate best-selling pulp fiction (*detektivy*),<sup>16</sup> the most popular TV shows,<sup>17</sup> and award-winning films.<sup>18</sup> As one Russian commentator writing in 1996 summed up the situation,

Интерес русского народа к тюремной, блатной жизни замечен давно. Однако за последние пять-семь лет интерес этот приобрел все черты

---

<sup>12</sup> Yves Montand, impressed by "Okurochek," recorded a French version of it, entitled "Le Megot" (Bratersky).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Baldaev, *Slovar'*; Baldaev, Belko, and Isupov; Bykov; and Elistratov.

<sup>14</sup> Baldaev published a heavily illustrated *Tatuirovki zakliuchennykh* (Prisoners' Tattoos) and provided visuals and commentary for the three-volume *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia* issued by London Fuel Publishing between 2003 and 2009, as well as *Drawings from the Gulag*. Alix Lambert brought out the book *Russian Prison Tattoos: Codes of Authority, Domination, and Struggle* and a video documentary titled *Mark of Cain* (2010). Samples of Soviet criminal tattoos and analysis of them have appeared on numerous internet sites.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Uspenskiĭ and Filina, as well as Bronnikov and Maĭer.

<sup>16</sup> On the *detektiv* genre, see Olcott; Goscilo, "Big-Buck Books;" and Borenstein.

<sup>17</sup> To cite but a few of the best-known examples, *Ulitsy razbitykh fonareĭ* (Streets of Broken Lamps, 1998), *Bandistkiĭ Peterburg* (Bandit Petersburg, 2000), *Brigada* (The Crew, 2002), and adaptations of *detektivy* by Alexandra Marinina and others.

<sup>18</sup> The plethora of such offerings include *Ubiĭtsa* (Killer, 1990), *Brat* (Brother, 1997) and its sequel (2000), *Mama ne goriui* (Mama Don't Grieve, 1998), *Strana glukhikh* (Land of the Deaf, 1998), *Voroshilovskii strelok* (The Voroshilov Sharpshooter, 1999), and *Oligarkh* (Tycoon, 2000).

социального заказа. Поначалу мы знакомимся с жизнью зоны благодаря самым интеллигентным выходцам из мест не столь отдаленных – политическим заключенным. Сегодня, когда наиболее влиятельная часть общества живет по воровскому закону, не до интеллигентности. ЦТ, совершенно не стесняясь, крутит клип «Братва, не стреляйте друг в друга, вам нечего в жизни делить...» главный сюжетный ход которого – похороны бандита. Киногерои «ботаю по фене». Пресса предлагает последние известия из бандитской жизни. Тележурналисты отправляются в зону за откровениями блатных о смысле бытия. Временами создается ощущение, что самая главная, самая значительная для российского самосознания и самоощущения группа населения находится именно в зоне, а на свободе – встречающие и провожающие (Titov 143).<sup>19</sup>

Thus, in the 1990s, Russia was in thrall to criminality – a fascination that even extended to male fashion, as evidenced by the Mafioso styles and flamboyant Versace designs featured in glossy magazines. Against this background, a film mating a soft-rock band with prison could be viewed as a rational (or at least pragmatic) investment of time, energy, and funds, congruent with early post-Soviet society's Zeitgeist.

### Liube's Flirtation with Crime as *Imidzh*

From the initial phase of its career, Liube's public image was steeped in stylized criminality conveyed through its song lyrics, lexical choices, and cultivation of a collective macho persona. Indeed, the name Liube provides a transparent clue to the cultural provenance the band embraced for public consumption. Prior to its formation, Rastorguev – the band's chief vocalist and sole permanent member – resided in Liubertsy, a Moscow suburb notorious for its tough, lower-class, quasi-criminal element. Viewed by some as hoodlums evading the police, by others as troglodytes functioning in the

---

<sup>19</sup> "Russians' interest in prison and criminal life was noted long ago. But in the last five to seven years this interest has acquired all the features of a social imperative. We first became acquainted with life in the zone when intellectuals who had been political prisoners were released from not so remote locations. Today, when the most influential segment of society lives according to criminal laws, the experience of intellectuals is irrelevant. TsT [Central TV] has no qualms whatsoever about showing the clip "Bros, Don't Shoot Each Other, There's Nothing in Life for You to Divide," the narrative of which centers on a bandit's funeral. Film heroes 'talk criminal jargon.' The press reports the latest news about criminal life. TV journalists set off for the zone to hear criminals' revelations about the meaning of existence. At times one has the sense that the primary, most significant group of the population with regard to Russians' self-awareness and self-image is located precisely in the zone, whereas free people are those who meet and see prisoners off." As Judith Pallot explains in a recent volume, the phrase "not so remote locations" originated "in the 1922 Siberian Committee that defined places of exile" as "remote locations" and those "not so remote." Examples of the latter include Perm, Olonets, and Orenburg, as well as referenced Gulag camps (Pallot and Piacentini 137, fn. 6).

capacity of unofficial police (Iakovlev 21), Liubera were young working-class males engaged in outwardly projected masculinism, chiefly in the form of brawling and body-building. These neo-proletarian, macho paladins pumped iron in clandestine, exclusionary dens (*kachalki*) to inflate muscles for their stated mission of clearing Moscow's streets of "punks, hippies, and the like" (Pilkington 177–78). The Liube quintet<sup>20</sup> (which, predictably, recorded a song titled "Liubertsy," 1989) reinforced its perceived overlap with this brand of populist, anti-Western machismo by a sartorial style that favored the retro working attire of the 1980s, especially 'wife-beaters'<sup>21</sup> and the checkered pants celebrated in its ironic song "Kletki" (Checks), alternating with military uniforms and accoutrements.

The group's name, which reportedly was Rastorguev's idea ("Muzhskie"), capitalized on all these volatile class, regional, and behavioral associations, as well as on the demotic promise of the *surzhyk* meaning of *liube*, i.e., "any," "every."<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, in the Russian context, slang, vulgarisms, and substandard forms in the band's lyrics, such as "харя" (mug), "разухабилась" (let itself go), "хреново" (shitty), "бля" (whore; short for блядь), "ё[б]" (fuck), "в одном и тем полке" (in one and da same regiment); the Ukrainianisms peppering Liube's lexicon and its quintessentially southern predilection for colloquial diminutives ("магазинчик," "вечерок," "картошечка," "немножечко," "бятня," "погодка")<sup>23</sup> all intensify the working-class aura espoused by the band and ally it with a hooliganism and violence strongly, if vaguely, redolent of criminality. Their songs communicate the kind of aggressive, voluble, expletive-ridden braggadocio, reeking of testosterone and sweat, projected by shifty male "dealers" at Moscow's Kievsky Train Station during the 1990s – at the time a major venue for

<sup>20</sup> The composition of the group has changed over time, the number of members also varying from five to six. Initially the band consisted of Nikolaï Rastorguev (vocals), Aleksandr Nikolaev (bass guitar), Viacheslav Tereshonok (guitar), Rinat Bakhteev (percussion), and Aleksandr Davydov (keyboard). By 1998, the only member of the five who remained was Rastorguev, with Pavel Usanov (bass guitar), as well as Sergeï Pereguda (guitar), Aleksandr Erokhin (percussion), and Vitalii Loktev (keyboard). The current band members are, apart from Rastorguev, Alekseï Tarasov (backing vocals), Sergeï Pereguda (guitar), Pavel Usanov (bass), Vitalii Loktev (keyboard, bayan), and Aleksandr Erokhin (percussion). Igor Matvienko is the musical composer as well as manager, and Aleksandr Shaganov and Mikhail Andreev supply most of the texts (see "Muzhskie", "Lubeh").

<sup>21</sup> Slang for tank-style t-shirts that resemble underwear, the term 'wife-beater' originated on account of the garment's association with males who, drunk and unemployed, sit around the house and are prone to be physically abusive.

<sup>22</sup> *Surzhyk* refers to the patois spoken by approximately twelve percent of the Ukrainian population, primarily in the countryside. A mélange of Ukrainian and Russian, it violates rules of both languages and is frequently deployed for humorous effect by the cross-dressing pop star Verka Serdiuchka. Thanks to Vitaly Chernetsky for part of this information.

<sup>23</sup> These are diminutive forms, which can express intimacy, tenderness, or simply casual informality, of the words "shop," "evening," "potatoes," "a little," "battery commander," and "weather."

black-market trade and shady negotiations between Ukrainians and Russians.<sup>24</sup>

Born on 14 January 1989 as the Pallas Athena-like brainchild of composer and musical entrepreneur Matvienko, with recordings of the songs “Liubertsy” and “Bat’ka Makhno” (Chief Makhno) (“Muzhskie”), Liube scored a “palpable hit” two years later with its single “Atas!”<sup>25</sup> Then as now, Liube’s albums consistently focused on Russian styles, themes, situations, and types, targeting a Russian listenership, and eschewing not only connections with Western music, but also the universalizing tendencies of Russian rock.<sup>26</sup> While Nautilus Pompilius sings “Ален Делон говорит по-французски” (Alain Delon Speaks French), Liube repeatedly invokes “*rodina*” (native country), “*rabochii klass*” (working class), and “*Rossia rodnaia/matushka*” (native Russia/Mother Russia). Russian realia in Liube’s transparently stylized works include the names of streets, regions, metro stations, political leaders, historical personages and events, cultural figures, TV shows, folk elements, and national rituals. “Staryi barin” (The Old Nobleman) opens a small window onto the seasonal conventions of an old Russian gentry estate; “Ulochki moskovskie” (Moscow’s Small Streets) provides Homeric catalogues of the capital’s by-streets. Elsewhere revisionary intertextuality draws on Russian high, middle, and low culture: “Tulupchik zaiachii” (Hareskin Coat) transposes Grinev’s gift of a hareskin coat to the eighteenth-century rebel Pugachev in Pushkin’s 1836 novel, *Kapitanskaia dochka*, to a modern setting, with suffering Mother Russia in need of a populist savior; “Orliata uchatsia letat” (Eaglets Are Learning to Fly) borrows from the folksong “Korobeiniki” (Peddlers) and Tchaikovsky’s 1st Piano

---

<sup>24</sup> Liube’s toughness later modulated to the sentimental militarism of songs commemorating wartime heroism and expressing strong nationalism. It is therefore unsurprising that Liube is reputedly Vladimir Putin’s favorite band. In 2007 Rastorguev received from Putin the state order “For Merit to the Fatherland,” fourth class, and in 2010 became a member of the Russian Duma, allied with the United Russia faction. In 2009 and 2011 the group performed at the Kremlin Palace (see “Medvedev pozdravil”; “Nikolay Rastorguev”).

<sup>25</sup> *Atas* (Watch Out!) is the name of the group’s first album, which contains the song of the same title. The Russian site with the most complete information about Liube and its recordings is <http://www.matvey.ru/lube/> (accessed 17 Dec. 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Yet Liube has a sufficient command of English to sing one of its songs, “No More Barricades,” almost entirely in that language without the heavy Russian accent that usually erects a barrier between Anglophone listeners and Russians speaking or singing in English. Moreover, Rastorguev skillfully captures the American pop vocal idiom in the musical phrasing of “and that is what I feel inside” in the song – a number that could give pause to those accusing him of nationalist imperialism during the 1990s. Rastorguev’s solo album of Beatles’ songs that recreates the Beatles’ sound in uncannily accurate form showcases his versatility, talent for ventriloquism, and (most likely, Matvienko’s) market-smarts. This was before the group grew increasingly nationalistic, repeatedly commemorating Soviet/Russian military triumphs and losses, as well as singing sentimental paeans to Russia, releasing the transparently labeled album *Liube Rasseia* in 2005. Matvienko’s astuteness in marketing the group both financially and politically may be deduced from its recording of the national anthem as part of this album.

Concerto, to naturalize aviation through the metaphors of Stalin’s “falcons” and “eagles,” which conjure up Soviet aces before and during World War II. “Sluzhili dva tovarishcha” (Two Comrades in Military Service) sets war folk poetry to a duet with a rock beat, relying for its effect on listeners’ familiarity with the “mature” actor/director/poet Rolan Bykov (1929–98), Rastorguev’s vocal partner in the number, who had starred in the 1968 film with the same title; the duet “Pobesediū so mnoi” (Chat with Me) similarly enlists the diminished vocal talent of the ultra-Soviet folk songstress Liudmila Zykina (1929–2009), the interplay between her quavering voice and Rastorguev’s powerful but here discreetly toned-down tenor unwittingly highlighting the motif of generations, the old and the new. Temporality, in fact, is one of Liube’s dominant themes, and it surfaces as nostalgia in a historical, personal-elegiac, or philosophical register – a nostalgia crucial to the pathos of loss that envelops the film *Zona Liube*.<sup>27</sup> Whatever the eclecticism, diversity, and multiple-group appeal of Liube’s repertory in the 1990s, the lynchpin of its lyrics was and remains Russia.<sup>28</sup>

In the early 1990s, the criminal element in Liube’s lyrics was manifest in such songs as *Sha!* and *Atas!* – criminal jargon for “Shh!” and “Watch out!” respectively.<sup>29</sup> The latter, about the “*gorbatyi glavar*” (hunchbacked honcho) punningly evokes not only Gorbachev’s beleaguered, product-scarce reforms, but also Stanislav Govorukhin’s popular TV miniseries *Mesto vstrechi izmenit’ nel’zia* (The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed),<sup>30</sup> starring Vladimir Vysotsky and Vladimir Konkin as Gleb Zheglov and Volodia Sharapov, the MVD officers pursuing the criminal Black Cat gang headed by the bandit nicknamed Hunchback (*Gorbatyi*). In a similar vein, the satirical “Shpariu,” the title of which is a prison vernacular and vulgar colloquialism for “screwing” someone either sexually or financially – sketches a young punk’s reported adventures in a tawdry, vodka-swilling Moscow (presumably under Yeltsin) and picks up on the widespread joke that future historians will remember Brezhnev (or Andropov) as a minor politician during the era of the pop singer Alla Pugacheva by irreverently pairing the singer’s name with Gorbachev’s (“Видел Аллу Пугачеву, Горбачева не встречал”; I saw

<sup>27</sup> Temporality is captured above all in the retrospective lines from “Noch” (Night): “Byl dushoi ia mlad, a teper’ starik” (I used to be young at heart, but I’m old now) and the exhortatory “Ne zabud’, paren’, tvoe proshloe” (Don’t forget your past, young man) from “Tramvai piaterochka” (Tram No. 5). See also “Staryi barin,” “Bat’ka Makhno,” and “Sha” (Cut It Out).

<sup>28</sup> That fact doubtless explains why Liube reportedly is Putin’s favorite musical group. If, as Roland Barthes posited in *S/Z*, a consumerist culture militates against re-reading (and, indeed, pulp fiction rarely stimulates re-readings), consumerism, paradoxically, does not have that effect on re-listening (or re-watching).

<sup>29</sup> Dvlatov’s *Zone* brims with such jargon, e.g., *The Zone*, 159.

<sup>30</sup> The five-part film was based on the Vañer brothers’ novel *Era miloserdiia* (Time to Be Merciful, 1979). At a 1998 concert celebrating Vysotsky, Liube contributed two of Vysotsky’s hits, “Na bratskikh mogilakh” (On Common Graves) and “Pesnia o zvezdakh” (A Song about the Stars).

Alla Pugacheva, didn't meet Gorbachev). Viewers familiar with the Soviet penal system are likely to interpret the film's opening number, "Belyi lebed'," which poetically evokes a white swan, as simultaneously alluding to one of Russia's most notorious high security prisons in Solikamsk, Perm, which holds the toughest and most violent recidivist criminals and is unofficially called "Belyi lebed'." In short, crime and Liube seemed a convincing and lucrative union from the start, and the group's towering success testified to Matvienko's smart judgment about the market in pop music.

## Cellmates versus Soulmates: On Site Insights

The culmination of the band's creative flirtation with criminality, the film *Zona Liube* adopts the aesthetic of a musical clip rather than elaborating a continuous, cohesive cinematic narrative. In fact, according to one source, the film originated in a clip (Petrov), though another commentator recalls that the project grew out of Liube's series of "charity performances" in various prisons and the documentary and clips of their experiences there ("Muzhskie"). The slight film plot of *Zona Liube* follows a TV crew, headed by the young psychologist Lena (Marina Levtova), as it visits various prisons to interview convicts and wardens for a documentary about their dreams, *Sny na zone* (Dreams in the Zone). By a managed coincidence addressed and dismissed early in the film (the band unexpectedly arrives a day earlier than scheduled), Liube happens to be giving concerts at the same location. Sequences of Lena's spectacularly unsuccessful attempts to elicit responses from her interviewees regularly alternate with brief shots of the band playing for large prison audiences, the editing leaving no doubt that Liube's significance lies in the music, not its members' physical presence. An unambiguous indicator of Liube's, and not Lena's, primacy in the entire enterprise is the group's authoritative framing function: the song "Belyi lebed'" on the soundtrack, preceding the appearance of the film's title on screen, and the song "Doroga," heard (also off screen) at the film's conclusion as the final credits roll, ensure that Liube has the first and last word(s). Furthermore, whereas Lena's questions merely evoke obdurate silence, ridicule, or worse, the film attributes, via a device common in music videos, extraordinary powers to the group: namely, its songs are illustrated by clips of the inmates' lives outside of prison, as though Liube's music could penetrate the criminal psyche. Through this form of artistic projection, Liube's songs empathetically envision narratives of the male prisoners' lives prior to or potentially after incarceration. In a sense, the band Liube dreams and speaks for them, presumably ventriloquizing emotions they cannot articulate. The constant intercuts between the segments with Lena and those with Liube underscore a contrast between the psychologist's cold incomprehension and the music's

intuitive insight, making a huge claim on behalf of artistic creativity versus a pseudo-science.

The film casts the Lena/Liube dyad in terms earlier used to brilliant effect in Stanisław Lem's *Solaris* (1961): the literalization of the spatial metaphor central to Freudian psychological categories, which maps consciousness or rationality, as the upper level of a troped hierarchy (where Lena "logically" interviews the prisoners, her supposed intellectualism symbolized by her glasses), while the lower level signifies the repressed or unconscious (where the casually garbed Liube taps into the convicts' inner world through its musical capacity for affect).<sup>31</sup> Discursive logic and established disciplines receive short shrift here: Lena, together with Igor, one of the hospitable prison officials, walks along a suspended bridge, gazing down on the convicts below, but cannot establish a meaningful connection with them. Yet, with no words spoken, Liube confronts and magically interacts with them on their own level, both literally and figuratively.

The ineptness of Lena – conventional, fashionably dressed, and clearly out of her element – strikes everybody in the film, from her son and cameraman Vladik to Igor, who advises her to listen better to the prisoners and pose different questions. Igor's counsel helps to consolidate the film's perspective on prison personnel, whom it analogizes with the convicts, presumably on the basis of shared everyday experience and mutual understanding. This equation coincides with Sergeĭ Dovlatov's observation in his 1982 publication *Zona: Zapiski nadziratel'ia* (*The Zone: A Prison Camp Guard's Story*; the Russian word *nad-ziratel'* nicely conveys the concept of *over-sight* materialized in Lena's unproductively elevated angle of vision in *Zona Liube*):

Я обнаружил поразительное сходство между лагерем и волей. Между заключенными и надзирателями. [...] Мы говорили на одном приблизительном языке. Распевали одинаковые sentimentальные песни. Претерпевали одни и те же лишения. [...] Мы были очень похожи и даже – взаимозаменяемы. Почти любой заключенный годился на роль охранника. Почти любой надзиратель заслуживал тюрьмы. (Dovlatov, *Sobranie* 63)<sup>32</sup>

Tellingly, during his aborted interview with Lena, the uniformed guard Andreĭ Egorov, isolated, morose, and claiming a failure of memory, emanates

---

<sup>31</sup> In Lem's *Solaris*, the space station in which the scientists conduct futile experiments is suspended above the ocean, which "reads" and projects in visible form the suppressed human fears, desires, etc., of those intent on solving the mystery of the ocean.

<sup>32</sup> "I detected a striking similarity between the camp and the outside, between the prisoners and the guards [...]. We sang the same sentimental songs, endured exactly the same privations. [...] We were very similar to each other, and even interchangeable. Almost any prisoner would have been suited to the role of a guard. Almost any guard deserved a prison term" (Dovlatov, *The Zone* 48–49).

despair through his body language to the sounds of Liube's "Sirota kazan-skaia," the lyrics consonant with his demeanor: "Нету у меня никого, кроме Родины-матушки [...] Дед погиб в гражданскую – повезло!" (I don't have anyone besides my motherland [...] Grandfather died in the Civil War – lucky him!). In fact, during the song, the film juxtaposes Egorov's immured desolation with the homosocial bonding of the listening prisoners, whose interlocking arms form an extended human chain, proleptically illustrating the assertion of a prisoner-interviewee, "Мы не острова, мы океан" ("We're not islands, we're an ocean"). Presumably unlike their custodians, convicts can derive some comfort in the solidarity of their fraternal community, a brotherhood here stimulated by and reflected in Liube's music.

A parallel sense of bleakness and solitude emerges in the clip accompanying the song "Luna," paired with images of tanks and a harsh, depopulated landscape as the setting for a disillusioned escort guard wracked by loneliness and a sense of futility. Recalling Vysotsky's famous "Okhota na volkov" (Wolf Hunt), the matrix metaphor of the lyrics casts the guard as a seasoned "lone wolf" baying at the nocturnal moon: "Да, стая, я старик, / Я словно стертый клык [...] Я раны залижу, / Я с прошлым завяжу, / Капканы вижу, и с тропы сверну, / Не потому, что слаб / А потому что кровь не греет старых лап. / Ночами долго-долго вою на луну."<sup>33</sup> The final lines reprise the contrast of youth and psychological age while intimating a spiritual death: "Но молодой вожак / Поставил точку так / Уже задумал, как меня убрать" ("But the young leader / Ended it like this / Already figured out how to get rid of me"). Intradiegetic in their function, both songs voice the disconsolate mental states of the zone's wardens, whose broken lives, empathetically presented from their perspective, ultimately differ little from those of the time-servers whom they supervise.

For the duration of the remaining songs, the film visualizes individual convicts' experiences, which enact the scenarios of the pertinent lyrics. These separate clips are framed by the opening, where the camera tracks the interior of a prison – its locked doors, dark corners, and a cat wandering along deserted corridors – to the sound of Liube's performance of "Belyi lebed"; and the conclusion, in which Lena suddenly walks away from the camera and the prison, to the sound of Rastorguev's offscreen iterations of "na vole" ("free") followed by "Doroga" – both emphasizing by contrast the prisoners' lack of freedom to take any road. "Belyi lebed" not only names the security prison in Solikamsk, but also invokes a traditional symbol of freedom through avian flight ("Белый лебедь, ты – на небе, ну, а я – на земле"; "White swan, you're up in the sky, but, hey, I'm on earth") and recalls the youthful killing of a swan, thereby linking murder with incarceration.

<sup>33</sup> "Yes, my pack, I'm old, / I'm like a worn-down fang / [...] I'll lick my wounds, / I'll call it quits with the past, / If I see traps I'll avoid them, / Not because I'm weak / But because blood doesn't warm my paws, / At night I howl a long, long time at the moon."

tion (“Мой лебеденок, ты меня прости / За то, что я тебя не отпустил. / И все же точно, что молва идет: / Кто нежно гладит, тот того убьет”).<sup>34</sup> Introducing the motifs of remorse and forgiveness that recrudescence throughout the film, the lyrics of this and other songs, as well as the concomitant visuals, underscore the grimness of incarceration, which deprives inmates of liberty and the simple human pleasures of the outside world. The latter are conjured up in elegiac tones of loss (“Я так давно не ходил по земле босиком...”, “Na vole”) and occasionally projected into an envisioned future of liberty (“Я скоро приеду домой...”; “I’ll soon come home...”, “Doroga”). This melancholy mood of dispossession, implicitly universalized across the entire prison collective, bookends specific, individualized histories.

Apart from sharing a sense of devastation and forfeited opportunities, these histories are asymmetrical and handled somewhat haphazardly – a weakness that accounts for at least one critic’s reservations about director Zolotukhin’s control of his material, which he deems incommensurate with Liube’s self-assured musical performance.<sup>35</sup> Thus we have the old, poeticizing prisoner who claims (dishonestly, it turns out) to have worked with horses – his irretrievably lost ideal and the subject of his verses. The song “Kon” musicalizes his dream of riding through beloved Russia’s expanses (“Выйду ночью в поле с конем / [...] Мы пойдем с конем по полю вдвоем / [...] Сяду я верхом на коня, / Ты неси по полю меня”),<sup>36</sup> while a rapidly shifting gallery of attendant images feature horses in diverse contexts: in abstracted close-up, in a stable, in the countryside, during training in a barn, amidst a flower-filled field, etc. Bracketed with the trapped prisoner through a matching shot of their eyes, the horse in expansive spaces symbolizes liberty – a major trope during Romanticism, in Russia traceable at least as far back as Lermontov’s 1832 “prison” poem, “Otvorite mne temnitsu...” (“Open my prison...”; revised as “Uzник” [The Prisoner] in 1837) and here applied to all those confined under lock and key.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> “My dear little swan, forgive me / For not letting you go. / What they say is really true: / The one who tenderly strokes is the one who’ll kill you.”

<sup>35</sup> “Профессиональная уверенность музыкантов-исполнителей и неуверенность режиссера” (“The professional confidence of the performing musicians and the director’s lack of it,” Titov 143). Zolotukhin (b. 1958), of course, is known primarily as an actor, especially for his celluloid incarnation of Peter the Great.

<sup>36</sup> “At night I’ll go out into the field with my horse / [...] The two of us will go across the field together / [...] I’ll mount the horse, / Carry me across the field.”

<sup>37</sup> See Lermontov’s “Uzник”: “Добрый конь в зеленом поле / Без узды, один, по воле / Скачет, весел и игрив” (“A fine horse, alone, unbridled and free in the green field, jumps, merry and playful”). The lyrics of “Kon” also evoke Lermontov’s poem “Vykhozhu odin ia na dorogu” (“I step out into the road alone,” 1841), with the relevant line “Я ищу свободы и покоя” (“I am looking for peace and freedom”). Elements shared by the two works include solitude, night, stars, the vastness of the surroundings, and a mood of pensiveness. Liube, however, replaces the hopelessness and yearning for death in Lermontov’s tragic

Two individual episodes focus on convicts' remorse about their treatment of the women in their lives – women who, in conformity with Russian cultural conventions, play ancillary roles in the male protagonists' stories. “Na vole” segues to a convict's past as a husband and father, placing him visually in the domestic environment of the family kitchen as, to the obtrusively loud ticking of a clock, he deposits on the table a thick wad of money, presumably acquired illegally. While his wife gazes reproachfully at him, and their small daughter whispers in her ear, the police arrive and arrest him. The emotional impact of this episode is heightened by the subsequent extended sequence, which depicts the wife at work in a factory. A scene, shot in overexposed format, shows her happily interacting in a sunlit outdoors with female coworkers and friends – an enjoyment of which imprisonment unavoidably deprives her spouse. Thus, the male criminal rather than the tolerant wife is the object of solicited compassion.

A parallel sequence, the gloomier “Мама,” features not a spouse, but the ever stoic, forgiving Russian mother (“Ты поймешь, ты простишь”; “You'll understand, you'll forgive”), whose young convict-son mentally returns to her isolated, poor dwelling before and after her death. Wracked by guilt, imploring her absolution, he recollects her tender affection as she nursed him and stroked his hair – affection now irrevocably lost to him:

Мама, мама, не плачь,  
 Не рыдай – погоди,  
 Ты прости меня, мама, прости...

Я вернулся – отпел,  
 Слава богу, успел.  
 Слава богу, успел, –  
 Докричал, дохрипел.

[...]  
 Мне до смертных минут  
 На коленях стоять,  
 Как вы жили-то тут?!  
 Дай тебя мне обнять.<sup>38</sup>

That this situation is a topos of the prison genre may be deduced from the kindred filial sentiments and tone of mournful contrition suffusing one of the two poems titled “Мама” in an anthology of prison verse published in 2001:

---

vision with optimism and an avowal of love for Russia (“Я влюблен в тебя, Россия, влюблен”; “I'm in love with you, Russia, in love”).

<sup>38</sup> “Мама, Мама, don't cry, / Don't sob – wait, / Forgive me, Mama, forgive... I came back and said the needed prayers, / Thank God I made it. / Thank God I made it, – / Shouted myself hoarse. / [...] Until my dying day / I should kneel. / How did you live here?! / Let me embrace you.”

“Я ведь знаю, сколько ты страдала, / Сколько не доспала ты ночей, / Только ты прости меня, родная, / Ради черной участи моей”<sup>39</sup> (Bronnikov and Maier 127). Maternal solicitude resurfaces in *Zona Liube* to the accompaniment of “Na vole” as tanks roll while women standing in groups seek their sons, presumably returning from jail or, more likely, war. Throughout the film, imprisonment and war seem to merge, and understandably so, since guards in the zone, such as Dovlatov, were (and remain) not unlike the armed forces. In fact, the military jacket worn by Rastorguev (the brainwave of his friend, Alla Pugacheva) visually allies him with the prison custodians.

Consistently, even insistently, *Zona Liube* portrays male prisoners in a sympathetic and romantic light: their crimes remain unspecified; they yearn for their loved ones; no violence punctuates their “dreams”; we never see them brandish guns, knives, razors, or any other kind of weapon; and the songs associated with their fates focus either on their deprivations, suffering, and poignant reminiscences of their former lives or on fantasies about a better future that will restore them to humanity. No images or lyrics reference murder, rape, or armed robbery – an absence that softens their profiles, while simultaneously abetting the film’s erasure of demarcations between the convicts and those with official, if ineffectual, jurisdiction over them. Ultimately, the film makes choices that mitigate the likelihood of viewers’ alienation from the criminal world. Indeed, the band’s presence and seeming empathy, not to mention its beguiling music, cast a rather attractive patina on prisoners, who are profoundly humanized through the visuals and the song lyrics. Subordinating the reality of their lives to Liube’s creativity in performance, the film embraces a “soft-center” zone that none of its historical inmates would recognize.

## Gender Separatism

Though the film firmly concentrates on the zone’s male population, women figure not only in the secondary roles of appendages,<sup>40</sup> but also as institutional inmates. An unusual and rather enigmatic clip accompanied by the muted song “Mladshaia sestrenka” flashes back to a young gypsy girl who lived with her aged grandfather. Pursued by a group of gypsies, she races along railroad tracks into the arms of a man noticeably older than she. The song’s lyrics and the film’s credits imply that he is her brother, but he could as easily be her lover. Presumably led astray through naïvely misguided no-

---

<sup>39</sup> “I know how much you suffered / How you didn’t get enough sleep at night, / Do forgive me, dearest, / For the sake of my unhappy lot.”

<sup>40</sup> For women’s “prepositional” role in the grammar of Russian and Soviet culture, see chapter 2 in Gosciolo, *Dehexing Sex*, especially 57–59.

tions of love, she lands in an all-female orphanage/juvenile correctional facility that Lena visits (“Ты все еще веришь в любовь / Фильмами добрыми бредишь / И все еще веришь в любовь / Верись... / Из дома уходишь тайком / Так же без спроса взрослеешь / И все еще веришь в любовь / Верись...”).<sup>41</sup> Rapid intercuts show the girl speaking in Roma before an abrupt switch to Lena’s conversations in Russian with the institution’s devoted female personnel: the unpaid supervisor of the facility and the enthusiastic cook with a passion for feeding others. Though short, this segment offers a much sunnier view of internment than glimpsed in the male zone. Moreover, adult female prison inmates interviewed by Lena respond with humor and playful sexual innuendo, in stark contrast to the men’s sullen unresponsiveness. Indeed, the only female warden interviewed by Lena’s son and cameraman Vladik directly and unabashedly proclaims her sexual desire (“Zhivogo! Zhivogo khochu!”, “A live man! I want a live one!”). This gender-marked representation might encourage one to conclude that Russian women’s fabled strength and capacity to withstand hardships, as well as centuries of exclusive responsibility for domestic work, have translated into a genetic code facilitating women’s adjustment to forcible confinement.

According to a recent sociological study of imprisoned Russian women, however, this discrepancy between women’s and men’s experiences of imprisonment as depicted in the film has scant empirical foundation, as men and women endure similar hardships in forced confinement. Edited by Elena Omel’chenko, whose interviews with 35 female inmates constitute a sizable portion of the study, *Do i posle tiur'my* (Before and After Prison, 2012) implies minimal divergence between the conditions, behavior, and psychological mood of male and female prisoners. The latter, who account for slightly over eight percent of the prison population,<sup>42</sup> complain about the complete lack of privacy and hygiene, additionally citing constant surveillance and subjection to sadistic humiliation as a part of everyday experience. According to some inmates, relations among women prisoners vary, though others indicate that gender solidarity is in short supply. An interviewee named Iuliia observes, “Женщины, они же очень недружные, очень злые, женщины очень жестокие [...]. Женщины, они очень такие противные, они

---

<sup>41</sup> “You still believe in love / You’re crazy about romantic films / And still believe in love / Believe... / You leave the house in secret / Just like you’re growing up without permission / And you still believe in love / Believe...”

<sup>42</sup> According to one scholar, in 2010, 69,100 women were incarcerated in Russia’s prisons, 47 of which are intended for women (Sabirova 71). The Moscow Center for Prison Reform finds that women commit the same crimes as men: stealing, defrauding, drugs, and murder, though the female crime rate has increased steadily owing to unemployment – 53 percent in 1996, when 7 percent of women prisoners were ranked as “especially dangerous recidivists” (“The crime rate”).

жестокие, могут издеваться, драться, бить” (224).<sup>43</sup> Like their male counterparts, the women cite “lawlessness, despair, devastation, [and] hopelessness” as their dominant states.<sup>44</sup> If anything, female inmates’ unhappy lot is exacerbated by gender-specific difficulties: the penal system strives to desexualize them and, furthermore, “a sentenced woman is typically rejected by her husband or partner, her friends, her colleagues and social circle. By contrast, women reportedly abandon men over imprisonment rather less often. On the contrary, women often give support to their partners who are put behind bars” (Stolyarova). Several of Omel’chenko’s interviewees cite how women line up to visit incarcerated males, whereas female inmates are deprived of that morale booster. Collaborative research by the British geographer Judith Pallot supports this perception of asymmetry:

The statistics on visitation show that both adult and juvenile women receive fewer visits than men. [...] It is obvious that visitation is not part of the routine for women prisoners in Russia. [...] the majority of visits women receive are from their parents (63.1 per cent), mainly mothers; followed by other relatives [...] and friends (25.6 per cent); and, finally, husbands and partners (12.3 per cent). [...] The most common reasons for relationship breakdown we were given [by female inmates] was the unwillingness of partners to wait. (Pallot and Piacentini 167–68, 174)

Assuming the accuracy of the interviewed women prisoners’ reports, it appears that female problems in the zone outnumber those of their male counterparts, particularly regarding the psychological support of ‘loved and loving ones’ on the outside.

While positing gender distinctions, *Zona Liube* portrays same-sex bonding of both men and women within the empirical circumstances of gender segregation. Males hug, link arms, ruffle their fellow inmates’ hair, and act protective of their partners; the less inhibited women openly caress other inmates. Sidestepping the explicitness rampant in *chernukha* films,<sup>45</sup> these gestures circumspectly but indisputably metonymize the homosexual and lesbian activities documented in Omel’chenko’s and Pallot’s recent studies, memoirs from the zone, and Aleshkovskii’s irreverent “Sovetskaia lesbiiskaia” – an underground classic that for decades circulated as an anonymous part of urban myth. Though Danzig Baldaev’s various collections of prison tattoos largely bypass homosexuality while copiously attesting to the lesbi-

---

<sup>43</sup> “The women – they’re very hostile, very mean, they’re very cruel, these women [...]. The women – they’re really revolting, they’re cruel, they’ll ridicule you, start fighting, beat you up.”

<sup>44</sup> On the penal system’s brutal indifference to physical hygiene in women’s prisons, see Goncharova.

<sup>45</sup> *Chernukha*, from the word for black [chernyi], refers to verbal and visual texts that emphasize the seedy, negative, violent aspects of life in a naturalistic mode – a style popular in the early 1990s.

anism of female prisoners,<sup>46</sup> Dovlatov, with his characteristic down-to-earth directness, casually refers to “mass orgies of lesbians on the roof of a barracks” and openly speaks of attending “the wedding of two camp homosexuals” (*The Zone* 163). Intriguingly, the sequence accompanying the film’s most a/rousing song, “Davaĭ naiarivaĭ” – in criminal jargon (and beyond), meaning do something with great pleasure (Baldaev, *Slovar’* 1: 275) – attributes an appreciably more robust sexuality (and eagerness to express it) to women than to men. As the semantically loaded lyrics and the lively musical rhythm urge surrender to pleasure, the visual portrayal of that surrender once again emphasizes gender difference. The sequence exemplifies the zone-specific phenomenon of *seans*, mentioned without a gloss in Dovlatov’s *Zona* (*The Zone* 160) and explicated diplomatically in Andreĭ Titov’s insightful film review by that very title as “*chustvennoe perezhivanie*” (“sensual experience,” Titov 144). Dictionaries of criminal argot define *seans* as a “high” attained through drug injection or through surreptitiously observing women, gazing at pornographic images, or viewing erotic films (Baldaev, *Slovar’* 2: 33) – in short, an onanistic moment. Personalized by the song’s apostrophe to Nikolaĭ [Rastorguev], the lyrics, typically for Liube, reference a traditional gypsy romance (“Gitara semistrunnaia”; A Seven-string Guitar), also an alternative title for Liube’s version) while juxtaposing the singer’s alleged past and present:

Распрощался я с юностью вешней  
 Но осталось похмелье весны.  
 Я гуляю, веселый и грешный,  
 По бескрайним просторам страны.

Я простился с любовною дрожью,  
 Но забавы остался запас.  
 По великому по бездорожью  
 Я пою, я играю для вас.<sup>47</sup>

Simultaneously an affirmation of rejoicing in what life offers and an invitation to pleasure, “Davaĭ naiarivaĭ” elicits an uninhibited, celebratory reaction that dramatically contrasts gendered images: whereas the men exhibit buttoned-up enjoyment or stalwart indifference, the female prisoners succumb to zipless ecstasy, galvanized into a sexual frenzy as they leap to their feet, moaning, dancing, partly undressing, and fondling themselves. They answer

<sup>46</sup> For a list of Baldaev’s volumes of prison tattoos, see the bibliography in Goscilo, “Texting the Body.”

<sup>47</sup> “I’ve said my goodbyes to the spring of my youth, / But spring’s hangover remains. / Cheerful and sinful, I stroll / Around the country’s boundless expanses. I’ve said goodbye to love’s tremors, / But there’s still some fun in reserve. / Along the great impassable roads / I’m singing and playing for you.”

the call to pleasure without any restraint.<sup>48</sup> This Woodstock-like wildness implies a sexual freedom in the women's zone, with which Liube is "in tune" and which has no male parallel in the film. At this point – the climax in all senses – *Zona Liube* verges, quite improbably, on a macho, rock, soft-porn, psychological prison movie.

Had the film ended at this stage, it would have left the viewer with an unexpectedly upbeat view of prison, where the transformative power of music can inspire a Dionysian orgy of sensual bliss. "Davaï naiarivaï," however, proves an exhilarating but short excursus. The happy ending favored by Hollywood (*kheppi end* in Russian) rarely impinges on Slavic cinema, and here it is replaced by a return to male prisoners' psychological traumas and travails, synchronized with the songs "Mama" and "Na vole." As noted earlier, the film concludes as the superfluous Lena exits into a sun-washed field while Rastorguev pointedly repeats the phrase so painfully at odds with the fate of the incarcerated – "na vole" – and the credits roll to the sounds of "Doroga." While paying tribute to the wonders of Liube's music, the film, albeit disjointedly and sometimes confusingly, manages to convey the obvious: prison is no haven, and inmates endure the anguish of futile regret, dis-possession, and social estrangement. By downplaying or bypassing the crimes for which imprisonment functions as punishment, and, instead, providing glimpses into the criminals' dreams, *Zona Liube* ultimately solicits viewers' sympathy for, and interest in, those sentenced to the zone and their equally beleaguered wardens.

During the arbitrary, large-scale repressions under Stalin in the 1930s and 1940s, one might have said, without exaggeration, that much of the country resembled a prison camp, both *de facto* and *in posse*. Given the period in question, such a generalization hardly seems excessive. It is difficult to know whether the impulse to evoke that era or pretentiousness led to similarly sweeping claims about the world depicted in *Zona Liube*. For instance, Anton Bublikov insists that Zolotukhin's film unambiguously demonstrates that all of Russia is one big zone (Bublikov). Matvienko is cited as saying, "Зона Любэ – это фильм, сделанный к песням, 'каждая из которых объединена единым чувством покаяния, рано или поздно приходящего к каждому человеку'" ("Muzhskie").<sup>49</sup> Likewise, Rastorguev in a 2004 interview asserted:

---

<sup>48</sup> Here, as throughout, they could hardly be less like Lena, who seems repressed and repressive in manner and word, as, for instance, when she censors one of the female convicts who is about to indulge in "sex-talk."

<sup>49</sup> "Zona Liube is a film made to go with the song, each of which is unified by the sole feeling of repentance that sooner or later comes to every human being."

Околотюремной тематики в *Зоне Любэ* я не вижу, просто режиссер сопутствующего альбому фильма Дмитрий Золотухин хотел, чтобы действие происходило в тюрьме. Однако *Зона Любэ* – широкое понятие, ничуть не подразумевающее колючую проволоку” Rastorguev).<sup>50</sup>

The comprehensive criminalization of the country in the 1990s doubtless inclined some of those living through that turmoil to read the film as a synecdoche for the national condition, but such a reading is sloppy, illogical, and unconvincing. The film goes to considerable lengths to distinguish Lena, for example, from the criminal milieu – a milieu that to her, as an outsider, is incomprehensible. How would she fit into an allegory of comprehensive confinement? Would one need to view her departure from prison as emigration?! Moreover, not only did Russians in the 1990s enjoy incomparably more freedom than in the 1980s and 2000s, but unrestrained freedom under Yeltsin was precisely one of the decade’s chief problems. Chaos, not incarceration, ruled. The desire to present *Zona Liube* as a trope for the entire country or, in Matvienko’s staggering version, to universalize the film’s import as a treatment of human conscience *tout court*, seemingly stems from a wish to assign profound significance to a film that, despite its appeal for fans of Liube, all too obviously lacks it.

Director Zolotukhin’s glorification of Liube’s music suffers from a kindred delusionary hyperbole:

[В песнях Любэ] есть и понимание жизни, и горечь, есть сочувствие бедным и убогим, деклассированным и разбойным людям, есть истинно русское сострадание ко всем тем, кто по велению души или в силу обстоятельств оказался на обочине жизни. Но есть в этой музыке вера в людей, есть любовь к ним, таким [sic], какие они есть. И есть истинное жизнелюбие и потребность выплеснуть жизненную силу в озорстве, пляске, песне... (“Zhiznennaia...”)<sup>51</sup>

History, of course, undermines Zolotukhin’s gratuitous self-congratulation regarding Russians’ purported unique compassion. Furthermore, it bears remembering that this bathetic, fantasy-based encomium pertains to a group whose musical and visual identity sprang from calculation and a practical consideration of what might sell best during the 1990s – a decade in which Liube’s lyrics and style were marked by playfulness and an assumed tongue-

---

<sup>50</sup> “I don’t see any prison theme in *Zona Liube*. The director Dmitrii Zolotukhin simply wanted the action accompanying the album to take place in prison. *Zona Liube*, however, is a broad concept that doesn’t at all imply barbed wire.”

<sup>51</sup> “[In Liube’s songs] there’s an understanding of life, and bitterness, there’s sympathy for the poor and the wretched, the déclassé and robbers. There’s a true Russian compassion for all those who either according to the dictates of their soul or because of circumstances end up on the sidelines of life. But in this music there’s also faith in people, there’s love for them, such as they are. And there’s a true love of life and the need to release this life force in mischief, dance, and song...”

in-cheek criminality. During the twenty-first century, under Putin, both the content and the style of Liube's repertoire underwent a sea change: lyrics became steeped in war and patriotism,<sup>52</sup> while estrada/pop tunes and earnestness pushed out raunch and parody. Thus, to superimpose retrospectively, and especially in 2004, an existential dimension upon *Zona Liube* seems woefully misguided and, quite simply, inaccurate. In fact, a sober assessment of the 1994 *Zona Liube* would lead one to conclude that the film set out to naturalize the group's earlier, criminalized songs through the prison setting. Doing so ineluctably diluted the works' stylization, which the visual aspect of the film counterbalances through its glimpse of prison's physical conditions and inmates' lives.

Ultimately, *Zona Liube* is a clipfest showcasing some of the group's most popular hits, and whatever success the film enjoyed rested on Rastorguev's performance and public image (what Elena Veselaia rather fancifully called his "wild temperament" [*beshenyi temperament*]), as well as audiences' straightforward appreciation of Liube's music-making. That appreciation has only increased with the years. After almost a quarter-century of performances and recordings, constant radio broadcasts of its songs, regular appearances on TV, the incorporation of its hits into films and TV shows,<sup>53</sup> and Putin's enthusiastic endorsement, Liube boasts a huge following. Its vocalist nowadays verges on an institution – a fact that may strike his detractors as a crime.

---

<sup>52</sup> Rastorguev twice received Soviet-style government recognition, in 1997 (Recognized Artist of the Russian Federation [Заслуженный Артист Российской Федерации]) and in 2003 (National Artist of the Russian Federation [Народный Артист Российской Федерации]). In 2001 Putin appointed Rastorguev Cultural Adviser to the government and in 2009 the band celebrated its twentieth anniversary with a concert at the Kremlin ("Lubeh"). In short, Rastorguev's ties with Putin's regime could hardly be more blatant, as also attested by Rastorguev's membership since 2006 in United Russia (Единая Россия) ("Medvedev pozdravil...") and the use of Liube's song "Davaï za" (Let's Drink To...) as the soundtrack to which Putin and Medvedev walked to the Russian presidential elections ("Lubeh").

<sup>53</sup> For a list of these and for a summary of Liube's awards, see "Lubeh."

## Liube Discography

- 1991 *Atas* (Watch Out!)
- 1992 *Kto skazal, chto my plokho zhili?* (Who Said We Lived Badly?)
- 1993 *Zona Liube* (Liube Zone)
- 1996 *Kombat* (Combat)
- 1996 *Sobranie sochineniĭ* (Collected Works)
- 1997 *Pesni o liudiakh* (Songs about People)
- 1998 *Pesni iz kontsertnoĭ programmy "Pesni o liudiakh"*  
(Songs from the Concert Program "Songs about People")
- 1999 *Sobranie sochineniĭ 1* (Collected Works 1)
- 2000 *Polustanochki* (Whistle Stops)
- 2001 *Sobranie sochineniĭ 2* (Collected Works 2)
- 2002 *Davaĭ za...* (Let's Drink to/Do It for...)  
*Iubileĭ. Lushchie pesni* (Anniversary: The Best Songs)
- 2004 *Rebiata nashogo polka [1996–2004]* (The Guys from Our Regiment)
- 2005 *Rasseia* (Russia)
- 2007 *Liube "v Rossii"* (Liube "in Russia")
- 2008 *Sobranie sochineniĭ 3* (Collected Works 3)
- 2009 *Svoi* (Our Folk)

## Works Cited

- Baldaev, D. S. *Drawings from the Gulag*. London: Fuel, 2010. Print.
- . *Slovar' blatnogo vorovskogo zhargona: Fenia*. 2 vols. Moscow: Kampana, 1997. Print.
- . *Tatuirovki zakliuchennykh*. St. Petersburg: Limbus, 2001. Print.
- Baldaev, D. S., V. K. Belko, and I. M. Isupov, *Slovar' tiuremno-lagerno-blatnogo zhargona*. Moscow: Kraia Moskvyy, 1992. Print.
- Borenstein, Eliot. *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008. Print.
- Bratersky, Alexander. "Aleshkovsky's Words of Wisdom Laced with Swears." *The Moscow Times*, 2 Oct. 2012. Web. 12 Dec. 2012. <[http://www.themoscowtimes.com/arts\\_n\\_ideas/article/aleshkovskys-words-of-wisdom-laced-with-swears/469115.html](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/arts_n_ideas/article/aleshkovskys-words-of-wisdom-laced-with-swears/469115.html)>.
- Bronnikov, A. G., and V. A. Maier, eds. *Rossiiskie viiony*. Moscow: AST, 2000. Print.
- Bublikov, Anton. "Ekombat." Rev. of *Zona liube. Sobesednik*. 25 May 1999. Print.
- Bykov, V. *Russkaia fenia*. Smolensk: Trast-Imakom, 1994. Print.
- "The Crime Rate Among Women." *Moscow Center for Prison Reform*. Web. 29 Dec. 2012. <<http://prison.org/english/rpovrt.htm>>.
- Dovlatov, Sergei. *Sobranie sochineniĭ*. Vol. 1. St. Petersburg: Limbus, 1993. Print.
- . *The Zone*. Trans. Anne Frydman. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012. Print.
- Eliustratov, V. S. *Slovar' moskovskogo argo*. Moscow: Russkie slovari, 1994. Print.
- Feuer, Jane. *The Hollywood Musical*. 2nd ed. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. Print.
- Goldman, Lea, and Jack Paine. "Top-Earning Dead Celebrities." *Forbes*, 29 Oct. 2007. Web. 5 Apr. 2009. <[http://www.forbes.com/2007/10/26/top-dead-celebrity-biz-media-deadcelebs07-cz\\_lg\\_1029celeb.html](http://www.forbes.com/2007/10/26/top-dead-celebrity-biz-media-deadcelebs07-cz_lg_1029celeb.html)>.
- Goncharova, Nataliia. "Rezhimy normalizatsii i kontroliia telesnosti v zhenskoĭ tiur'me: tiuremnaia gigiena." *Do i posle tiur'my: Zhenskie istorii*, ed. Elena Omel'chenko. St. Petersburg: Aleteiia, 2012. 51–68. Print.
- Goscilo, Helena. "Big-Buck Books: Pulp Fiction in Post-Soviet Russia." *Harriman Review* 12.2–3 (1999/2000): 6–24. Print.
- . *Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood During and After Glasnost*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996. Print.
- . "Texting the Body: Soviet Criminal Tattoos." *Cultural Cabaret: Russian and American Essays for Richard Sites*. Eds. David Goldfrank and Pavel Lyssakov. Washington, DC: New Academia. 2012. 203–30. Print.
- Gudziĭ, N. K. *Istoriia drevneiĭ russoĭ literatury*. 5th ed. Moscow: Gupediz, 1953. Print.
- Iakovlev, V. "Kontora 'Iiuberov'." *Ogonek* 5 (1987): 20–21. Print.
- Rev. of *Jailhouse Rock*. *Down Beat* 9 Jan. 1958: 21. Print.
- Rev. of *Jailhouse Rock*. *The Spectator* 17 Jan. 1958: 107. Print.
- Kolbovskii, Aleksandr. "Zona klipa i klipy o zone." Rev. of *Zona Liube. Stolitsa*. 31 Jan. 1995. Print.

- Lambert, Alix, dir. *Mark of Cain*, 2011. Film.
- . *Russian Prison Tattoos: Codes of Authority, Domination, and Struggle*. Altgen, PA: Schiffer, 2003. Print.
- “Lubeh.” Wikipedia. Web. 22 June 2013. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lubeh>>.
- “Medvedev pozdravil liubimuiu gruppu Putina s 20-letiem.” *NEWSru*. newsru.ua, 14 Feb. 2009. Web. 3 Dec. 2012. <<http://www.rus.newsru.ua/rest/14feb2009/lube.html>>.
- “Muzhskie pesni Liube.” *Molodezh' Estonii*. 4 Mar. 1998. Print.
- “Nikolay Rastorguev – Lyube.” *Russia-Ukraine Travel*. Russia-ukraine-travel.com, n.d. Web. 3 Dec. 2012. <<http://www.russia-ukraine-travel.com/nikolay-rastorguev.html>>.
- Omel'chenko, Elena, ed. *Do i posle tiur'my: Zhenskie istorii*. St. Petersburg: Al-eteĭia, 2012. Print.
- Olcott, Anthony. *Russian Pulp: The Detektiv and the Way of Russian Crime*. Lanham, MD: Rowan, 2001. Print.
- Pallot, Judith, and Laura Piacentini. *Gender, Geography, and Punishment: Women's Experience of Carceral Russia*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012.
- Petrov, Petr. “Liubera, no ne blatnye.” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*. 21 May 1996. Print.
- Pilkington, Hilary. “‘Good Girls in Trousers’: Codes of Masculinity and Femininity in Moscow Youth Culture.” *Gender Restructuring in Russian Studies*, eds. Marianne Liljeström, Eila Mäntysaari, and Arja Rosenholm. Tampere: University of Tampere, 1993: 175–91. Print.
- Rastorguev, Nikolaĭ. Interview. “U nas est' megakhity obshchenarodnogo znachenia.” *Gazeta* 5 Mar. 2004. Print.
- Sabirova, Giuzel'. “‘Neproste rasskazy o sebe i zone’: otvety i vyzovy normativnym predstavleniiam v istoriiakh zhizni zhenshchin s opytom zakliucheniia.” *Do i posle tiur'my: Zhenskie istorii*, ed. Elena Omel'chenko. St. Petersburg: Al-eteĭia, 2012. 69–102. Print.
- Stolyarova, Galina. “Book Reveals Plight of Female Prisoners.” *The St. Petersburg Times*. #1738 (49), 5 Dec. 2012. Web. 6 Dec. 2012 <<http://www.sptimes.ru/story/36678>>.
- Sutherland, Christine. *The Story of Maria Volkonsky and the Decembrist Exiles*. New York: Farrar, 1984.
- Titov, Andreĭ. “Seans.” Rev. of *Zona Liube*. *Iskusstvo kino* 2 (1996): 143–44. Print.
- Uspenskiĭ, E. N., and E. N. Filina, eds. *V nashu gavan' zakhodili korabli*. Moscow: Omega/Denis Alfa, 1995. Print.
- Veselaia, Elena. Rev. of *Zona Liube*. “Manifest kontsa veka.” *Moskovskie novosti*. 8 Feb. 1995. Print.
- Vilensky, Simeon, ed. *Till My Tale Is Told: Women's Memoirs of the Gulag*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999. Abridged translation of Semen Vilenskiĭ, *Dodnes' tiagoteet: Zapiski vashei sovremennitsy*. Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1989. Print.
- “Zhiznennaia sila Liube.” *Chas* 6 Mar. 1999. Print.



Part III  
Comparative Dimensions



# Punishment and the Human Condition: Hannah Arendt, Leo Tolstoy, and Lessons from Life, Philosophy, and Literature<sup>1</sup>

Inessa Medzhibovskaya

Sometime after 1935, Joseph Stalin was reading Leo Tolstoy's last novel, *Voskresenie* (*Resurrection*, 1899). Pausing at descriptions of inhumane conditions suffered by prisoners in Siberia under the tsars, Stalin jotted down his thoughts in the margins.<sup>2</sup> Passages like the one below bewildered him:

Snores, moans, and sleepy voices came through the open doors and sounded through the passage [...]. The foul air in the political prisoners' rooms seemed pure compared with the foul closeness here. The smoking lamp shone dimly as through a mist, and it was difficult to breathe. Stepping along the passage one had to look carefully for an empty space, and having put down one foot, a place had to be found for the other. Three persons who had evidently found no room even in the passage lay in the anteroom close to the stinking and leaking tub. One of those was an old idiot, whom Nekhliudov had often seen marching with the gang; another was a boy of about twelve, who lay between the two other convicts, his head on the leg of one of them (Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection* 446).<sup>3</sup>

Taking special notice of the scene with a boy sleeping near a leaking slop pail, Stalin made a memo mark; he added his standard "ha-ha" next to passages describing instances when prisoners attempt to resist, when they insist on dignity and pursue honorable, ethical choices.<sup>4</sup> On the final page of the novel, Stalin calculated Tolstoy's age in 1899, when the novel was complet-

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to all the participants for stimulating comments on my keynote address "My Cell, My Love: Prison and the Human Condition" at the workshop "Punishment as a Crime? Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Prison Experience in Russian Culture," held at Uppsala University, 14–17 August 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Stalin owned a copy of *Voskresenie*, in an edition published right before the peak of the purges in 1935. From among other available editions, he chose to read this edition, edited by Nikolai Kalinnikovich Gudziĭ for the Academia series in 1935.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Russian are mine. All references to Tolstoy's works, except as noted, are to his *Polnoe sobranie sochineniĭ* in 90 volumes, followed by volume and page. The passage quoted above occurs in Tolstoy, *Voskresenie* 378.

<sup>4</sup> I was able to examine the copy several times after having made a few initially unsuccessful but persistent attempts to procure permission at the Communist Party Archives in Moscow, Russian State Archive for Social and Political History (558–3–353). The experience of reading this copy was not easy. For a detailed account, see Medzhibovskaya, "Transcription and Presentation," forthcoming.

ed, to check that the author was in fact seventy when the final lines of his book were composed. How could the old sage be so maudlin in his descriptions of the functioning of the punitive machine? To emphasize his contempt for Tolstoy's sentimentality and lack of understanding about the nature and goals of punishment, Stalin used his pencil profusely to underline, cross out, and overwrite with his ridicule the retrograde empathy of the classic writer. His cynicism was on full display in his marginalia and notations. Stalin the man was unable to live without the need to restrain, coerce, and punish. He was equally unable to commiserate with stories of suffering.

Coercive regimes of punishment are routinely discussed within the social sciences and humanities in terms of Hannah Arendt's concept of totalitarianism, Michel Foucault's biopolitics, or Giorgio Agamben's writings on the state of exception.<sup>5</sup> Arendt made classic the distinction between the suspect and the objective enemy, allowing us to understand punishment under totalitarianism as one of the mechanisms for systematic implementation of ideological terror, which originates, according to her, from the times of the French Revolution (Arendt, *The Origins* 423, 460ff). Foucault expanded the framework of Arendt's explanations by insisting that all the disciplinary procedures run by and through modern institutions, including prisons, have as their main goal a fundamental political regulation of *bios*.<sup>6</sup> Agamben made an essential corrective to Foucault, by pointing out that the technological precision of the mechanisms practiced in the twentieth century within the units of an enormous complex of punitive industry, such as the camp, was to utilize rather than merely regulate *bios*, namely, through its demotion to *zoe*. By way of excepting certain population categories from civic liability, the camp became the *nomos* of the modern for dooming the enemy and the unwanted to the conditions and consequences of bare life.<sup>7</sup> It is not surprising that the incremental degree of dehumanization exposed in the theories above, in the very ontological explanations of punishment, caused a return of arguments in favor of ethical implication and participative witnessing offered by critics and theorists such as Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Dominick LaCapra, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Susan Sontag, among others.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Many forms and varieties of punishment are discussed in this essay, including incarceration, methods of torture, and different types of capital punishment. I will occasionally use the terms "incarceration" and "confinement" more broadly for punishment.

<sup>6</sup> See especially Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics; Discipline and Punish; Power*, and essays on biopolitics in *The Essential Foucault*.

<sup>7</sup> See especially Agamben's *Homo Sacer; The Open; and State of Exception*.

<sup>8</sup> See Derrida's *La peine de mort*, his seminars on the death penalty, currently available in translation, although not in their complete form. The problem of the non-instrumental "other" and thus of the ontological impossibility of punishment is implicitly present in the entirety of Levinas's oeuvre. Other works worth mentioning are Butler's *Precarious Life*; Felman's and Laub's *Testimony*; LaCapra's *Representing the Holocaust and Writing History, Writing Trauma*; and Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*. I will return to their arguments in the closing comments of this essay.

The call for humanization of theoretical discourse on punishment was uttered because theories frequently treat the particulars of the human condition merely as an illustrative justification of their key points and propositions, as “paradeigmata” of “exemplary chastisement” – a problem even with milder punishments under democracies diagnosed as early as the eighteenth century by Giambattista Vico (Vico 448–50). A century later, Søren Kierkegaard characterized this problem as a more general problem of modernity, which he believed had lost its existential sense of orientation. It is one thing to suffer, and another to become a professor of the fact that another suffers, and “aptly use” the motifs and descriptions of suffering in “lectures and sermons” (Kierkegaard 528). Is it possible to humanize the suffering of the punished by way of words?

In his essay on the inconsistency of human actions, Michel Montaigne wondered why Nero, “that living image of cruelty,” would exclaim when the sentence of a condemned criminal was brought to him for signature: “‘Would to God I had never learned to write!’ So much his heart was wrung at condemning a man to death!” (290). Montaigne understands why kings, these most unfree of beings bound by their obligations of power, cannot pardon simply out of pity. Not so with Foucault.

A good case in point is Foucault’s conviction that all instances of forgiveness of the condemned by the sovereign buttress his power over subjects or the power of institutions over an individual. The more merciful the gesture of deliverance from punishment, and, vice versa, the more principled and intractable the sentence, the more symbolically strong the gesture of power. When he thinks of the note written by the unrepentant murderer Pierre Rivière, Foucault immediately imagines the various manipulations of the account by the criminal author himself. Legal servants and other officials and professionals involved in handling the case are doing their part and turning the criminal account into a “key to the relations of power, domination, and conflict within the discourses” (Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière* xi).<sup>9</sup> Speaking about the discourses of power, Foucault is unable to see that the power of words, including that of prison narratives, lies precisely in that they are not merely contributory and complementary to the institutional or sovereign handling and dispensation of justice. Rather, they are inalienable from the core human need to interact through storytelling in pursuit of life’s meaning, the kind of storytelling that began, according to Levinas, in situations abounding in literature: when the “I” is identified with the morality of obligation to the other (18).

---

<sup>9</sup> For Foucault, challenges to power can hide in the narratives (pleas, dockets, dossiers, depositions, criminal statements, deliberations, and memoirs, as well as emerging scenarios for future chapters on state history and governance). In their competition for independence from the executive power of the state, legal authorities, doctors, and psychiatric experts all contended the case of an unnaturally brutal murder by a madman with a raving, inconclusive, but mesmerizingly powerful scenario of his own (Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière* vii–xiv, 199–211).

This essay discusses the contradictory possibilities of humanizing punishment without seeking to justify it. If punishment is understood as a complex and multifaceted process involving an evolution in the experiences of the self and others, then the very process is of interest with regard to meaning and forgiveness as expressed in literature. According to the practicing psychiatrist, psychology specialist, and Nazi extermination camp survivor Viktor Frankl, stories are products of suffering, witnessing, or visualizing the extremes of experience. They remind us of meaning in the world, and beauty of life. Frankl recalls how, one day, camp convicts instinctively huddled together to gasp in admiration at the sight of a sunset: “How beautiful the world could be!” (40). Frankl not only resumed his practice of psychiatry but also started to write non-fiction after the camp. Frankl believes there is no crime in narrating and even fictionalizing the experiences of punishment because, in its metaphorical sense, punishment is a communicable, however aberrant, experience of life, a chain through which all become connected. As William James famously put it while examining the possibility of healthy-minded optimism enduring sickness under extreme conditions in his study of human nature, “A chain is no stronger than its weakest link, and life is after all a chain” (136). One of the major existential thinkers of the twentieth century, Emile Cioran, holds that if such metaphors of imprisonment are signs of anything, they indicate the conditions of mutual responsibility, including the possibility of opening up a breach in the long chain of un-freedom (Cioran 180). Arendt specifically insists on the universal and open-ended, shared character of her version of totalitarianism. Its sources, stories, and practices can recur again and again, anywhere for that matter. A totalitarian prison can be broken open only if direct human connection among its victims, witnesses, and perpetrators can be established (Arendt, *The Origins* xl).

Significantly, Arendt does not regard a continued return to these stories and practices as the “complacent repetition of truths” (*The Human Condition* 5). When stories about punishment become clichés, they destroy our capacity for compassion (Arendt, *On Revolution* 70). Like Vico, Arendt blames the Enlightenment for the latter development, arguing that its inflexible stance vis-à-vis the complex variations and differences between human nature and the human condition brought about the possibility of using punishment as a weapon of totalitarian rule.<sup>10</sup> In *On Revolution*, Arendt turns directly to literary examples in order to demonstrate that approaches to punishment may vary. Specifically, she chooses Hermann Melville’s *Billy Budd* and Fedor Dostoevsky’s “The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor” (*On Revolution* 71)

---

<sup>10</sup> “To avoid misunderstanding,” writes Arendt, “the human condition is not the same as human nature, and the sum total of human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature [...] the conditions of human existence – life itself, natality and mortality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth – can never ‘explain’ what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that they never condition us absolutely” (*The Human Condition* 9–11).

because they operate with categories of “goodness beyond virtue and evil beyond vice” in order to expose the principles on which authoritarian systems of punishment rest (*On Revolution* 72–73).

Arendt appears to be much more sensitive, as a theorist, to the particulars of human weakness and emotion than Foucault and his followers, who understand the faults of Enlightenment mainly as faults relating to the exercise and administration of the critical method. Foucault suggested that Enlightenment be removed from humanism because Enlightenment implements punishment as a tool for reaching its overall goal of liberating humanity from immaturity, whereby punishment is a means of coercing those who resist this process. For Foucault, punishment as it exists in modernity inflicts suffering uselessly; it infantilizes without achieving correction, and is thus a process antagonistic towards progress (Foucault, *Power* 387–88; *The Essential Foucault* 53). Conversely, to appreciate Arendt’s attention to the emotional and psychological devotion to a personal cause, it is worthwhile to look at her letter to Karl Blumenfeld from November 1953, in which she likens her solitary theorizing on totalitarianism to a childish, irresponsible, and risky crime: one ends up locked up for much longer than expected. Instead of infantilizing, this kind of voluntary confinement to a meaningful cause reinforces commitment to *vita activa* (Young-Bruehl 279–80).

In her consideration of situations in which unacceptable conditions, the conditions in the “dark times” of persecution, forced internment, and confinement impose a bond of mutual responsibility, Arendt’s ideas agree with Frankl’s, rather than Foucault’s.<sup>11</sup> A courageous escapee from an internment camp from which most of her companions – the Jewish women rounded up in Paris – never returned, Arendt had the right to insist on this responsible condition of non-excuse. Arendt argues, no less, that ethical judgment should re-enter the discourse and narratives on punishment, which is evident in her emotionally punctuated coverage of Eichmann’s trial. Arendt confessed that she had written a tale about the competing “trends of judgment” in the courtroom, the trial of Eichmann becoming the tipping point and an organizing moment for mankind to reconsider its ability to punish by reviewing its methods of handling justice (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 296). The controversy and outrage her book raised stemmed from its insistence on Eichmann’s sheer moral “thoughtlessness” and detachment from ethics rather than his vicious criminality. Consider Arendt’s observation that, judging by the trial, there seems to be a “current confusion in legal circles about the meaning and usefulness of punishment” (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 287). When she commented on Eichmann’s banality, it was not a comment inviting sympathy for his so-called dignity in prison or in dying. His conventional pattern of erect indifference, the drinking of red wine (half the bottle), remaining in manly command of himself, “completely himself” through these last months and

---

<sup>11</sup> See, especially, Arendt’s *Men in Dark Times*.

minutes of posturing in accordance with the theatrical pattern of valor in the trial box or on the gallows were teaching “the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil” (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 252). The banality of evil supports the statutes of compliance with the ordinances of power; compassion resides in the statutes of resistance to these ordinances.

Arendt was generally suspicious of rhetoric. Nonetheless, starting with her youthful commentary on St. Augustine, the connection persists in her ongoing discussions of the topics of power and care (*caritas*), in which power is exercised not as a punishing force from above. Rather, it consists of not losing what is within your will – “willing love” and compassion – and the nourishing of the resolve to achieve active hope through “the internal binding force” (Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* 87–89, 135–37). Frankl provides a more direct description of such Augustinian-inspired and conversion-like epiphany. For him it comes from being bound by force to life under implausible circumstances, in the work trenches of the camp, signifying the moment of inner enlightenment:

In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious “Yes” in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose. At that moment a light was lit in a distant farmhouse, which stood on the horizon as if painted in the midst of the miserable grey of a dawning morning in Bavaria. “Et lux in tenebris lucet” – and the light shineth in darkness (Frankl 40–41).

The redundancy of meaning in the verse “lux lucet” (John 1.5), from which Frankl quotes, underscores the unity of human will and ability. The gospel verses deal with the theme of light’s genitive relation to life, and of men’s relation to life through light, light becoming synonymous with life in the relatedness of all creatures: “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1.4–5). It is possible, as has been done in Protestant traditions, to render “overcome” as “comprehend” with the result that the second verse above would read “and the darkness did not comprehend it.” For Frankl, darkness, i.e., his experience as a convict, is overcome by the power of comprehension, by the discovery of inner purpose and resolve.

There is light in darkness even when light itself is turned into an instrument of torture: Alexander Solzhenitsyn described the everlasting light bulbs in the cells of the NKVD prisons, switched on around the clock. Solzhenitsyn speaks of his prison experience as if it were a form of inevitable, difficult love, proving that life is everywhere. This idea is reflected in one of the most memorable chapters in his *Arkhipelag GULag* (*Gulag Archipelago*), called “First Cell, First Love.” Solzhenitsyn echoes Kierkegaard’s sarcasm toward scholars sermonizing on the topic of suffering, and he praises the capacity for finding spiritual support and communion. He begins his monu-

mental work with a quote from a communique published in a scientific journal in the West, to the effect that mollusks frozen under ice in the subarctic zone may be excavated with bare hands and eaten on the spot – proving not only harmless, but also nutritious to the Soviet explorers who ate them. Solzhenitsyn perceives this as ludicrous and repellent in its droll naiveté, as the “explorers” were none other than famished and desperate Gulag convicts. Although he firmly believes in the “nutritious effects” of prison or camp for anyone who has endured its ordeals and gotten out alive, Solzhenitsyn doubts that the experience is fathomable to those who have not experienced it firsthand, even in the same country. He doubts even more that it is possible for another nation “to fathom another people’s bitter experience through a book” (Solzhenitsyn xiii). And yet he allowed his manuscript to be smuggled out of the Soviet Union when publication abroad seemed to be its only chance to see the light of day. Shaken out of its droll naiveté, the whole world understood.

How is literature capable of facilitating the comprehension of suffering? Firstly, this is possible by sustaining a religious and spiritual focus. According to Pavel Novgorodtsev, one of the outstanding legal theorists in pre-revolutionary Russia, the role of religion is diminished in Western law and Western literature. Novgorodtsev thinks this is erroneous. The peculiarity of the Russian method of thinking about divine law and state law is that the latter is secondary, auxiliary in its role to the former. The application of law is powerless without faith in the “miraculous turnaround” (*chudesnyi perezvorot*) (Novgorodtsev 376). Only the latter provides the power needed to remedy the eternal ambivalences in the strife between the right and the wrong in the effort of correcting sin and injustice. This is no religious fundamentalism, but a special form of mutual responsibility of everyone for everyone. This is not cultural anarchism, but a form of religious engagement with culture, including legal culture. Novgorodtsev’s explanation of the miraculous turnaround finds support at the level of cultural memory, undergirded, for example, by the very etymological relatedness of such words in the Russian language as “execution” (*kazn’*), “to repent,” and “repentance” (*kaiat’sia, pokaianie*) (Shansky, Ivanov, and Shanskaia 183).

In light of this, it is not surprising that the Russian tradition tends to embed the theme of moral implication and obligation in the deep archetypal structures of the very genre of prison literature. This begins with the obligation, on the part of the writer, to interpose and narrate, and culminates with the obligation, on the part of the reader, to comply with the most basic conditions of spatial and spiritual engagement, namely with the courage to observe and bear witness. Russian literature thus revives the original sense of the Greek word “martyr,” which means, *prima facie*, “witness,” not victim. It is therefore interesting that second-person narration, which is a rare and challenging form of storytelling in the Western canon, is widespread in Russian narratives about punishment and confinement. The direct address of the

reader as “you” achieves the goal of a categorical tethering of the reader to the experience of witnessing the unspeakable. Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov all used this method, like Dante before them, to describe the pain inflicted by violence and forceful enclosure.

Dante invented a characteristic tone and voice, carried forth by the mellifluous rhythm and echoing lull of terza rima, to convey the agony and torment borne by him, the Christian poet, to an audience of witnesses, in the presence of his guide Vergil. He frequently laments his weakness and inability to understand, or to continue to stare into the abyss. He now faints, now flinches. But he also has the comfort of the supportive Master, Vergil, who interprets everything for him, as in one of the most celebrated passages from lines 1–30 of Canto III, with its legendary beginning “*Per me si va nella città dolente, per me si va nell’eterno dolore*” (Through me the way into the suffering city, // Through me the way to the eternal pain), in which the weeping poet cannot help but hear and internalize all those “strange utterances,” “horrible pronouncements,” “accents of anger,” and “words of suffering,” which make a tumult “like sand that eddies when a whirlwind swirls” (Dante 21).

By reinforcing the role of the narrating figure entering hell, and by endlessly and irrevocably altering the stances of its ethical engagement and authority, Russian literature did away with the Romantic clichés that had consolidated the carceral literary canon of the nineteenth century, and revived its picaresque, Renaissance spirit of defiance, adventure, and irony. Russian authors also retrofitted and put back into literary circulation Dante’s accents of anger and suffering, all the voices, piercing and faint, and all the gestures of beating hands – in a tumultuous whirlwind of the grains of sand caught up in the opaque eddies and swirl of historical strife. Despite the fact that Evgeniia Ginzburg’s two-volume *Krutoï marshrut* (The Steep Journey) (1967–78) was the “story of an ordinary Communist woman during the period of the ‘personality cult’” (Ginzburg 418) and despite its modernized, convoy-like-ringing in the Russian title, the latter was rendered in English through a fitting equivalent, *Into the Whirlwind*, referring back to its precise genealogical origin in the third canto of *La Divina Commedia*. This not a coincidence: Ginzburg’s work teems with literary references to Dante’s leitmotifs.

In the modern Russian tradition, Tolstoy attuned these leitmotifs to what would become a wholly new literary technique. There is the same Dante-inspired solemnity of factual ascertainment in Tolstoy’s masterminding, in one breathless continuous flick, the job of the interpreting master and the comforting guide in his *Sebastopol Stories*, in particular, “Sevastopol’ v dekabre mesiatse” (“Sevastopol in December,” 1855). In his passionate desire to reveal the whole truth, the master voice leads, explains, and consoles, walking in and out of the zones of horror of the Crimean War and its amputation wards (“if your nerves are strong, walk into the room on your left”), com-

menting on made-up and precocious expressions of suffering, and imposing silence on the visions of the unspeakable (Tolstoï, *Polnoe sobranie* 4: 8).

Dostoevsky first introduces his implicating narrative in *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* (*Notes from the House of the Dead*, 1861), through the voices of a fictionalized convict and his editor. The editor lacks pathos about his discovery of Gorianchikov's "reminiscences of penal servitude" in Siberia. He finds parts of these fragments, written by a released wife-murderer, to be "not devoid of interest," and dismisses the other part as product of a deranged mind (Dostoevsky, *House of the Dead* 11). Ethical absolutes reach an ever higher pitch through gradual modification of contrasts between "you" and "I" in the opening pages of the otherwise unhurried and detached, almost emotionless fragments. The narrative starts off using an impersonal third-person "one," that is, a reflexive, self-bound pronoun in Russian, interrupting itself with pauses, subterfuge, and ellipses and then suddenly merging "I," "you," and "one" into "we," wherein the walls and fences separating convicts from those at large, plain criminals from political prisoners, and narrated humanity from actual humanity on the part of readers disappear, and the chink in the wall is enough to offer a full, disturbingly complex, touchingly plaintive, and morally integral view:

*Our prison stood at the edge of the fortress grounds, close to the fortress wall. One would sometimes, through a chink in the fence, take a peep into God's world to try and see something: but one could see only a strip of the sky and the high earthen wall overgrown with coarse weeds, and on the wall sentries pace up and down day and night. And then one would think that there are long years before one, and that one would go on coming to peep through the chink in the same way, and will see the same wall, the same sentries and the same little strip of sky, not the sky that stood over the prison, but a free, far-away sky. [...] Outside that gate is the world of light and freedom, where men live like the rest of mankind. But those living on this side of the fence picture that world as some unattainable fairyland. [...] When you come into the enclosure you see several buildings within it. [...] Here behind the buildings prisoners of an unsociable and gloomy disposition like to walk in their spare time, to think their own thoughts hidden from all eyes. Meeting them as they walked there, I used to like looking into their grim, branded faces, and guessing what they were thinking about. There was a prisoner whose favorite occupation in his spare time was counting posts in the fence. ... Yes, in this place one might learn to be patient. When it got dark, we used all to be taken to the barracks, and to be locked up for the night (Dostoevsky, *House of the Dead*, 12–13; emphasis mine).*

In "Palata № 6" ("Ward Number Six," 1892), Chekhov turns the second-person "you" into an invitation that implies the possibility of the reversal of roles. One enters the asylum as a tourist, risking nothing more serious than only the sting of nettles: "Unless you are afraid of nettle stings, let us take the narrow path to this shack and see what goes on inside" (Chekhov, *Ward*

*Number Six* 23; emphasis mine).<sup>12</sup> But free entrance is no guarantee of free exit: there exists a danger of perpetual committal in this “little Bastille,” where physical and psychological tortures compare to the pouring of “molten lead” into the mouth (Chekhov, “Palata” 125). These sufferings may be commonplace from the point of view of Ragin, the doctor in charge. He philosophizes idly that nothing can be helped because *all life* is a trap. Against the call of his better judgment, Ragin listens with bestirred interest to the “disorderly mismatch in the potpourris of old and yet unfinished songs” (Chekhov, “Palata” 108) about punishment and injustice from Gromov, a patient who is suffering from persecution mania. But to Gromov’s request to let him out, Ragin responds in the negative (“not in my power,” “Palata” 129), citing the duties and limits of his office. Ragin claims that one should accept the randomness of the situation: some are caught and confined; others are not caught and remain at large (“Palata” 128). The only way to deal with the situation of committal to this prison is through compliance with it, as with a given of life. Soon enough Ragin is locked up in the very same ward through the intrigues of the unscrupulous Dr. Khobotov. When he feebly tries to protest, he is hit in the face and in the chest by the brutal warden Nikita, who is convinced that “people need hitting” (Chekhov, *Ward Number Six* 22). In this horrific way, Ragin learns that the actual link between those who confine and those who are confined is completely reversible precisely because of the compliance of those who yield power. His hopeless rebellion subdued by Nikita, he peers out through the latticed window on his first night in the ward and sees only the moon, the prison across the street, and upward-pointing nails on the fence.

The flickering lights jump mockingly on the other side of the window in front of Ragin’s eyes, holding no promise of the victory of light over darkness. In the intensity of its despair, the scene is reminiscent of the one presented by Frankl, but it lacks its key result, namely the discovery of meaning and inner light. Chekhov still insists on the existence of an ethical order of things based on compassion, forgiveness, and love – the very staples that Ragin finds to be clichéd stories familiar to destitution. Even the tiny donations collected from the townsfolk outside the asylum by the dutifully kind Jew Moiseika, who is trying to imitate Gromov, are such gifts. Ragin lacks the intelligence of character that would allow him to have faith in the possibility of building an environment of dignity anywhere and under all circumstances. Had he succeeded, it would have been in the exact sense of Cioran’s solution to the proverbial entrapment in life. That life is a trap was Ragin’s very phrase. Cioran, however, made the vital qualification that we may be imprisoned, but are not automatons (Cioran 180). Ragin read much, but learned little. All the stories about entrapment and the way out are lost on

---

<sup>12</sup> «Если вы не боитесь ожечься о крапиву, то пойдемте по узкой тропинке, ведущей к флигелю, и посмотрим, что делается внутри» (Chekhov, “Palata” 105).

him, and gone with him, like a heap of books that he leaves behind, treated as unusable refuse by his maid. The inability to see anything but clichés in stories of suffering is the very danger of which Arendt warned as she worked her way through her own stockpiles of literary examples and types.

There are examples of recovery of an active stance through stories, however. Exercising self-irony, Solzhenitsyn relates a love affair between an imaginary prisoner (“you”) and his first cell at the Big House in Leningrad during World War II. Solzhenitsyn is well aware of the long tradition of describing this odd type of love in literature, contributed to the modern canon by the emblematic example of Silvio Pellico. Deprived of all the customary comforts and pushed by the Austrians into his first solitary cell at the Piombi in 1820, the Italian Carbonari and successful Romantic playwright Pellico *resolved* to behave like a true Christian as soon as the heavy door of his cell slammed shut on him. This immediate and implausible commitment required that he open his soul to everyone and everything, to his forbidding new home, to the inmates in adjacent cells, to his wardens – even to the spider in his cell.<sup>13</sup> Solzhenitsyn’s explanations for his prisoner’s love were different: in the city ravaged by the siege, the Big House offered greater comfort than on the outside. Solzhenitsyn reasons that this must have been a case of a cat “being envious of the dog’s life” (Solzhenitsyn 82). It is symptomatic that Tolstoy comes to his mind:

Lev Tolstoy was right when he dreamed of being put in prison. At a certain moment that giant began to dry up. He actually needed prison as a drought needs a shower of rain. All the writers who wrote about prison but who did not themselves serve time there considered it their duty to express sympathy for prisoners and to curse prison. I have served enough time there. I nourished my soul there, and I say without hesitation: “Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!” (And from beyond the grave come replies: “It is very well for you to say that – when you came out of it alive!”) (Solzhenitsyn 313).

By insisting on the literariness of this anecdotal “envy” of prison experience, Solzhenitsyn enters into the complicated position immortalized by Jaroslav Hašek’s inimitable simpleton Švejk, who explains the enviable qualities of life in modern prisons, which not only provide all the necessary

---

<sup>13</sup> I refer to one of the earlier episodes in Silvio Pellico’s autobiographic book *Le mie prigioni* (My Prisons, 1832), in which, among other things, the author describes his friendship with a spider during the first year of his solitary confinement in 1820. One of the most prominent Carbonari, Pellico (1789–1854) was also famous as the author of *Francesca da Rimini* (1818); in the years following his liberation in 1828, he quickly regained literary fame by releasing *Le mie prigioni* and then publishing another celebrated meditation, *Dei doveri degli uomini* (*On the Duties of Men*, 1834). Both works were widely read and admired in Russia.

physical comforts, but also an ordered structure to relationships.<sup>14</sup> Švejk speaks of model modern prisons with relish: “There is no quartering, no Spanish boots. We’ve got bunks, a table, a bench. We’re not all squashed together like sardines: we get soup; they give us bread and bring us a jug of water. We’ve got our latrines right under our snouts. You can see progress in everything...” (Hašek 21). Solzhenitsyn’s point about Tolstoy’s “envy” lends another shade of meaning, also touched upon by Švejk: namely, an environment conducive to story-weaving and a sense of commitment to stories, both provided by modern prisons and camps.

An exchange between Tolstoy and his disciple Vladimir Chertkov of 6–7 June 1885 explains Tolstoy’s view of imprisonment as a story-making vehicle. In a letter to Chertkov, Tolstoy hopes for imprisonment, vaguely imagined, as a prisoner might hope for a possibility of escape, as a vainglorious “desire to nail a stick horizontally onto a cross” (“*Zhelanie stavit' palochku poperechnuiu kresta poperek*”) (Tolstoï, *Polnoe sobranie* 85: 223–24). Yet Tolstoy likens this desire to a cheap longing for martyrdom, which is worse than a desire for “superficial benefits” (*vneshnie blaga*) of life. It may well be Chertkov’s bull-headed insistence on setting an example by becoming an emblematic and prophetic prisoner that forever changed Tolstoy’s mind about the special potential of prison for heroism. Chertkov wrote that while in prison of any kind, even (metaphorically speaking) a domestic prison, one should first of all see if there is an opportunity to carry out the task of a messenger (*zadachu poslannichestva*): “have you done everything you could in your prison? (*sdelali vy vse, chto mozhet, v vasheï tiur'me?*)” (Tolstoï, *Polnoe sobranie* 85: 236). Chertkov’s recommendations are ludicrous: if the prisoner finds himself “handcuffed and hamstrung” (*sviazan po rukam i nogam*), in solitary confinement, or subjected to torture that the body literally cannot endure, then he should try to escape (although the conditions for escape are not named). Tolstoy’s view on *vita activa* consists in what he identifies with the ability to align himself with the “conditions of a possibility of service” (*usloviia vozmozhnosti sluzheniia*) to life irrespective of the conditions of freedom or confinement (Tolstoï, *Polnoe sobranie* 85: 236).<sup>15</sup>

Is this response merely rhetorical? Not only was Tolstoy someone who never “served time”; he even confessed that he was frightened of the very idea of prison. This confession was made the same year that he wrote “Bog pravdu vidit, da ne skoro skazhet” (“God Sees the Truth But Waits,” 1872), his masterpiece parable explaining the reasons why it is possible to accept a

<sup>14</sup> Upon entering the interrogation room and seeing Cesare Lombroso’s study *Criminal Types* on the interrogator’s table, Švejk announces: “I admit everything [...] Without structure no one would ever get anywhere” (Hašek 18, 20).

<sup>15</sup> The Russian word *sluzhenie* (service) has a religious connotation, denoting something like meaningful service to God’s world in general, and does not require a grammatical object. Tolstoy uses the word here and elsewhere in the sense of serving life as a token of commitment to the reverence and preservation of life.

bunk and hard labor in Siberia if it would entail a call for ethical life (e.g., not being angry at the world, not being angry at those who had wronged you, not being a stool pigeon and informer; practicing forgiveness and kind acts despite the harsh conditions). In the same year, however, Tolstoy found himself under investigation for the goring of a shepherd on his estate. The experience of standing at attention at the signal phrase “The Court is in session!” (*Sud idet!*) and responding to the unsavory interrogation committee, was enough for the thought to cross his mind that he could kiss the jailer’s hand in exchange for being left alone for a week so he could write. Aside from its immorality and cruelty, the institution of punishment remains irrelevant to the writer and his characters because it changes precious little of what is cardinal in the inner resolve for ethical life.

The murderer Stepan Pelageiushkin, depicted in “Fal’shivyi kupon” (“The False Coupon,” 1880s–1904), kills for money. His punishment begins before actual imprisonment and exile to Siberia. Spending the night in a ditch and recalling the gaze of his victim and the silent prayer for his soul in her eyes, Stepan begins his long spiritual journey towards self-recovery. He delivers himself to the police and leads a long, holy life of honest labor and brotherly companionship, first in prison and later in Siberia (Tolstoĭ, *Polnoe sobranie* 36: 5–53). Another of Tolstoy’s fictional murderers, Pozdnyshev of *Kreĭtserova sonata* (*The Kreutzer Sonata*, 1887), one of Tolstoy’s most accomplished and verbose criminals, deserves attention. Save for a brief mention of his release after having served his time, not a word about the experience of imprisonment falls from his lips during his obsessive confession, which continues for hours during a notoriously endless train ride. Pozdnyshev maintains that he understood, in his peculiarly twisted way, everything essential about jealousy, the bestiality of love in modern society, about abstinence and sterility, and about the horror of his act, in the moments that he watched his wife die, but not through the process of his sentencing or imprisonment.

Tolstoy erases altogether the boundary between prison and life as such in a few of his last unfinished plans, existing only in related prose drafts and dramatic scenes begun in 1908 and featuring Socialist Revolutionaries in prison and the family of Pavel, a revolutionary worker of peasant origin.<sup>16</sup> In all his artistic renditions of prison conditions, but most notably in *Resurrection* (1899) and “Bozheskoe i chelovecheskoe” (The Divine and the Human, 1906), Tolstoy eschews any elements of the spectacular found in younger writers’ descriptions of prison heroics on the part of revolutionaries. He mercilessly ridiculed such descriptions by authors such as Sergeĭ Stepniak-

---

<sup>16</sup> See Medzhibovskaya, “Terror Unsublimated” and “Tolstoy’s Response to Terror...”, for a detailed discussion of such works from 1908 and 1909 as “Kto ubiitsy? Pavel Kudriash” (“Who Are the Murderers? Pavel Kudriash”), “Net v mire vinovatykh” (“Nobody is Guilty in this World”), and a fragment about the revolutionary hieromonk Iliodor.

Kravchinskiĭ, Boris Savinkov, and Leonid Andreev.<sup>17</sup> According to Tolstoy, there could be nothing sublime or heroic about the punishment of one human being by another – only horror at the senselessness of the process and the act. Nonetheless, Tolstoy speaks admiringly of Pellico’s ability to befriend a spider during incarceration, as a sign of the Italian’s reverence for life – recalling Frankl’s attitude towards the same. In his tract *On Life (O zhizni, 1886–87)*, which had been started as a bedridden self-threnody during a violent illness following a bad leg injury in the fields, Tolstoy wrote the following:

То же, что я еще не различаю в каждом из этих существ его особенного отношения к миру, не доказывает того, чтобы его не было, а только то, что то особенное отношение к миру, которое составляет жизнь одного отдельного паука, удалено от того отношения к миру, в котором нахожусь я, и что потому я еще не понял его, как понял Сильвио Пеллико своего отдельного паука. [...] И потому может уничтожиться мое тело, связанное в одно моим временным сознанием, может уничтожиться и самое мое временное сознание, но не может уничтожиться то мое особенное отношение к миру, составляющее мое особенное я, из которого создалось для меня все, что есть. Оно не может уничтожиться, потому что оно только и есть (Tolstoĭ, *Polnoe sobranie* 26: 405-06).<sup>18</sup>

For Tolstoy, as for Frankl, the epiphany occurs neither in the dramatic scenes on the gallows nor in the heroic and proud fortitude practiced in the cell or in the barracks, but in the quiet scenes of the discovery of reverent relatedness of all people and all creatures. “It is very well for you to say that,” we may object, echoing Solzhenitsyn, “you never spent a day behind bars!” But it is significant that Tolstoy situates prison and the spider not within the punitive network of conditions and relations that delimit life, but places it exactly in the way Arendt and Frankl do, as a prerequisite for an active and loving attitude towards the world for as long as one is alive. Tolstoy accepts (just like Kierkegaard, Cioran, and other existentialists) that we serve our time by living our life, irrespective of place. In a diary entry of 21 November 1897, Tolstoy wrote: “Думал о смерти: О том, как странно, что

---

<sup>17</sup> In January 1909, Chertkov recalled these epithets from Tolstoy concerning the false psychology of the last moments in Andreev’s description: “What a senseless, despairing, shameless jamboree of words!” (Chertkov 124).

<sup>18</sup> “The fact that I don’t as yet distinguish in each of these beings their distinct attitude to the world is no proof that it doesn’t exist, but only that this distinct attitude to the world, of which the life of every single spider is constituted, is remote from that attitude to the world where I abide, and therefore I have not yet understood it the way Silvio Pellico understood his singular spider. [...] And therefore my body may be destroyed, tied as it is in tone with my temporal consciousness, my very temporal consciousness may be destroyed, but my special attitude to the world, which constitutes my distinct I and from which everything that is was created for me, cannot be destroyed. It cannot be destroyed because this is the only thing that is” (my italics).

не хочется умирать, хотя ничто не держит, и вспомнил об узниках, которые так обживутся в своих тюрьмах, что им не хочется и даже бояться покидать их для свободы. Так и мы обжились в своей тюрьме этой жизни и боимся свободы” (*Polnoe sobranie* 53: 165).<sup>19</sup> Tolstoy gave up a career in law primarily because he did not accept Russia’s pattern of modernization, borrowed by Catherine the Great from Cesare Beccaria’s precept of commensurate punishment, which was a way to rationalize the existential situation. Tolstoy thought it outrageous to demand punishment for public offense (*Polnoe sobranie* 46: 6–7) based on the principle of the “measurement of punishment,” which insisted on the proportionate correlation between the gravity of the punishment to the gravity of the crime (Beccaria 19–26). The public execution he witnessed in Paris in 1857 paved the way for his ethical radicalism in rejecting the possibility of normative coercion from above and in the name of *le bien publique*.

How it is possible to exercise ethical freedom under the conditions of oppressive governance? From the comparative point of view of this essay, it is useful to assess Tolstoy’s use of Kant’s categorical imperative, in his view the only legal incentive admissible and appropriate in human transactions with the law, alongside Arendt’s call for the return of the ethical imperative in the courtroom. Tolstoy discussed the principle of categorical imperative with the celebrated lawyer Anatoliĭ Koni. Tolstoy shared Koni’s principle of “inquisitive justice, not affectionate kindness” (*pytlivaia spravedlivost’, a ne laskovaia dobrota*) only on the condition that inquisitive justice implies the application of Kant’s categorical imperative, calling for moral behavior and separating a judge’s role from that of an executor of power to punish: “Я лично не могу, как бы ни желал, отрешиться от мысли, что как скоро признан высший нравственный религиозный закон, категорический императив Канта, так уничтожается самый суд перед его требованиями” (Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie* 75: 96).<sup>20</sup>

In an undated conversation with Isabel Hapgood, recorded in her memoir, Tolstoy describes the behavior of military and court bureaucrats of his day, who are afraid of pardoning anyone lest a precedent be set of charity, which would cause the punishment machinery to falter (Hapgood 99). Decades later, Arendt described Eichmann in strikingly similar terms. The correlation between Tolstoy’s and Arendt’s views is remarkable. For Arendt, Eichmann

---

<sup>19</sup> “Have been thinking about death: how strange it is that I am unwilling to die – although nothing is holding me back. And I remembered how convicts get so domesticated in their prisons that they are unwilling, even afraid of, leaving their cells for freedom. In the same way we have grown so accustomed to our prison house of this life that we are afraid of freedom.”

<sup>20</sup> “No matter how much I might wish it, I personally cannot rid myself of the idea that as soon as the highest religious moral law – Kant’s categorical imperative – is acknowledged, then legal courts are annihilated by its requirements” (Tolstoy to A. F. Koni, 1 May 1904; Iasnaia Poliana). An excellent summary of Koni’s views, including his most celebrated dicta summarized here, can be found in V. I. Smoliarchik’s *Anatoliĭ Fedorovich Koni*.

symbolized unthinking obedience. He was merely a banal purveyor of orders from his superiors, occasionally rewarded for his loyal service. He did not make much of his role in the carrying out of the Final Solution when he was chatting with occasional Jewish visitors, his acquaintances, who came to plead with him vainly for their loved ones. Of course he had never volunteered for murdering anyone directly, with his own hands. He was doing “his duty” indirectly, signing orders that would dispatch people to their deaths. Arendt notes that Eichmann went as far as evoking Kant as a moral witness when he argued that by fulfilling orders he was adjusting the principle of his will to the principle of general laws, which happened to be the laws of the Third Reich:

To the surprise of everybody, Eichmann came up with an approximately correct definition of the categorical imperative: “I meant by my remark about Kant that the principle of my will must always be such that it can become the principle of general laws” (which was not the case with theft or murder, for instance, because the thief or the murderer cannot conceivably wish to live under a legal system that would give others the right to rob or murder him). Upon further questioning, he added that he had read Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. He then proceeded to explain that from the moment he was charged with carrying out the Final Solution he had ceased to live according to Kantian principles, that he had known it, and that he had consoled himself with the thought that he no longer “was master of his own deeds,” as he was unable “to change anything.” What he had failed to point out in court was that in this “period of crimes legalized by the state,” as he himself now called it, he had not simply dismissed the Kantian formula as no longer applicable, he had distorted it to read: Act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or of the law of the land (Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 136)

Arendt scrutinized the motives for Eichmann’s behavior. Kant’s reliance on man’s faculty of judgment in the Third Critique, which Eichmann never read, “rules out blind obedience” and thus renders impuissant the “categorical imperative of the Third Reich,” in which every action within its remit aims to secure the Führer’s approval (Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 136). Arendt corrects Kant, who disbelieved in man’s capacity for complete and absolute goodness, arguing instead that only goodness, and not evil, can be radical; that goodness is human as well as divine; and that by choosing goodness over evil, and by acting in good ways, men redeem the shakiness of their convictions and repair the damage of bad faith and the radical defects in the absolute moral order of things.

Tolstoy also held a conviction of the reality of absolute goodness, but he took an even more radical stance with regard to the idea of the innocent victim as a categorical witness. He rejected any possibility of punishment, based on a definite judgment about an individual’s guilt before the law, regardless of whether, in serving justice, it attempted to mitigate or increase

cruelty. Tolstoy often quoted Hebrews 10.30: “Vengeance is mine, I shall repay,” and also Matthew 18.21–22, containing Jesus’ injunction to Peter to forgive not seven but “seventy times seven.” Tolstoy used the latter dictum, *inter alia*, as one of the epigraphs to his novel *Resurrection*, along with the injunction in John 8.3–11 not to judge others, his triumvirate of wisdoms about justice. In the final revision of his calendar of wisdom *Krug chteniia* (The Circle of Reading, 1906–09), Tolstoy paraphrased Hebrews 10.30 and John 8.3–11 to impress upon the reader yet again that evil spreads with the appropriated prerogative to punish: “Большая часть бедствий людей происходит от того, что грешные люди признали за собой право наказания. Мне отмщение, и аз воздам” (Tolstoï, *Polnoe sobranie* 42: 17).<sup>21</sup> Tolstoy adds a few other, aphoristic observations about the vindictive, retributive nature of all punishments and prisons: “Наказание всегда жестоко-мучительно. Если бы оно не было жестоко-мучительно, оно бы не назначалось. Тюремное заключение для людей нашего времени так же жестоко-мучительно, как было битье кнутом сто лет назад” (Tolstoï, *Polnoe sobranie* 42: 17–18).<sup>22</sup> If Tolstoy’s absolute form of justice, which rejects the notion of power and, hence, punishment, were applied in the courtroom, Eichmann’s claim that he merely followed orders would become indefensible, as would Foucault’s doctrine of punishment. Although diametrically opposed, both Eichmann’s and Foucault’s views depend on the notion of the existence of power, which leads them to accept that because there is power, there is punishment.

What is the source of Tolstoy’s response to punishment? During his studies of Catherine the Great’s legal *Nakaz* (Instruction), Tolstoy noted that “To punish in Russian means to instruct” (*Nakazyvat’ – po-russki znachit pouchat’*) (Tolstoï, *Polnoe sobranie* 42: 16). Tolstoy views crime as a type of wrongdoing prompted by the weakness of judgment which invites delusion (*zabluzhdenie*) or loss of moral direction. Imprisonment or punishment would be powerless to instruct, but they possess the power to corrupt; only forgiveness will have the power to teach in a positive way and restore moral absolutes and goodness. This idea resounds most provocatively in Tolstoy’s personal letter to Alexander III (8–15 March 1881) following the assassination of Alexander II, when Tolstoy was pressing the young tsar, to no avail, to exercise Christian pardon even at the cost of violating the law of his reign (Tolstoï, *Polnoe sobranie* 63: 49–51). Alexander responded through a third party with an argument that resembles the later ones of Foucault and Eichmann, namely, that the power to punish or pardon is not based on his power as an individual, but rather on the divine power of which he is an instrument,

<sup>21</sup> “The greater part of human misfortune results from sinful people taking upon themselves the right to punish. Vengeance is mine, I shall repay.”

<sup>22</sup> “Punishment is always cruel and tortuous. If it were not cruel and tortuous it would never be meted out. Imprisonment is as cruel and tortuous for people of our time as was flogging by knout a hundred years ago.”

and in respect of which he does not have the right to go against the law of his reign (Medzhibovskaya, "Tolstoy's Response" 511–12).

Tolstoy showed a particular interest in the possibility of the reversal of punishment through forgiveness, with the possibility to disobey the law code, if necessary, in order to exercise mercy. In his work "Chto takoe religia i v chem sushchnost' ee" ("What is Religion and What is Its Essence," 1901–02), Tolstoy recalls Montaigne in his consideration of the example of Nero, whom he compares favorably to modern rulers (Tolstoï, *Polnoe sobranie* 35: 173–74). Tolstoy observes that the majority of modern Neros act consistently with their station, signing off on sentences that override their purely human urge to pardon. Tolstoy studied cases of these failures to pardon closely in his late works such as "Posle bala" (After the Ball, 1903), *Khadzhi Murat* (1904), and the already mentioned "The Divine and the Human" (1906). All these works point to moral laziness, to the preference of hiding behind the letter of ordinances for fear of losing the authority and safety of their office as key reasons that keep rulers from exercising humanity instead of punishment. In order to explore the possibility of the violation of office by rulers, Tolstoy invented a narrative situation in which he could subdue servants and operators of the punitive machine to séances of lethargic dreams and hypnotism, during which they could imagine themselves in the body or the place of their victim, or be brought to witness the results of their punitive policies and orders. They can thus see people imprisoned and executed, and whole families uprooted and deported under armed guard. In this state of induced coma and zero thought, rulers and bureaucrats are made submissive and receptive to the voice of their awakened conscience as witnesses who can put an end to punishment and repression when they wake back to life.<sup>23</sup> And so they do, in Tolstoy's late fiction.

What can be learned from this literary miracle-making? Dmitri Nekhliudov of *Resurrection* (1899) understands the verses of the Gospel about forgiveness as a call for action only after he revisits prison in the darkness of the night with the English Evangelical preacher (both are ridiculed by prisoners when they visit during the day for their saccharine didacticism about the importance of patience). The two night visitors realize that they have entered a zone that requires change, a reaction, action. This was the very scene with the boy sleeping near a slop pail that caused Stalin's bewilderment, which he then attempted to cover up with ridicule. Dictators and tyrants could well understand the dangerous charge of this scene. This passage in the novel was also banned by Tsar Nikolai II and excised out of the versions of the text published in Russia before 1917. Thanks to the efforts of Tolstoy's youngest daughter, Alexandra Tolstoy, who deeply internalized

---

<sup>23</sup> This is precisely what happens in "Son molodogo tsaria" ("Dream of a Young Tsar," 1894), "Assiriiskii tsar' Asarkhadon" ("The Assyrian Tsar Asarkhadon," 1903), and "Posmertnye zapiski startsa Fedora Kuz'micha" ("Posthumous Notes of the Elder Fedor Kuzmich," 1905).

the book's call for action, the section was restored in the posthumous publication of Tolstoy's works abroad (1911) and in the editions of Tolstoy in Soviet Russia.

Alexandra Tolstoy defected in 1929, unwilling to participate in Stalin's program of exploiting Tolstoy's legacy and aware of the extent to which Tolstoy's imagined and rhetorical prisons could threaten the holders of power and also influence the lives of many Soviet citizens during their arrests, trials, sentences to the Gulag, and time on death row. Upon her own re-arrest and sentencing to a term in the high-walled Novospassky Monastery, which the Bolsheviks had turned into a camp, she made a new friend, the former governor's daughter, who offered her encouragement by paraphrasing a quote from *Resurrection*. In her memoirs, Alexandra recalls her saying, "Dear Alexandra L'vovna [...] don't be distressed, please don't. We can live anywhere – it all depends on ourselves. And this place is not so dreadful as it seems at first. Believe me, you can be happy anywhere. Come, I'll show you to your cell. Let me help you carry your things" (A. Tolstoy 128). Following the examples in the literary works of her father, with their emphasis on the absolute possibility of survival through *caritas*, Alexandra was able to smuggle out of prison the information necessary to save lives, supported other inmates and their children, and always insisted on respectful and humane treatment of prisoners during her five arrests and ordeals in detention centers and prison in the period of Red Terror. In reading her prison memoir, one is reminded of the behavior of the noble, resisting prisoners described in Part III of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*. It is difficult to let go of the impression that prison was for Alexandra a fortuitous and instructive adventure, in which her father's writings about prison served as survival guides.<sup>24</sup>

One of Russia's greatest religious philosophers and ardent anti-Bolsheviks, Semyon Frank, was deported from Soviet Russia to Germany in 1922. A Jew, he found himself in hiding in the French Alps during WWII. While in hiding, Frank thought about Tolstoy's idea of non-violence as expressed in his depiction of the fictional character Boris Cheremshanov, a conscientious objector doomed to certain death in the tsars' prisons at the end of Tolstoy's unfinished play "Light Shineth in Darkness" ("I svet vo t'me svetit," 1896–1902). Frank concludes that Tolstoyan precepts of non-violent resistance to evil are those of victims and bystanders, rather than of engaged witnesses, because they underestimate the real power of evil and its institutions (Frank, *Neprochitannoe* 339). After the war, Frank titled the last work published in his lifetime *Svet vo t'me* (Light in the Darkness, 1949). It enters into a dialogue with Tolstoy's play and other texts – most notably Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* discussed earlier in this essay. Like most European existential philosophers of his time, Frank saw no casuistry in sequestering "genuine, essential salvation" from "the task of simple pro-

---

<sup>24</sup> On Alexandra Tolstoy's arrests, see Croskey 13–22.

tection from evil, i.e., the task of the external counteraction of spiritually and materially destructive forces acting in the world, and the external facilitation of the well-being of one's neighbors in the world" (Frank, *The Light Shineth in Darkness* 125). Frank addresses what he describes as a schematized attitude towards deconstructed and ridiculous evil, the evil rendered non-dangerous rhetorically through Tolstoy's famed device of estrangement (*ostranenie*). For Frank this represents a lackadaisical attitude, responsible for the spread of the banal evil of Nazism and Stalinism (Frank, *The Light Shineth in Darkness* 126).

Against the background of these criticisms, it is interesting to consider the core conflict in Tolstoy's "Light Shineth in Darkness," specifically the argument between Nikolaï Ivanovich Saryntsev (an autobiographical figure for Tolstoy) and an Orthodox Priest, Father Gerasim. Gerasim supports the conjoined codes of justice of the "two kingdoms," the Church and the State. In his opinion, which coincides with the official doctrine, the State is endowed with a prerogative to punish or forgive the tsar's subjects (upon first extracting pledges of their loyalty). Saryntsev responds that consequently the Church "sanctions oaths, murder, and executions," going on to argue that all state institutions and their obedient employees are unconscionable accessories to sanctioned violence (Tolstoï, *Polnoe sobranie* 31: 150).<sup>25</sup> Tolstoy did not attempt to conceal the controversy of these propositions. Frank may not have known that the unfinished play has two alternative versions of the concluding scenes, neither of which suggests a conventionally happy end. In the first version, Boris Cheremshanov, a young aristocrat and fiancé of Saryntsev's daughter, falls for Saryntsev's promotion of conscientious objecting. He is court marshaled, locked away in solitary confinement, and then thrown into an asylum wing of the prison for his obstinate refusal to retract. Nikolaï Ivanovich makes no objection at the end of the play to Boris's mother, who curses him for having brought her son to ruin. In another sketch of the conclusion, Boris's mother fires at Saryntsev, killing him; his dying words express relief, since he sees no possibility of redeeming his guilt for Boris's martyrdom. However, he is relieved, knowing that conscientious objection and peaceful disobedience are the only morally legitimate ways to confront violent and punitive politics of the state against its people or against the nations with which it goes to war. At the cost of his freedom and his young life, Boris accomplishes what Saryntsev only preaches: he refuses to be an obedient and thoughtless purveyor of repressive policies. But there is another way to understand the meaning of Tolstoy's unfinished work, not through Saryntsev, but through Boris as an example of *vita activa*, and through his resolve not to be a punishing hand of the government. This is how the work of light shining in darkness is realized.

---

<sup>25</sup> The English translation is quoted from *Tolstoy Plays* 3: 61.

Despite his possible disagreement, Frank's real-life seriousness in responding to what was Tolstoy's fictional (in this case, dramatic) solution to confinement and escape is telling. There are still other examples that testify to the enduring force of Tolstoy's texts in the fates of prisoners. Evgeniia Ginzburg died a believer in the redemption of Leninist truth and the Communist cause, rather than Christian forgiveness. The events of perestroika, during which her memoir finally became publishable, provided her with an opportunity to convey to those born after the dark years of Stalin's terror, to those whom she addresses as "honest people and true communists," the light of Leninism (Ginzburg 417). The memoir itself all but disabuses her example of the effect of the righted party call. In a telling episode during the overcrowded cattle car transport, Ginzburg relates a remarkable example of cooperation following a brief fallout between the "political offenders" and enemies of the people of all ideological stripe – Communists, but also the former Mensheviks, and Social Revolutionaries – after an accidental spill of a tiny ration of water. At a station in the Urals, Ginzburg presses herself closer to the opening in the door, which the guards had neglected to bolt properly. The sounds of gurgling water and "hot water" signs she could see at the station are too much to bear. Ginzburg, an atheist, begs God for a miracle as she throws herself into the bustle of the station. And the miracle occurs: one of the women in the car manages to push her hand with a mug through the opening and cries out: "Water!" The guards are too stunned to intervene in the sudden outpouring of kindness of the people on the platform, who spontaneously organize delivery of water and food to the "poor souls" in the car. This scene reminds Ginzburg and the others in the car of prison scenes depicted in Tolstoy's *Resurrection*: Ginzburg recounts, "I felt for a moment as if we were not in 1939 but back in 1909. But the modern age reasserted itself in the person of a young woman who hastily thrust into the car a bunch of spring onions, saying: 'here, eat some vitamins. That's the most important thing of all!'" (302-05). Likewise, scenes from Tolstoy's *Resurrection* sustained Andrei Amal'rik during his years of dissident opposition to the KGB rule.<sup>26</sup>

Literature takes the lead in explaining confinement as a horrific part of the human condition. Literature unites stories about punishment across time and place in written accounts of suffering and endurance that ultimately transcend borders, as well as historical and political contexts, becoming a force that connects life experiences through collective memory. By establishing its points of resonance and dissonance among the various voices – enclosed within tight isolating spaces or crowded into a chorus – literature about prison conveys ruptures and connections between the body and mind, between a collectivity of bodies and minds, and their audience. From didactic exposure

---

<sup>26</sup> See Amal'rik's *Zapiski dissidenta* (Notes of a Revolutionary), published posthumously, two years after his death in a car accident, after his emigration from the Soviet Union.

to picaresque satire, from prison and camp ethnography to autobiographical testament, from fictionalized experience to pure fiction, confinement is a condition of life which transcends walls and overcomes language barriers. The texts examined here engage the deepest recesses of selfhood that touch and implicate millions, achieving fully what Judith Butler hopes for: “One would need to hear the face as it speaks in something other than language to know the precariousness of life that is at stake” (Butler 151). During the final years of his life, when he was writing almost daily and speaking publicly against punishment, Tolstoy frequently imagined himself on the way to the scaffold. This happened also in January 1909, when he returned to his plots about revolutionaries in prison and on death row:

В старости это уже совсем можно и даже должно, но возможно и в молодости, а именно то, чтобы быть в состоянии не только приговоренного к смертной казни, но в состоянии везомого на место казни. Как хорошо: «Я есмь, смерти нет. Смерть придет – меня не будет». Мало того, чтобы быть готовым не удивляться тому, что есть смерть, ничего не загадывать; хорошо, главное то, что вся жизнь становится торжественна, серьезна. Да, жизнь – серьезное дело (*Polnoe sobranie* 57: 4)<sup>27</sup>

Acknowledged and embraced as a universal, nationless, and media-transcending common narrative, confinement – a constituent condition of life itself – becomes one of humanity’s most essential stories. It is not possible, when confronted with the unspeakable expressed in these stories, to be left alone, emotionless and expressionless. It is not possible to leave it with theories to authorize and reify the unspeakable. It is impossible to leave the stories unexamined. Because life, of which prison and punishment are also part, is, as Tolstoy holds, a serious thing.

---

<sup>27</sup> “In old age this is not only possible but a must, but also possible when one is young, and to wit: to not only be in a state of someone condemned to death, but in a state of someone taken to the place of execution. So well: ‘I am, and there is no death. Death will come, I am no more.’ It is not enough to be ready not to be surprised that there is death and to forecast nothing; it is good, main thing, the whole life becomes solemn, serious. Yes, life is a serious thing.”

## Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Print.
- . *The Open: Man and Animal*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004. Print.
- . *State of Exception*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005. Print.
- Amal'rik, Andrei. *Zapiski dissidenta*. Moscow: Ardis, 1982. Print.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Rev. and expanded ed. New York: Penguin, 1994. Print.
- . *The Human Condition*. 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958. Print.
- . *Love and Saint Augustine*. Eds. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996. Print.
- . *Men in Dark Times*. San Diego: Harvest, 1993. Print.
- . *On Revolution*. New York: Penguin, 1977. Print.
- . *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, 1994. Print.
- Beccaria, Cesare. *On Crimes and Punishments and Other Writings*. Ed. Richard Bellamy. Trans. Richard Davies, Virginia Cox, and Richard Bellamy. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004. Print.
- Chekhov, A. P. "Palata № 6." *Sobranie sochineniĭ*. Vol. 5. Ed. M. Eremin. Moscow: Ogonek, 1970. 105–59. Print.
- . *Ward Number Six and Other Stories*. Ed. and trans. Ronald Hingley. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.
- Chertkov, V. G. "Zapisi." *L. N. Tolstoĭ v vospominaniĭakh sovremennikov*. Vol. 2. Ed. N. M. Fortunatov. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1978. 119–29. Print.
- Cioran, Emil Michel. *Drawn and Quartered*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Arcade, 2012. Print.
- Croskey, Robert. *The Legacy of Tolstoy: Alexandra Tolstoy and the Soviet Regime in the 1920s*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 2008. Print.
- Dante. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Inferno*. Trans. Allen Mandelbaum. New York: Bantam, 1980. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Death Penalty*. Vol. 1. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2013. Print.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The House of the Dead and Poor Folk*. Trans. Constance Garnett. New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004. Print.
- Dostoevsky, F. M. *Polnoe sobranie sochineniĭ*. 30 vols. Eds. G. M. Fridlender et al. Leningrad: Nauka, 1972–1990. Print.
- Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print.

- Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France. 1978–1979*. Ed. Michel Senellart. Trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave, 2008. Print.
- . *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1979. Print.
- . *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*. Eds. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose. New York: New Press, 2003. Print.
- . *I, Pierre Rivière, Having Slaughtered My Mother, My Sister, and My Brother*. Trans. Frank Jellinek. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1982. Print.
- . *Power*. Ed. James D. Faubion. Trans. Robert Hurley et al. New York: New Press, 2000. Print.
- Frank, S. L. *The Light Shineth in Darkness: An Essay in Christian Ethics and Social Philosophy*. Trans. Boris Jakim. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1989. Print.
- . *Neprochitannoe: Stat'i, pis'ma, vospominaniia*. Moscow: Shkola politicheskikh issledovaniĭ, 2001. Print.
- Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Trans. Ilse Lasch. Boston: Beacon, 2006. Print.
- Ginzburg, Evgeniia. *Journey Into the Whirlwind*. Trans. Paul Sherwood and Max Hayward. San Diego: Harvest/Harcourt, 1995. Print.
- Hapgood, Isabel Florence. *Russian Rambles*. Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1895. Print.
- Hašek, Jaroslav. *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the World War*. Trans. Cecil Parrott. New York: Penguin, 1974. Print.
- James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Ed. Martin E. Marty. Penguin, 1982. Print.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*. Trans. Alexander Dru. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1938. Print.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Representing the Holocaust. History, Theory, Trauma*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994. Print.
- . *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001. Print.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Eds. and trans. Adrian T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. Print.
- Medzhibovskaya, Inessa. "Terror Unsublimated: Militant Monks, Revolution, and Tolstoy's Last Master Plots." *Tolstoy Studies Journal* vol. 22 (2010): 17–38. Print.
- . "Tolstoy's Response to Terror and Revolutionary Violence." *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9.3 (2008): 505–31. Print.
- . Transcription and Presentation of Stalin's Marginalia and Comments in Tolstoy's *Voskreseniie*. Forthcoming.
- de Montaigne, Michel. *The Complete Works*. Trans. Donald M. Frame. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. Print.
- Novgorodtsev, P. I. *Sochineniia*. Moscow: Raritet, 1995. Print.
- Pellico, Silvio. *My Prisons: Francesca da Rimini*. Trans. Florence Kendrick Cooper. n. p.: National Alumni, 1907. Print.
- Shansky, N. M., V. V. Ivanov, and T. V. Shanskaia. *Kratkiĭ etimologicheskii slovar' russkogo iazyka*. Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1971. Print.
- Smoliarichik, V. I. *Anatoliĭ Fedorovich Koni*. Moscow: Nauka, 1981. Print.
- Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr I. *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918–1956*. Trans. Thomas B. Whitney and Harry Willets. Authorized and abridged ed. Perennial Classics, 2002. Print.

- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador/Farrar, 2003. Print.
- Stalin, Joseph. Marginalia and Comments in Tolstoy. *Voskreseniie: Roman*. Ed. N. K. Gudziĭ. Moscow: Academia, 1935. The Personal Library of Joseph Stalin at the Russian State Archive for Social and Political History. 558–3–353. Archival document.
- Tolstoy, Alexandra, *Out of the Past*. Trans. and eds. Katharine Strelsky and Catherine Wolkonsky. New York: Columbia UP, 1981. Print.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *Resurrection*. Trans. Louise Maude. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.
- . *Tolstoy Plays*. 3 vols. Trans. Marvin Kantor with Tanya Tulchinsky. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1998. Print.
- Tolstoĭ, L. N. *Polnoe sobranie sochineniĭ*. Ed. V. G. Chertkov et al. 90 vols. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1928–1958. Print.
- . *Voskresenie. Roman*. Ed. N. K. Gudziĭ. Moscow: Academia. 1935. Print.
- Vico, Giambattista. *New Science: Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations*. Trans. David Marsh. 3rd ed. New York: Penguin, 1999. Print.
- Young-Bruehl, Elisabeth. *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale UP, 2004. Print.



# Non-Totalitarian Imprisonment under Western and Eastern Eyes: Lord Archer, Eduard Limonov, and Theories of Human Motivation

Andrei Rogatchevski

Russia is a country where periods of restrained freedom have violently alternated with periods of unlimited freedom. Amidst these pendulum-like swings, prison stands as a powerful but controversial symbol of both the protection of order and the oppression of liberty. Given that prison culture is often said to suffuse Russian culture, is there anything truly unique about prison experience in Russia, in comparison with elsewhere?

Prison experience befalls an individual, whose space is restricted, whose time is misused, and whose will is subjugated by an outside agency under a preventative or punitive pretext. Workhouses, police cells, penal colonies, concentration camps, immigration detention facilities, and prison farms – as well as prisons *per se* – all belong to the category of institutions where confinement can be experienced. Arguably, the most notorious institutions of this kind have been run on behalf of totalitarian dictatorships, resulting in experiences showing a considerable degree of similarity across the geographical and cultural spectrum. Thus, according to one observation, referring to Hitler's Reich and countries of the Eastern Bloc in Stalinist times, "normal capacity for thought was defied by the unprecedented madness of the Holocaust just as much as by the seeming meaninglessness of the Soviet mass arrest" (Engdahl 9). Yet another shared feature of incarceration under both Nazi and Communist dictators has been pointed out by the philosopher Avishai Margalit:

Being a helpless inmate in a Nazi concentration camp or a Bolshevik gulag can make you believe that the thousand year Reich or the unstoppable juggernaut of communist triumph is just the way of the world. The disparity of power between victim and perpetrator confirms every minute what seems to be the invincibility of the regime. Under such adverse conditions, to believe in what would under normal circumstances be a rather reasonable belief – namely, that the evil power is limited and temporary – is hard indeed (155).

The list of such commonalities can be expanded to encompass instances when a state "engages in a systematic practice of depriving individuals of their freedom based on non-criminal [...] considerations [...] accompanied by

extreme physical conditions including torture and execution” (Oja 273). Yet what about non-totalitarian prison experience in countries with non-dictatorial regimes? Do they have any features in common with the totalitarian variety? And where does post-Communist Russia fit into the picture?

In order to answer these questions, I will begin by examining prison writing based on the first-hand experience of two contemporary authors – one Russian, the other British. The authors are of different cultural backgrounds, but similar age and criminal history, including the prison conditions endured. Their statements about prison experience will then be compared to statements by other writers, from Russia and elsewhere, who left a substantial record of their and, in some cases, other prisoners’ experiences in non-totalitarian confinement. I have, where possible, limited my selection of texts to autobiographical testimonies in the “factographic mode,” for the sake of veracity, rather than the verisimilitude of the “realistic mode.”<sup>1</sup> Non-fictional descriptions of confinement, distinguished by a “foregrounding of the semantic content of the message [...], at the expense of its poetic function” (Schoonneveldt 244), are often perceived as particularly trustworthy, even though they may pursue a specific agenda. The question of whether the authors are guilty of the crimes they went to jail for does not necessarily affect the credibility of their testimonies about incarceration. As one scholar puts it, it is possible not to be “moral and yet [be] a moral witness,” i.e., to experience and report on a “combination of evil and the suffering it produces” (Margalit 162, 148).

The Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare (b. 1940) and the leader of the National Bolshevik Party of Russia, Eduard Limonov (b. 1943), seem to form a suitably odd couple with which to start off my comparative investigation. Best-selling authors-cum-politicians of dubious reputation,<sup>2</sup> both were arrested in 2001 (Archer in London, Limonov in the Altai region of Russia), sentenced to four years (Lord Archer for perjury, Limonov for gun-running<sup>3</sup>) and released early, for good behaviour, in the summer of 2003. In a relatively short space of time, both passed through several penitentiary institutions. Archer served time in five different ones, from Belmarsh in A-category to

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on the distinction between the two modes, see Toker 189–90.

<sup>2</sup> For more on Archer and Limonov, see, for instance, Carrère, Crick, Dodolev, and Mantle. It has to be said that Lord Archer has outperformed Limonov not only as a well-integrated member of the establishment (he was an MP, a deputy chairman of the Conservative Party and became a life peer in 1992), but also by the number of books sold (estimated between 250 million and 400 million copies, see Horowitz). However, Limonov leads by the number of titles published, some fifty of his to Lord Archer’s thirty or so (translations into many foreign languages excluded).

<sup>3</sup> Lord Archer was tried by jury and his sentence was widely believed to be inappropriately severe, as of 830 people convicted for perjury in the UK in 1991–2000, “only four people were given a four-year sentence upheld on appeal” (Archer, *Prison Diary* 795). Limonov was tried by a judge and, given that prosecution had asked for fourteen years, his sentence can only be seen as rather mild, indicating that his guilt could not really be proven in court (although he still had to be convicted as a prominent member of the radical opposition).

North Sea Camp and Hollesley Bay in D-category, via Wayland in C-category and Lincoln in B-category.<sup>4</sup> Limonov was an inmate in three prisons and a penal colony, including the notorious high-security Lefortovo remand prison (then run by the FSB), as well as several penitentiaries in the Saratov region. Both authors detailed their ordeals at some length in non-fictional genres, resulting in a three-volume *Prison Diary* by Archer (whose 2005 omnibus edition numbers just over a thousand pages), and such books as *V plenu u mertvetsov* (A Captive of the Dead, 2002), *Po tiur'mam* (From One Prison to Another, 2004), and *Torzhestvo metafiziki* (Metaphysics Will Triumph, 2005) by Limonov, totalling just under a thousand pages. It is unlikely that Archer and Limonov are aware of each other's existence to this day, which renders the parallels observed below even more striking. Like two diamonds, "The Western Star" and "The Star of the East," forming two eyes of the same temple god (see Christie), I will bring these two authors together in the comparison below, with the aim of providing a stereoscopic insight into the prison culture phenomenon.

The comparison will focus on the prison conditions as the authors describe them (chiefly in Belmarsh and Lefortovo as establishments with a particularly strict regime), the authors' attitudes to their new environment, and the lessons they learn.<sup>5</sup> The framework used to analyse the authors' depictions of their own behaviour in confinement is largely based on a theory of human motivation that establishes a universal hierarchy of needs, the satisfaction of which, from lower to higher levels, contributes towards an individual's sense of fulfilment and worth.<sup>6</sup> At the base of the hierarchy, there are purely physiological needs, followed (in descending order of priority) by the need for safety, love, esteem, and self-actualisation. According to A. H. Maslow, the average individual "is satisfied perhaps 85 per cent in his physiological needs, 70 per cent in his love needs, 40 per cent in his self-esteem needs, and 10 per cent in his self-actualisation needs" (388–89). A common assumption would be that those who are perceived to be non-average, such as the two celebrity authors in question, owing in no small measure to their status as public figures, suffer an especially powerful blow when they, just like any other prisoner, are stigmatised, deprived of friends, family, and sex – not to mention the limitations imposed on their earning capacity and the lack of provision for essentials, such as water, food, fresh air, sleep, and

---

<sup>4</sup> The detention system in Britain is based on inmates' security categorization, from A (highly dangerous to the public) to D (suitable for open prisons).

<sup>5</sup> Cf.: "Prison started teaching me lessons precisely when I thought, at the age of fifty-eight, that I had known it all" (Limonov, *V plenu* 22; all translations from Russian are mine unless indicated otherwise); "I learn something new every few minutes. [...] I am still on such a steep learning curve" (Archer, *Prison Diary* 35, 157).

<sup>6</sup> Cf.: "if prepotent need A is satisfied only 10 per cent, then need B may not be visible at all. However, as this need A becomes satisfied 25 per cent, need B may emerge 5 per cent [...] and so on" (Maslow 389).

excretion.<sup>7</sup> How do Archer and Limonov describe their reaction to such conditions? In what way, if any, is their individual response to the challenges of imprisonment rooted in their personal circumstances and the cultural tradition, English and Russian, that each of them represents?

A millionaire accustomed to a degree of comfort, Archer seems to be put quite out of sorts by “Hellmarsh”’s<sup>8</sup> stony beds, toilets without a flush (in some cells, at least<sup>9</sup>), and food that he finds inedible (according to him, only £1.27 was allocated at the time for three meals per prisoner per day).<sup>10</sup> As the inmates’ canteen allowance is limited to £12.50 a week, he cannot really survive on the meagre rations of bottled water, biscuits, and crisps from the prison canteen either.<sup>11</sup> In hot weather, maintaining homeostasis,<sup>12</sup> one of the indispensable physiological needs placed by Maslow at the bottom of his hierarchy, becomes difficult.<sup>13</sup> Archer also complains about being locked up in his cell, for up to seventeen hours on days when Belmarsh is short-staffed. This is too long to remain without exercise and company (his cellmate had shopped him to a tabloid, so Archer was moved to a cell of his own). When asked whether he wants to attend a church service, Archer readily agrees, not because he is turning to God, but because “it will mean a long walk and forty-five minutes in a far larger room than my cell” (*Prison Diary* 49). So-called power walks in the exercise courtyard (once a day for just under an hour) are not enough for Archer, a fitness enthusiast, but it is not easy to get onto a gym rota which accommodates only sixty people at any one time for a prison population of just over 900. Limonov is just as health-conscious as Archer, but has to resort to press-ups and sit-ups in his cell and in the prison

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf.: “A man of education, condemned by law to the same punishment as the common man, [often] suffers incomparably more. He must stifle all his needs, all his habits, he must descend into a lower sphere, must breathe another air. He is like a fish thrown upon the sand. The punishment that he undergoes, equal for all criminals according to the law, is ten times more severe and more painful for him than for the common man” (Dostoevsky 77).

<sup>8</sup> Belmarsh’s nickname, see Archer, *Prison Diary* 231.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. “this time the lavatory has a flush. No need to pee in the washbasin any more” (Archer, *Prison Diary* 27).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. “overcooked meat, Heaven knows from which animals, mushy peas swimming in water, and potatoes that Oliver Twist would have rejected” (Archer, *Prison Diary* 27). Predictably, in Wayland “the food is every bit as bad as Belmarsh” (Archer, *Prison Diary* 277). Only at the North Sea Camp does food turn out to be “as good as most motorway cafes” (Archer, *Prison Diary* 613), which is not much of a compliment.

<sup>11</sup> Archer tops up his canteen supplies with more bottled water and biscuits from an insider dealer. Reportedly, even drugs are not too difficult to obtain on the inside. “Amazing how much heroin you can get into the spine of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*,” Archer says (*Prison Diary* 186). Prison staff is apparently inclined to turn a blind eye on the drug-dealing in jail because prisoners under the influence usually keep quiet.

<sup>12</sup> “The body’s automatic efforts to maintain a constant, normal state of the blood stream” (Maslow 372).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. “I open my little window to its furthest extent (6 inches) to let in whatever breeze there is, but I still feel myself sweating” (Archer, *Prison Diary* 135). For his part, Limonov fights cold in Lefortovo: “a bare breast underneath my indigo prison robes, made of cotton fabric... I’d put a towel above my breast and hold it with both hands for warmth” (Tul’skiĭ).

courtyard (which is divided into small individual cubicles to prevent prisoners from communicating with each other). There is no such thing as a gym for prisoners in Lefortovo.

In Belmarsh, you are entitled to converse with fellow prisoners under supervision of the guards during meals, religious services, work, and study sessions, as well as during association hours in the courtyard, in the common room (where you can also watch television), and even in other prisoners' cells (which you can visit by invitation). By contrast, Lefortovo's regulations limit prisoners' communication to cellmates only (usually two or three, at least one of whom is often an informer or a bully intent on extracting confessions from other prisoners by any means at his disposal, in hope of receiving a sentence reduction as a reward). Unlike Belmarsh inmates, Lefortovo prisoners do not work, study, or pray in groups, although books, newspapers, and TV sets are allowed in the cells (various radio programmes, depending on the preference of the guards on duty, are heard over the course of the day via the centralized radio system).<sup>14</sup> Food parcels (if there is anyone on the outside who cares and can afford to send them) add variety and nutritional value to Lefortovo inmates' rations, normally limited to pearl barley with herring (see Limonov, *V plenu* 20).<sup>15</sup> Water, too, is at a premium in Lefortovo. Inmates are only allowed a shower once a week,<sup>16</sup> so some prisoners resort to ablutions above the cell's toilet bowl.<sup>17</sup> Breathing is impeded when cellmates smoke, as many do. Lefortovo is not the worst example: in typically overcrowded Russian cells, as a rule, prisoners "live in half-dark, wet surroundings, saturated with nicotine; to strike a match, one has to squeeze through to the cell window for a current of air" (Limonov, *V plenu* 179).<sup>18</sup> Excretion is not a private matter, so that prisoners "practically live in a smelly toilet" (Limonov, *V plenu* 143).<sup>19</sup> Prisoners' sleep is disturbed, among other things, by the dim electric glow that is always on at night,<sup>20</sup> by the threat of harsh punishment,<sup>21</sup> and by sex deprivation.<sup>22</sup> In Belmarsh, sleep is

---

<sup>14</sup> In Belmarsh, individual radios and stereos are allowed in the cells. Lord Archer uses his to follow cricket matches.

<sup>15</sup> Lord Archer may well have a justifiably low opinion of prison cuisine, but it has to be stressed that Belmarsh detainees are allowed a choice of three different meals three times a day to accommodate their dietary and religious preferences.

<sup>16</sup> As opposed to almost every day in Belmarsh.

<sup>17</sup> The paucity of water in prison conditions has inspired Limonov to write his *Kniga vody* (The Book of Water; Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2002), a collection of reminiscences about various bodies of water that symbolise freedom.

<sup>18</sup> In British jails, however, "if you don't smoke, they can't make you share a cell with someone who does" (Archer, *Prison Diary* 73).

<sup>19</sup> To be fair, odour is an issue for Belmarsh too; as Archer puts it, "the smell of prison is a perfume that even Nicole Kidman couldn't make fashionable" (Archer, *Prison Diary* 37).

<sup>20</sup> "I protect myself from the night light by making a band out of a wafer bath towel and placing it over my eyes and forehead" (Limonov, *V plenu* 242).

<sup>21</sup> "How can anybody sleep soundly if Article 205 [of the Russian Criminal Code, dealing with acts of terrorism] threatens them with up to twenty years in jail?" (Limonov, *V plenu* 189).

regularly interrupted by loud rap music, which is apparently “the biggest single cause of fights breaking out in prison” (Archer, *Prison Diary* 104). As for sexual fantasies, Archer is predictably rather coy, living up to the cliché “No sex, please, we’re British.”

So, how do the authors in question respond to enforced solitude, described by Limonov as a “threat of death by reflection in the mirror” (Limonov, *V plenu* 188)?<sup>23</sup> Archer is in a better position (even though he rarely shares his cells with anyone), because he communicates at regular intervals with quite a few other inmates, as well as prison staff, many of whom are friendly and “keep a smile on their face” (Archer, *Prison Diary* 19).<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, Limonov’s long-term experience of asceticism as a struggling free-lancer arguably makes him less vulnerable to privations than his British counterpart.<sup>25</sup> Characteristically, a fellow prisoner pays Limonov the following compliment: “You are just like a thief-in-law (*vor v zakone*) of old times. [...] You have no family, no children, and no property. Nor do you have a fixed place of residence. You don’t even have a residence permit (*propiska*). Besides, you are a wise person, Eduard Veniaminovich. Personally, I’d suggest you ought to be treated as a boss of made men” (*Ia by lichno predlozhit Vas koronovat*; Limonov, *Po tiur'mam* 184).

Nonetheless, Archer’s and Limonov’s reactions to their respective prison conditions exhibit a certain similarity that can be defined as *mens sana in corpore sano*. In addition to “some serious exercising for fear of wasting away in jail,” mentioned above, Limonov “had to keep writing, otherwise [he] would have been forced, on a daily basis, to face loneliness in a high-security prison” (*V plenu* 28, 49). Archer also decided, soon after being locked up, to “above all things keep my mind alert and my body fit. The writing of a day-to-day diary seems to be my best chance for the former, and a quick return to the gym the only hope for the latter” (*Prison Diary* 42). Even more surprisingly, both prison administrations come across as patrons of the arts. Limonov is eventually allowed to spend several hours a day in an empty cell, with a specially provided table lamp, to work on his prose undistracted. (He wrote seven books of non-fiction and a theatre play.<sup>26</sup>) The Gov-

---

<sup>22</sup> “Nightmare visions of your recent girlfriends engaged in sexual acts with other males pervade your lonely nights” (Limonov, *V plenu* 21).

<sup>23</sup> Russian jails for ordinary criminals, conversely, are ruled by the “dictatorship of the prison crowds” (Limonov, *V plenu* 188).

<sup>24</sup> By contrast, in Lefortovo, even though jailors use the polite “Vy” (the formal “you”) when addressing prisoners, this is still nothing less than a “concentrated, cold and detached [form of] violence” (Limonov, *V plenu* 180). Informal communication between Lefortovo residents and employees is forbidden, and smiling at a cell’s trapdoor can get an employee sacked (see Limonov, *V plenu* 181).

<sup>25</sup> Archer notes: “I am used to a disciplined, well-ordered life, but [in Belmarsh] it’s no longer self-discipline because someone else is giving the orders” (*Prison Diary* 83).

<sup>26</sup> The conditions in Saratov remand prison no. 1, where Limonov was transferred in advance of his trial, offered much fewer opportunities for creative work, see “Limonova dostali,” as well as Limonov, “Literary Gulag” 58.

error of Belmarsh even assumes that Archer will write a book about his confinement, telling him: “If you weren’t writing a book, I can’t imagine what the authorities imagine will be gained by sending you here” (Archer, *Prison Diary* 57). Moreover, Archer is encouraged by a prison officer to “be sure you write [your account of prison life] as it is. Tell them about the problems both sides are facing, the inmates and the officers, and don’t pull your punches” (Archer, *Prison Diary* 261).<sup>27</sup> While in Belmarsh, Archer even teaches the odd creative writing class. In Maslow’s terms, the prison survival strategy of both Archer and Limonov is, to a large extent, about engaging in intense self-actualisation, despite the acute deficit of gratification of the lower-level needs.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, other prisoners around Archer and Limonov mostly shun spiritual and intellectual pursuits, seeking oblivion in drugs, sleep, and mass media.

Archer’s and Limonov’s attitudes to their imprisonment are also determined to a degree by their stance with regard to the accusations levelled against them. Neither of the two professes their innocence, but they do not admit their guilt, either. The reader may acquire an impression that both authors only feel sorry that they have got caught. Detained after his trial, Archer instructs his lawyers to lodge an appeal (which was subsequently dismissed).<sup>29</sup> Detained before his trial, Limonov devotes many pages of *V plenu u mertvetsov* to expounding his own version of the circumstances that led to his arrest. Meanwhile, both Archer and Limonov submit to prison regulations. This may be expected of Lord Archer, who appears to generally prefer a non-confrontational stance. However, Limonov, despite being a self-styled rebel<sup>30</sup>, also opts consciously for having “as good as possible a relationship with the administration of the prison. One cannot fight the whole world, you know. So I behaved as a model prisoner, never went to bed one minute earlier than 10pm, never wrote a complaint” (“Literary Gulag” 58).<sup>31</sup> In Russia, an early release on probation depends on the number of times a convict is sent to a segregation unit, which in Russian penitentiaries can

---

<sup>27</sup> In Russia, it is a fellow prisoner who urges Limonov to “write about it on our behalf. So that people know how it is here. Write about it. We can’t, you see. But you can” (Limonov, *Po tiur'mam* 39).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. “A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy” (Maslow 382).

<sup>29</sup> Cf.: “I didn’t get a fair trial” (Archer, *Prison Diary* 93). He stops short of calling it a miscarriage of justice (which are infrequent in Britain). However, one could get a shorter sentence for grievous bodily harm. Letters of moral support to Lord Archer reportedly numbered in the thousands and are referred to in his *Prison Diary* at times. Limonov also quotes extensively from similar letters he has received (see *V plenu* 333–53).

<sup>30</sup> Limonov considers himself a revolutionary in art, politics, and everyday life (see *V plenu* 98–99).

<sup>31</sup> This is Limonov’s original English, unedited in accordance with his preferences. The magazine *Vice* testifies that he wants it to “read broken, like a real Russian would speak it” (see the unsigned editorial footnote to Limonov, “Literary Gulag” 56).

apparently happen for as little as “dozing off when watching a TV programme” (Limonov, “Vybory”).

At the same time, both Archer and Limonov, in their reactions to different current events during their incarceration, question the state’s right to judge them and other prisoners. The two authors point out the judiciary’s double standards with regard to those in power, on the one hand, and the powerless, on the other. Archer’s comment on the so-called Rumble in Rhyl is characteristic in this respect. In 2001, during an election campaign in the town of Rhyl, a protester threw an egg at Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott. Prescott hit the protester in retaliation, and a scuffle ensued. As Archer notes, “several inmates pointed out that they are serving sentences from six months to three years for punching someone after they had been attacked, so they’re looking forward to the deputy prime minister joining us” (*Prison Diary* 494). The protester was briefly detained by the police, yet the Deputy Prime Minister was not.<sup>32</sup> For his part, Limonov reacts to the Dubrovka hostage crisis in October 2002 by criticising the “cold-blooded concilium of statesmen [...] who decided to use a dangerous, previously untested gas on over 800 Russian citizens,” which resulted in many casualties. “The mass murders authorised by the Russian Federation’s top officials are left unpunished,” he continues. “The squalid (*ubogie*) individual murders committed by private persons [...] are punished by deprivation of freedom and extermination of life” (*Po tiur'mam* 160–61).

Judges’ verdicts come under both authors’ fire as disproportionately harsh. Limonov states: Russian courts, “like mad, mete out sentences of such length as if they mistakenly believe that men’s life expectancy in the Russian Federation is 114, not 57 years” (*Po tiur'mam* 227–28). Archer voices a similar criticism, albeit on a more modest scale, advocating the desirability of conditional sentences for certain categories of criminals and crimes. For instance, he has the following to say about the Wayland prison, where he spent nine weeks in the summer and autumn of 2001: “I don’t consider young people, who are first offenders and have been charged with minor offences, should be sent to establishments like this, where one in three will end up on drugs, and one in three will commit a far more serious offence once they’ve received tuition from the prison professors” (*Prison Diary* 280).

Limonov also argues that it does not take much for a law-abiding citizen to become a criminal: “A lawbreaker is someone who oversteps the limits set by law. If a law is unintelligent or imprecise, the number of infringements can be huge” (*Po tiur'mam* 76).<sup>33</sup> Archer’s fiction, written both before and

---

<sup>32</sup> The protester threatened to sue Prescott over an excessive use of force while acting in self-defence. Neither party was subsequently charged.

<sup>33</sup> This is a widespread point of view, cf.: “Anybody, outwardly kind and honest, can become a criminal, given the circumstances” (Rubanov 51); “Free people think of themselves as saints. [...] If they swap places with prisoners, though, little will change either in or outside

after imprisonment, also seems to uphold the idea that the borderline between an honest person and a prospective convict can be thin and porous.<sup>34</sup> Yet when he becomes a convict himself, he is not quite accepted as a fully integrated member of the criminal brotherhood, in no small measure owing to his wealth and life peerage.<sup>35</sup> Nor does he really aspire to such an integration, regardless of his desire to be known among the inmates simply as Jeff. However, Archer praises what he sees as the extraordinary potential of many of his fellow prisoners. Thus, among thirty-two murderers and seventeen lifers, who share Spur One of Belmarsh's Block One with Archer, "Derek 'Del Boy' Bicknell is a natural Chief Whip, Fletch, the Leader of the Opposition, Billy, Secretary of State for Education, Tony, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Paul, Home Secretary, and Colin, Secretary of State for Defence [...] an inmates' Cabinet" (Archer, *Prison Diary* 170–71). This is partly a sad joke, because even Archer himself, who had been running for the office of London mayor prior to his trial, cannot seriously contemplate a return to politics, once he is set free. He is well aware of the average British attitude to criminals, illustrated by the saying "crime does not pay," which implies, among other things, that ex-cons are rarely re-admitted into society.<sup>36</sup> Careful with his own words,<sup>37</sup> Archer seems happy to report without comment an opinion of a fellow prisoner about Belmarsh (which, of course, can be extended to the British penal system as a whole): "this place is more about retribution than rehabilitation" (*Prison Diary* 178). Upon his release, all Archer can hope for after his spectacular and well publicised fall from grace is to contribute to a debate on how to improve Her Majesty's prison service.<sup>38</sup>

---

prison" (Svinarenko 152); "To unveil the essential criminal in the human [...], *we're just like them*" (Steinberg 362; italics as in the original). Even Ben E. Cabell, sometime Chair of the Texan Board of Prison Commissioners, said: "Every human being is a potential criminal. [...] Every criminal is a potentially honest man" (quoted in Perkinson 161).

<sup>34</sup> Cf., for instance, his first novel, in which four decent citizens, victims of a financial scam, conspire successfully to swindle a corrupt businessman out of a million dollars by way of revenge (see Archer, *Not A Penny*); and the short story "The Man Who Robbed His Own Post Office," in which a hard-working couple decides to recoup their losses when their superiors suddenly downgrade postal operations at the branch the couple has been managing (Archer, *Cat* 1–40; his fiction is vaguely reminiscent of the picaresque tradition and the Robin Hood legends). Limonov also states that "there is no clear borderline between a criminal and an average person. Any average person can transgress it" (*V plenu* 122).

<sup>35</sup> As for the prison authorities, Archer insists that he has been discriminated against by them because of his erstwhile privileged position: "The golden rule seems to be: it mustn't look as if Archer's getting special treatment, even if he's being treated unjustly" (*Prison Diary* 162).

<sup>36</sup> Cf.: "People who have not been to prison tend to fall into two categories. The majority who treat you as if you're a 'convict on the run' while the minority treat you as if you are in their front room" (Archer, *Prison Diary* 372).

<sup>37</sup> Prison censors are entitled to read everything that is sent to the outside from the inmates' cells.

<sup>38</sup> To eliminate cases like this, for example: "A child of seventeen [...] who has been charged with shoplifting – his first offence, not even convicted – and he is being locked up for eighteen and a half hours, unable to speak to anyone. This is Great Britain in the twenty-first centu-

Limonov, on the other hand, is eager to emphasise the alleged affinity between some writers and lawbreakers,<sup>39</sup> and does not hesitate to use the first-person plural pronoun when talking about the inmates' collective, with which he evidently identifies to a greater degree than Lord Archer. Brought up within a long Russian tradition of keeping multitudes of innocent people in jail (epitomised by the proverb "Never say never to poverty and prison" / *Ot sumy da ot tiur'my ne zarekaisia*),<sup>40</sup> Limonov takes advantage of sympathy towards prisoners, common among many Russians, when he claims: "all prisoners are martyrs" and "we are all martyrs here – crowds of tattooed Christs" (*V plenu* 185, 190).<sup>41</sup> Unlike Archer, who does not dispute the validity of the prison system in Britain as a whole but merely wants it to function better, Limonov sees Russian penitentiaries as monstrosities, "modelled on military barracks in their extreme form, with elements of health care institutions and public toilets thrown in for good measure" (*V plenu* 224). According to Limonov, the prison system in Russia is a microcosm of Russian society, in that it reflects the idea of "might makes right": "the rank and file are always considered guilty and treated as scapegoats, while the officer in charge behaves like an autocrat" (*Torzhestvo* 180). For Limonov, in modern-day Russia this officer, representing a repressive government or state, is granted the right to be in charge through sheer brutal force, rather than absolute moral imperatives or the principle of sacred power. It looks, therefore, as if the state, though not exactly totalitarian in the strict sense of the term (when individuals are coerced into subordination by an autocratic state authority in all aspects of their lives), does not differ very much from the bandits it is striving to subdue (see Limonov, *Po tiur'mam* 288).<sup>42</sup> In such a context, mere prison reform is not good enough for Limonov. Instead, he promises to fly the National Bolshevik flag above Lefortovo and the Butyrki prison (see Tul'skiĭ) – as well as to raze Lefortovo to the ground and build a

---

ry. [...] I can hear the right-wingers assuring us that it'll be character building and teach the lad a lesson. [...] It is far more likely that he will become antagonistic towards authority and once he's released, turn to a life of crime" (Archer, *Prison Diary* 59). For Archer's suggestions on prison reform, see *Prison Diary* 1063–64, "Archer Calls" and "Captive Audience."

<sup>39</sup> Cf.: Slava Mogutin's books "are criminal – for an artist, this is a compliment"; "Art would not have existed without crime and criminal figures" (Limonov, *V plenu* 66, 120). On the affinity between criminality and creativity, see also Sarah J. Young's chapter in this volume.

<sup>40</sup> Cf.: "Russians know only too well that law in Russia is often a synonym for lawlessness" (Limonov, *V plenu* 125).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. the reaction of Iuriĭ Aleksandrov, acting head of the United Editorial Board of the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN), which publishes the *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* journal: "There is nothing remotely Christ-like about these rapists, murderers, and robbers" (Aleksandrov 138).

<sup>42</sup> A comparable thought has also been expressed by an old recidivist kept in Lefortovo in 1996–97: "the worst and most prominent crooks are not in prisons but in business, media, and government offices" (Rubanov 202). An opinion of an old-time burglar, voiced in the US' Charlestown State Prison in 1947, was not much different: "the only difference between us and outside people was that we had been caught" (Malcolm X 178).

dance pavilion in its place (*V plenu* 18).<sup>43</sup> It goes without saying that such a decisive action requires a change in government. In Lefortovo, says Limonov, “the amount of talent per square metre – diplomats, thieves-in-law, world-class businessmen, the criminal elite, special forces personnel, war heroes, well-known contract killers – far exceeds that in the Kremlin, the Prime Minister’s administration, and the State Duma. We could form an efficient government with immediate effect” (*V plenu* 124–25).

It is noteworthy that both Archer and Limonov hold many of their fellow inmates in extremely high esteem. This can be explained by another theory of human motivation. It deals with the so-called cognitive dissonances, which occur “whenever an individual simultaneously holds two cognitions [...] which are psychologically inconsistent. [...] Individuals strive to reduce [dissonance] by adding ‘consonant’ cognitions or by changing one or both cognitions to make them ‘fit together’ better, [...] so that they become more consonant with each other. [...] If dissonance exists it is because the individual’s behavior is inconsistent with his self-concept” (Aronson 2–3, 27). Both Archer’s and Limonov’s self-conceptions sit uneasily with their prisoner status. The authors face the same choice: either to admit that they have done something wrong, or to remain in denial about it. Both opt for denial. To demonstrate that he does not belong in prison, Archer draws a parallel between himself and Dante Alighieri, a temporary visitor in the Otherworld, by naming parts of *A Prison Diary* in a way reminiscent of *La Divina Commedia*: Hell (Belmarsh), Purgatory (Wayland), Heaven (North Sea Camp), and Back to Hell (Lincoln). For Limonov, it is the world outside that is criminal through and through,<sup>44</sup> while the cream of society rots in prison (*V plenu* 124, 151). Attaching a disproportionate significance to the social group that the two authors are forced to join because of imprisonment, is not dissimilar to the effects of severe initiation, which makes those undergoing it overrate the community they consequently become part of. This phenomenon is known as dissonance reduction as a result of effort justification (see Aronson 4).

Surprising as it may initially seem, Lord Archer and Limonov, independently from each other and despite certain dissimilarities in their background, prison conditions, and the nature of the crimes they were found guilty of, reveal similar patterns in their approaches to their individual circumstances, as well as their attitudes to penal institutions in general. Even though what they experienced in their respective jails is a far cry from extreme brutality, arbitrary unlawfulness, apparent irrationality, and ostensible impregnability that are routinely associated with totalitarian incarceration,

---

<sup>43</sup> One does not have to be a radical politician to make pronouncements like that. An ex-yeshiva student of liberal views, earning his salary as a librarian in a Boston prison, also claims: “prisons make fine ruins” (Steinberg 212).

<sup>44</sup> E.g., “natural born killers work for [the police and special forces]” and even building contractors are “brazen criminals” (Limonov, *V plenu* 59, 73).

both authors still find most of the penal institutions they know to be ill-suited not only for habitation, but also for fulfilling the fundamental goal they are meant to achieve, i.e., prisoners' rehabilitation. This unsuitability is largely seen by both authors as society's fault.

A further excursion into the field of prison writing demonstrates that the convergence of Archer's and Limonov's views on confinement is hardly coincidental. In fact, the two authors are far from unique in making their points, which are not even peculiar to the early twenty-first century. Approximately twenty years before the publication of Archer's and Limonov's books detailing their prison experience, the renowned Scottish author and sculptor Jimmy Boyle, who went in and out of jail since the age of twelve, opined:

[penal] institutions [...] are a danger to the community. They simply harden attitudes and make prisoners more dependent by taking away all responsibility. [...] When feeling the pain of their confinement at its deepest level, [prisoners] have to listen to politicians, the media and public, calling for tougher sentences and prison regimes (34).

As if echoing this, while serving her seven-year sentence for dissident political activity, almost at the same time as Boyle, but in female colony ZhKh-385/3-4 in Soviet Mordovia, Irina Ratushinskaia observed: "Labour camps exist not to form but to destroy human personality. [...] For how long will they remain in my land?" (289, 319). Forty years earlier, in a different epoch and on a different continent, Malcolm X, serving a seven-year term for larceny and breaking and entering, had arrived at a similar conclusion: "There shouldn't be bars. Behind bars, a man never reforms" (176). On the subject of who is to blame for ending up in confinement, he holds: "The black prisoner [...] symbolized white society's crime of keeping black men oppressed and deprived and ignorant, and unable to get decent jobs, turning them into criminals" (Malcolm X 195).<sup>45</sup> Oscar Wilde, imprisoned for gross indecency in Britain in 1895-97, summed up his experience in strikingly similar terms: "the laws under which I am convicted are wrong and unjust laws, and the system under which I have suffered a wrong and unjust system. [...] Society should realize what it has inflicted on me" ("De Profundis" 165, 167). It would be curious to discover just how far back in history the same attitude can be traced.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> These words actually belong to Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam movement, but Malcolm X makes it clear that he fully shares Muhammad's views on the subject (see 211, 436).

<sup>46</sup> Writing in 1861, Dostoevsky proffered the following explanation of why prisoners tend to accuse society for making them what they are: "The criminal who has revolted against society, hates it, and [almost always] considers himself in the right; society was wrong, not he. Has he not, moreover, undergone his punishment? Accordingly he is absolved, acquitted in his own eyes" (Dostoevsky 17).

Interestingly, both Archer and Limonov mention Wilde in their prison books, with sympathy, as their predecessor, and quote from his “Ballad of Reading Gaol” (Archer, *Prison Diary* 1036; and Limonov, *Sviashchennye* 225–32). In this poem, in a few memorable words, Wilde describes a prison cell in a way which many inmates around the world can probably still recognize today: “Each narrow cell in which we dwell / Is a foul and dark latrine” (*The Ballad* 28).<sup>47</sup> *The Ballad* also contains the image of prisoners as the living dead, which also appears in the work of many other prison writers. The recidivist and author Jean Genet wrote, for example: “I accept living [in the world of prisons] as I would accept, were I dead, living in the cemetery” (219). Boyle also deploys this imagery when he speaks of his fellow inmates with long prison sentences: “I was part of a group known as the living dead” (Boyle 3).<sup>48</sup> Even a prison staff member likens penitential monastic cells (a prototype for modern prisons) to “living tombs” (Steinberg 214).

A prison sentence does not have to be long to evoke associations with death. A lifer because of a gangland murder, Boyle understandably calls imprisonment “a slower form of death” and claims to prefer the death penalty (105).<sup>49</sup> Maksim Gromov, a member of Limonov’s National Bolshevik party who served just three years (for protests against Russia’s social welfare monetisation of 2005) and has likely never even heard of Boyle, describes confinement in similar terms: “ordinary capital punishment is about the separation of body and soul. [Imprisonment] is slightly different: this is a prolonged separation of body from soul” (*Limonka* 152). This process may be so tormenting that Gromov’s party comrade, Sergeĭ Soloveĭ, paradoxically calls for a return to pre-prison forms of punishment as allegedly more humane: “Elementary compassion leads to protests against the long-term rotting of thy neighbour in prisons. A gentler punishment should be introduced: chopping arms for thieves, tearing tongues out for swindlers, and caning for hooligans” (*Limonka* 371). Historically, prison has replaced mutilation as an ostensibly less barbaric form of punishment (see Foucault), but Soloveĭ refuses to call this progress. If prison is a symbol of modern civilisation, he is happy to reject both prison and the civilisation it has come to represent.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Cf.: a Belorussian serving his sentence in an American jail in the mid- to late 1990s “decided to write an elegy to his girlfriend. It [...] started with the following intense line: ‘Have you ever eaten in a toilet, darling?’ [...] An inmate in a solitary confinement cell in America does eat and drink a few paces from the toilet bowl, and his cell, especially in transit jails, isn’t unlike a bathroom, size-wise” (Starostin 222). In Europe, for reasons of hygiene, it is against the law to have a “lavatory in the cell, especially if it’s also your eating place. The British ignore this rule, preferring to pay a heavy fine each year” (Archer, *Prison Diary* 281).

<sup>48</sup> Limonov uses a similar expression in *Po tiur'mam* 52.

<sup>49</sup> Cf.: “Deprivation of freedom is a symbolic murder” (Svinarenko 242). An old recidivist from Lefortovo states: “Ask me now, what would I have chosen, [...] five prison sentences totalling twenty years, or capital punishment, I’d say, [...] the latter” (Rubanov 204).

<sup>50</sup> Yet another National Bolshevik detainee, Andreĭ Grebnev, claims: “Democrats in the Kremlin have announced a moratorium on capital punishment but created such conditions in pre-trial detention centres that people there [...] don’t live long enough to be tried” (*Limonka*

Prison authors tend to portray themselves and other prisoners as victims and even martyrs. The American Jack Henry Abbott, who had been in and out of detention since the age of nine for a string of offenses including manslaughter, and then committed suicide when he was 58 and still in jail, compares inmates to gladiators. According to him, “convicts speak of penal institutions for young men as gladiator schools”, whose graduates “acquit themselves with the honour of the tormented” (Abbott 74).<sup>51</sup> Prisoners’ tormentors include, first and foremost, prison guards. Jimmy Boyle recalls: “The degree of brutal violence exerted on us by gangs of prison officers was no different to that for which we were convicted [...], the underlying belief being that acts of physical violence have an instant ‘cure’ in the exercise of a more powerful physical violence. In fact, it made all of us worse” (4).

In an attempt to win sympathy, prison authors often compare inmates to children, evoking connotations of innocence and defenselessness.<sup>52</sup> By contrast, the staff in places of confinement is sometimes compared to Nazis. John Healy, the London-born son of Irish immigrants and an ex-alcoholic who spent many months in different British jails for theft, burglary, violent assault, and drunken fines, describes employees of a London workhouse as “big and well fed, dressed all in black; with their big boots and shiny peaked caps, they looked and acted like a death’s-head division in a German concentration camp” (154–55). The uniform of Limonov’s jailers may look very different, but he still calls them “kind, evil, passive, and active Fascists<sup>53</sup> in the line of duty” (Limonov, *Po tiur'mam* 183). This, of course, is an exaggeration (even though in the late 1960s, an American attorney compared the Ellis Unit, a Texas prison, to Auschwitz; see Perkinson 262). In non-totalitarian confinement, inmates are rarely reduced to the state memorably depicted in *House of Dolls*, a book about Nazi concentration camps:

Often, when the bedtime gong is heard, [prisoners] come crawling down from their hutches, go out of the block and line up on the assembly ground in precise even rows. [...] They think the gong has sounded morning roll call, and they are ready to march out to work. [...] They no longer distinguish between the dark of night and the light of day (Ka-Tzetnik 135633, 96–97).

---

225).

<sup>51</sup> Limonov uses identical imagery in the description of the prisoner Sochan in *Po tiur'mam* (15).

<sup>52</sup> Cf.: “All prisoners are children” (Genet 27); *zek* is like a “little child” (Limonov, *Torzhestvo* 157). The following supporting statement comes from a member of prison staff (for whom, however, childishness in an adult is partly a worrying sign of underdevelopment): “a surprising number of inmates [in Boston’s South Bay jail] were the emotional age of children. The result [...] of a lifetime suffering abuse, physical, emotional, sexual [...]. I saw a murderer suck her thumb. I broke up games of tag. And this was all reinforced by the structure of prison, where inmates have about as much control over their lives as children” (Steinberg 135–36).

<sup>53</sup> A Russian synonym for Nazis.

If not perhaps to the same degree, prison boredom, also a form of torture, can still transform the perception of time flow beyond recognition. Oscar Wilde famously described how time in confinement “does not progress. [...] It seems to circle round one centre of pain. [...] This immobile quality [...] makes each dreadful day in the very minutest detail like its brother” (“De Profundis” 159). Books and periodicals can help prisoners to fight the tedium, but they are not always available – at least not necessarily the desired titles. At the Pentonville prison, all Wilde “had to read was *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and that work [...] did not satisfy him” (Hyde 383). It took intervention by an MP to expand Wilde’s reading list with “the writings of St Augustine, several books by Cardinal Newman, Pascal’s *Pensées*, and Walter Pater’s work on the Renaissance” (Hyde 383). *Madame Bovary*, however, was not allowed. While at Reading, a kindly warder used to smuggle in for Wilde a copy of *The Daily Chronicle*, delivered to the prison.<sup>54</sup> This action

was of course a most serious breach of the regulations. [...] But Wilde was not content with *The Daily Chronicle*; he persuaded the warder to get him *The Saturday Review* and other weekly periodicals, which presented much greater difficulties than the newspaper. [...] [The warder] could not have those sent to prison, as that would have attracted attention. Prison warders don’t read *Spectators* and *Saturday Reviews* (Hyde 397–98).

Nowadays, the problem remains just as acute. The more extensive the prison term, the more exotic books you may find yourself after, if given a chance. Asked by a fellow inmate whether he has read Herodotus, Archer quips: “I’ll need a little longer sentence if I’m ever to get back to 484 BC” (*Prison Diary* 625). For his part, Limonov studies (and promotes among other prisoners) dense and controversially revisionist (if not downright pseudoscientific) history books, *Drevniaia Rus’ i Velikaia Step’* (Ancient Rus and the Great Steppe, 1989) by Lev Gumilev, as well as *Imperiia* (The Empire, 1996) by Anatoliĭ Fomenko and Gleb Nosovskiĭ (see *Po tiur’mam* 105, 181–83). It is, however, a real luxury when a prison’s reading stock can satisfy the diverse

---

<sup>54</sup> The same warder would bring Wilde and other prisoners “little delicacies of food” (Hyde 397). He was subsequently dismissed for a sweet biscuit. According to one informal classification, these actions would qualify the warder as a “feeder”: there are “two kinds of prison workers: those who [are] feeders, and those who [aren’t]. [...] Feeders [are] a secret subculture of prison workers who engage in the illicit practice of bringing food in for inmates. [...] A minor act of disobedience that helped you maintain a conscience, allowed you an identity apart from, and against, being a jailer” (Steinberg 296–97). It can be claimed that some guards sympathize with prisoners. (Malcolm X, however, points at less noble motives: “Smuggling to prisoners was the guards’ sideline; every prison’s inmates know that’s how guards make most of their living”; 177). Prisoners’ sympathy for the guards is not unheard of either: “We feel sorry for them, with a touch of contempt. Poor them – what is the principal difference between their lives and the prisoners’? Always in the same labour camp and wouldn’t dare say a word against an order” (Ratushinskaia 142).

interests of its population.<sup>55</sup> A testimony by Dmitrii Starostin, a Russian inmate in six different US jails, sentenced in 1995 to six years and eight months for grievous bodily harm, suggests that while he was devouring prison fiction by Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn, his fellow prisoners clearly preferred *Penthouse* and *Playboy* (see Starostin 32, 153). As for the National Bolshevik intellectual Alekseï Golubovich, he complained that, in the Butyrka prison in Moscow,

librarians could do much better. I am reading *What Is to Be Done* [by Nikolai Chernyshevskii]. [Mikhail Sholokhov's] *Quiet Flows the Don* is next. Once in a week or a fortnight a so-called librarian comes and puts through the cell door trap a catalogue of sorts with about fifty titles. The author and title is all the information it has. [...] I have a feeling that they have no bibliographer [...] and nothing has been systematised (*Limonka* 108-09).

In Ratushinskaia's colony in Soviet Mordovia, there was no catalogue. Moreover, some of the books, especially modern ones – about “love” and “war,” mostly – were hardly identifiable. They lacked a beginning and end because common prisoners used the first and last pages for rolling paper. Yet the colony's political prisoners (never more than a dozen at any one time) did read the relatively undamaged nineteenth-century Russian classics, up to ten volumes a fortnight or so (Ratushinskaia 257).

The gap between diversion-seeking common criminals and inquisitive political activists is not as wide as it sometimes may seem,<sup>56</sup> and can be bridged by recourse to some purposeful serious reading. Unlike the female smokers in the correctional facility in Mordovia, Malcolm X had been using library holdings (at the Norfolk Prison Colony) to satisfy his intellectual curiosity, not his cravings for nicotine. In his autobiography, he acknowledged a sizeable debt he owed to prison self-education, which made him leave his bad habits and criminal past far behind: “You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge. [...] Months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned. [...] Prison enabled me to study far more intensively than I would have if [...] I had attended some college” (Malcolm X 199, 207).

Common criminals' intelligence should also not be underestimated, and they may use a prison library to research and plan future crimes as best they can. Generally speaking, prison authorities do not treat the prison library as an entitlement precisely because they are inclined to believe it to be not “a

---

<sup>55</sup> Limonov thoughtfully augmented the Lefortovo library holdings by donating fifteen or twenty books from his personal collection, before his transfer to another prison (see *Po tiur'mam* 20).

<sup>56</sup> On instances of ordinary criminals turning political despite limited education, see, for example, Kuznetsov 136–37; and the South African feature film *Mapantsula* (dir. Oliver Schmitz, 1988). In the late 1960s' America, “convicts began to think of themselves not as errant miscreants in need of liberal mending but as lumpen proletariat revolutionaries” (Perkinson 300).

place to better yourself, [but] a place to get better at getting worse. [...] [In such libraries,] for each person seeking spiritual guidance or the development of his political conscience, like Malcolm [X], there was a cold materialist, studying how to employ violence more efficiently in the service of brutal criminal endeavours. Just like [James] Whitey [Bulger]" (Steinberg 4, 53).<sup>57</sup> One would expect prison administration to mistrust both types. As Jack Henry Abbott notes, "it has been [...] the experience of all prison authorities: the most dangerous prisoners [...] are 'readers and writers'" (Abbott 19).

The use of reading and especially writing (where possible) as an extremely efficient coping mechanism when surviving prison conditions seems to be one particular aspect that unites the otherwise very disparate selection of authors under examination. Among them are individuals known for their writing before jail (Dostoevsky, Wilde, Ratushinskaia, Archer, Limonov) – but also some who took up writing in or after jail (Genet, Abbott, Boyle, Healy, Starostin, Rubanov). Moreover, there are individuals who did not even do much reading before jail (Malcolm X), as well as those whose official duties included providing convicts with reading material and teaching creative writing classes (Steinberg). Some authors in question went to prison for common crimes, petty or grave. Others were detained as political prisoners. Some were behind bars regularly. Others were only convicted once. Some felt remorse. Others did not.<sup>58</sup> Some served time in their home countries. Others were imprisoned abroad. They belonged to different epochs and continents, as well as age, race, and gender groups. The length of their sentences varied, too.<sup>59</sup> What they all have in common, in Maslow's terms, is belonging to the category of "innately creative people in whom the drive to creativeness seems to be more important than any other counter-determinant. Their creativeness might appear not as self-actualisation released by basic satisfaction, but in spite of lack of basic satisfaction" (Maslow 386). It is precisely this creativeness and thirst for knowledge that helps such people,

---

<sup>57</sup> On Bulger, see Cullen and Murphy.

<sup>58</sup> According to Donald Clemmer, a prison administrator and sociologist, "the apparent rehabilitating effect which prison life has on some men [...] occurs in spite of the harmful influences of the prison" (quoted in Perkinson 221). Why some prisoners are reformed and others not, depends to a degree on how they deal with their cognitive dissonances: "the same dissonance-producing situation can result in quite the opposite dissonance-reducing behaviour" (Aronson 17).

<sup>59</sup> The longer the sentence, the more institutionalized a prisoner becomes, which in turn is believed to limit his chances for repentance and reformation. A third year in confinement seems to function as an institutionalization threshold; according to Sergeĭ Soloveĭ, who had been sentenced to fifteen years in 2001 for protests against the mistreatment of Russian war veterans in independent Latvia (the verdict was subsequently commuted), "in your first year in jail you live by the reminiscences of life on the outside, and hopes for a speedy release. [...] The second year passes in a detailed study of life in confinement, its negative sides being more obvious. In your third year a realisation comes that [...] your life goes on, even though it has many inconveniences and limitations here" (*Limonka* 28).

wherever they come from, to rise above the lack of gratification of the more basic needs, which they are deprived of when imprisoned.<sup>60</sup>

When an ordinary prisoner uses pen and paper, this is more often than not a private letter or a complaint to the authorities aiming at relieving his/her own personal circumstances. Such a prisoner's typical discourse can arguably be reduced to one sentence: "Others steal millions, I'm in jail for nothing, the court didn't understand my case, I've got neither lawyer nor shower" (Svinarenko 228). The creative type, on the other hand, "every day, for a while, stays in the realm of an unfulfilled fairytale [...] hoping for a possibility and inevitability of his dreams' realisation, [...] wishing to make demands for a happy life and to fight victoriously for a better future" (Karpov 59) – not only for him/herself personally but for society at large.<sup>61</sup> That is why testimonies by this self-selected group of highly articulate prisoners engaged in intense reading/writing activities are especially valuable. According to one observation, "although all sufferers of evil are equal in being qualified to attest to their suffering, they are far from equal in their ability to elucidate their experience of evil to us who were not there" (Margalit 181–82).

As one can see from the many quotes gathered above, most of these creative individuals – whether fully institutionalised or not,<sup>62</sup> and irrespective of their nationality, date of birth, gender, race, and social background – as if conspiring with each other (yet rarely aware of each other's writings), proceed to undermine the discourse, which posits that "the main purpose of [non-totalitarian] prison is to reduce crime, by keeping criminals off the streets and deterring others from following their example" (American Oublette). Perhaps with the sole exception of Jean Genet, who said "I love prison" (323),<sup>63</sup> all the authors discussed here would probably agree with the recent words of an American penologist:

---

<sup>60</sup> Another category of people who may survive privations in confinement more easily than others consists of those pursuing "ideals, [...] high values and the like. With such values people [...] give up everything for the sake of a particular ideal, or value" (Maslow 387). Members of the National Bolshevik Party arguably come from this stock. Many of them can also be classed as creative individuals (artists, poets, etc.) The categories of creativeness and idealism may indeed overlap.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Emmanuel Levinas's characterisation of Léon Blum, a French statesman in French and German custody in September 1940-May 1945, and his book *À l'échelle humaine* (For All Mankind, finished in 1944): "a man in prison continues to believe in an unrevealed future and invites us to work in the present for the most distant things of which the present is an irrefutable denial" (Levinas 28).

<sup>62</sup> The more institutionalised the prisoner becomes, the more "fanatically defiant and alienated individual [he is], who cannot imagine what forgiveness is, or mercy or tolerance, because he has no *experience* of such values. [...] He *imagines* them as [...] 'weaknesses'" (Abbott 13). In Oscar Wilde's words, "prison life with its endless privations and restrictions makes one rebellious. [...] It turns one's heart to stone" ("De Profundis" 171).

<sup>63</sup> He also said, however, that an "incest committed in the toilet between a father and a son [was] the really exquisite form of love" (Genet 115). The examples from Genet prove the point that "positive meanings of incarceration do not depend on particular conditions but

By and large, [...] the prison as an institutional form has fostered more criminogenesis than moral regeneration, more debasement than redemption, more scandal than success. Were the prison [...] judged by the same standard as its inhabitants, it would surely be classified as a repeat offender, perhaps a candidate for the death penalty (Perkinson 369–70).

Is there, then, anything about Russian prison experience that makes it appear unique? “Thank God I’m not locked up in Russia,” Archer exclaims without elaborating upon the subject (*Prison Diary* 425). What is it, then, that inflicts reputational damage on Russian prisons? Could it be the custom of male rape? It is employed as a prisoner-to-prisoner punishment “for a serious misdemeanour or plain cheekiness, [which] is unknown in the slammers of New York, maybe because there is no commonly accepted criminal ethos or hierarchy here. Such an ethos exists among Latin American gangs but the transgressors there are slashed, not raped” (Starostin 132).<sup>64</sup>

Otherwise, the perceived differences in prisoners’ conditions and experience do not as a rule appear to be specific to Russia. Those in solitary cells (not necessarily in Western prisons only) may crave for companionship (see, for example, Kubovich), whereas those in overpopulated ones, or with insufferable cellmates, or perhaps sociopaths by inclination (not necessarily in Russia only) may pine for the solitary (see Malcolm X 177; Abbott 5; Starostin 55, 159). Important as these distinctions may be for a particular individual,<sup>65</sup> they become relatively minor in a bigger scheme of things. Whether a prison is a “five-star hotel” (Lefortovo, according to Rubanov 461) or a “civilisation’s anus” (the Matrosskaia Tishina prison, Rubanov 391), whether it is totalitarian or not, whether its residents are guilty or innocent, most of them are distinctly unhappy about their place of abode and would very much prefer not to be there.

It has been suggested that “people, even in different societies, are much more alike than we would think from our first contact with them, and [...] as we know them better we seem to find more and more of this commonness. We then recognise the most startling differences to be superficial rather than basic” (Maslow 389). This appears to be true, among other things, of the universality of prison experience, totalitarian as well as non-totalitarian, which “constitutes a unique source for understanding the human condition in cross-cultural perspective” (Gruenwald 513).

---

rather express something deep-seated about the way human beings experience the world” (Duncan 1239).

<sup>64</sup> There are, however, reports about prisoners’ hierarchy and punishment by male rape practiced in penitentiaries in China (see Sciolino).

<sup>65</sup> Cf.: “Life may be awful, but after watching the ten o’clock news and seeing the conditions in the Greek jail where they’ve locked up eleven British plane spotters, I count my blessings” (Archer, *Prison Diary* 763). For a comparative description of conditions in Austrian, German, Colombian, Cuban and Venezuelan jails, as well as common prison features across the globe, see Starostin 180, 190–92, 262–63; Svinarenko 328–30.

## Works Cited

- Abbott, Jack Henry. *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison*. New York: Random House, 1981. Print.
- Aleksandrov, Iu. *Tiur'my Rossii: Istorii i sovremennost'*. Moscow: FSIN Rossii, 2009. Print.
- “American Oubliette: Life without Parole is an Outrageous Sentence for Non-violent Criminals.” *The Economist* 16–22 Nov. 2013: 16. Print.
- Archer, Jeffrey. *Cat O'Nine Tales*. London: Pan, 2007. Print.
- . *Not a Penny More, Not a Penny Less*. London: Cape, 1976. Print.
- . *A Prison Diary Omnibus*, London: Macmillan, 2005. Print.
- “Archer Calls for Prison Reform.” 18 Sept. 2003. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/3118212.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3118212.stm)>. Web.
- Aronson, Elliot. “The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance: A Current Perspective.” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. Ed. L. Berkowitz. Vol. 4. New York: Academic, 1969: 1–34. Print.
- Boyle, Jimmy. *The Pain of Confinement: Prison Diaries*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 1984. Print.
- “Captive Audience: Jeffrey Archer Sets Out His Three-Point Plan to Reform Penal System.” *The Law Society Gazette* 103.21 (2006): 20–1. Print.
- Carrère, Emmanuel. *Limonov*. Paris: P. O. L., 2011. Print.
- Crick, Michael. *Jeffrey Archer: Stranger Than Fiction*. London: Fourth Estate, 2000. Print.
- Christie, Agatha. *Poirot Investigates*. London: Bodley Head, 1972. 7–31. Print.
- Cullen, Kevin, and Shelley Murphy. *Whitey Bulger: America's Most Wanted Gangster and The Manhunt That Brought Him to Justice*. New York: Norton, 2013. Print.
- Dodolev, E. Iu. *Limoniana, ili Neizvestnyĭ Limonov*. Moscow: Zebra E – Zelenaiia lampa – Argumenty nedeli, 2012. Print.
- Dostoevsky, Fedor. *The House of the Dead, or Prison Life in Siberia*. Trans. H. S. Edwards. London: Dent, 1914. Print.
- Duncan, Martha Grace. “‘Cradled on the Sea’: Positive Images of Prison and Theories of Punishment.” *California Law Review* 76.6 (1988): 1201–47. Print.
- Engdahl, Horace. “Philomela’s Tongue: Introductory Remarks on Witness Literature.” *Witness Literature: Proceedings of the Nobel Centennial Symposium*. Ed. Horace Engdahl. London: World Scientific, 2002: 1–14. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin, 1991. Print.
- Genet, Jean. *Our Lady of the Flowers*. Trans. B. Frechtman. Paris: Morihien, 1949. Print.
- Gruenwald, Oskar. “Yugoslav Camp Literature: Rediscovering the Ghost of a Nation's Past-Present-Future.” *Slavic Review* 46.3/4 (1987): 513–28. Print.
- Healy, John. *The Grass Arena: An Autobiography*. London: Faber, 1988. Print.

- Horowitz, Anthony. "Jeffrey Archer Interview: The Saga Continues." *The Daily Telegraph* 7 May 2011. Print.
- Hyde, Harford Montgomery. *Oscar Wilde*. London: Mandarin, 1991. Print.
- Ka-Tzetnik 135633 [Dinur, Yehiel]. *House of Dolls*. Trans. Moshe M. Kohn. New York: Simon, 1955. Print.
- Karpov, P. I. *Tvorchestvo zakliuchennykh: (Risunki, skul'ptura i raboty masterskikh)*. Moscow: NKVD, 1929. Print.
- Kubovich, Yaniv. "Eshel Prison Breaking the Law by Isolating Inmates." *Haaretz* 17 May 2013. Print.
- Kuznetsov, Eduard. *Mordovskii marafon*. Ramat Gan: Moscow, 1979. Print.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Humanism of the Other*. Trans. Nidra Poller. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2003. Print.
- Limonka v tiur'mu*. Comp. by Alekseĭ Volynets. Ed. Zakhar Prilepin. Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2012. Print.
- Limonov, Eduard. "Literary Gulag: A Writer's Retreat Behind Bars." *Vice* 4.4 (2006): 56–8. Print.
- . *Po tiur'mam*. Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2004. Print.
- . *Sviashchennye monstry*. Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2003. Print.
- . *Torzhestvo metafiziki*. Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2005. Print.
- . *V plenu u mertvetsov*. Moscow: Ul'tra-kul'tura, 2002. Print.
- . "Vybory: organizovannoe prestuplenie." *Nezavisimaia gazeta* 19 Aug. 2003: 11. Print.
- "Limonova dostali varenaia kil'ka, temnota i 'otryzhka sovkovosti'." 4 Sept. 2002. Web. <<http://www.apn.ru/news/print13434.htm>>.
- [Malcolm X.] *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. With the assistance of Alex Haley. New York: Ballantine, 1992. Print.
- Mantle, Jonathan. *In for a Penny: The Unauthorised Biography of Jeffrey Archer*. London: Hamish, 1988. Print.
- Margalit, Avishai. *The Ethics of Memory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002. Print.
- Maslow, A. H. "A Theory of Human Motivation." *The Psychological Review* 50 (1943): 370–96. Print.
- Oja, Matt F. "Toward a Definition of Camp Literature." *Slavic Review* 48.2 (1989): 272–74. Print.
- Perkinson, Robert. *Texas Tough: The Rise of America's Prison Empire*. New York: Picador, 2010. Print.
- Ratushinskaia, Irina. *Seryĭ – tsvet nadezhdy*. London: Overseas Publications Interchange, 1989. Print.
- Rubanov, Andreĭ. *Sazhaĭte, i vyrastet*. St. Petersburg: Limbus, 2006. Print.
- Schoonneveldt, Léon van. "The Moral Witness in the Field of Cultural Remembrance," *Literature and Memory: Theoretical Paradigms – Genres – Functions*. Eds. Ansgar Nünning and Marion Gymnich. Tübingen: Francke, 2006: 235–47. Print.
- Sciolino, Elaine. "A Poet's Tale from China's Gulag." *The International Herald Tribune* 11 Apr. 2013. Print.
- Starostin, Dmitriĭ. *Amerikanskiĭ GULAG: Piat' let na zvezdno-polosatyykh narakh*. Moscow: Ul'tra-Kul'tura, 2003. Print.
- Steinberg, Avi. *Running the Books: The Adventures of an Accidental Prison Librarian*. New York: Anchor, 2010. Print.
- Svinarenko, Igor'. *Russkie sidiat: Po zonam rodiny*. Moscow: Vagrius, 2002. Print.
- Toker, Leona. "Towards a Poetics of Documentary Prose: From the Perspective of Gulag Testimonies." *Poetics Today* 18.2 (1997): 187–222. Print.

- Tul'skiĭ, Mikhail. "Golos iz Lefortovskoiĭ tiur'my." *Nezavisimaia gazeta* 14 June 2001: 10. Print.
- Wilde, Oscar. "De Profundis." *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Ian Small. Vol. 2. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- . *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. London: Electric Book, 2001. E-book.

# Index

## A

Abbott, Jack Henry 176, 179  
Absenteeism 50-54, 59-60  
Acemoglu, Daron 46  
Agamben, Giorgio 12, 138  
Aleshkovsky, Iuz 113  
Amal'rik, Andreĭ 157  
Andreev, Leonid 150  
Andropov, Yuri 118  
Anekdoty 90, 97, 102-106  
Anti-Stalin songs 113  
Archer, Lord Jeffrey 13, 163-175,  
177, 179, 181  
Arendt, Hannah 12-13, 137-138,  
140-142, 147, 150-152  
Aristotle 12, 90, 101  
Arkhipova, Aleksandra 97, 103  
Article 58 55, 82, 95

## B

Bakhtin, Mikhail 12, 74, 90, 99-100  
Bakhtin, Vladimir 89  
Baraki [prison huts] 22, 94  
Barnes, Steven 44  
Beccaria, Cesare 151  
Belomorkanal [White Sea-Baltic  
Canal] 93-94  
Beregis' avtomobilia [Watch Out for  
the Car] (film) 113  
Bergson, Henri 12, 90, 102-103  
Beria, Lavrentiy 95  
Blatnye pesni [criminal songs] 97,  
100, 114  
Blumenfeld, Karl 141  
Borodkin, Leonid 57  
Boyle, Jimmy 174-176, 179  
Brezhnev, Leonid 97, 104, 118  
Brodiagi [vagrants] 70, 84

Bublikov, Anton 128  
Butler, Judith 138, 158  
Bykov, Rolan 118  
Byvshie [former people] 49

## C

Cardinal Newman 177  
Chastushki [doggerels] 12, 90, 94,  
98-100, 106  
Chekhov, Anton 12, 84, 144-146  
Cheka 50  
Cheremshanov, Boris 155-156  
Chertkov, Vladimir 148  
Chistka [cleansing] 61  
Cioran, Emile 12, 140, 146, 150  
Collective farms 46-47, 58, 62  
Collectivization 11, 43-47, 55, 62  
Conception of the Development of  
the Penal System through the Year  
2020 38  
Corpus delicti 35-36  
Correctional colonies;  
Cell-type facilities (PKT)  
[pomeshchenie kamernogo tipa]  
21  
Colours of 29-31  
Enterprises 31, 34, 37, 39  
Forbidden zone [zapretnaia zona]  
21-23  
Guards company [rota okhrany]  
22  
Industrial area [promzona] 21  
Living area [zhilaia zona] 21-22  
Local area [lokal'nyĭ uchastok]  
22-23, 33-34, 39  
Solitary confinement cells  
(ShIZO) [shtrafnoĭ izoliator] 21

Council of People's Commissars  
[Sovnarkom] 50  
Criminal Code, Russian 35–36, 95  
Criminal Procedure Code, Russian 36

## D

Dante 144, 173  
Death row 155, 158  
Decembrist Uprising of 1825 114  
De-kulakization [raskulachivanie]  
48–49, 60, 98  
Delone, Vadim 96  
Derrida, Jacques 138  
Desertion 54, 60  
Doroshevich, Vlas 11, 70–71, 77–84  
Dostoevsky, Fedor 11–12, 69–80,  
82–84, 96, 113, 140, 144–145,  
178–179  
Dovlatov, Sergeĭ 96–97, 120, 124,  
127  
Dubrovka hostage crisis 170  
Dzhentl'meny udachi [Gentlemen of  
Fortune] (film) 113

## E

Eichmann, Adolf 13, 141, 151–153  
Ertz, Simon 57  
Execution 44, 46, 55, 95, 113, 143,  
151, 156  
Extractive institutions 46

## F

Fainsod, Merle 58  
Feinstein, Stephen 89  
Felman, Shoshana 138  
Feuer Miller, Robin 73  
Figner, Vera 78  
Filtzer, Donald 43, 51, 53–54  
Final Solution, the (see Holocaust)  
Flaubert, Gustave 177  
Fomenko, Anatoliĭ 177  
Forced industrialization 45, 47, 49  
Forced labour 91, 94, 97  
Foucault, Michel 12, 138–139, 141,  
153, 175  
Frank, Semyon 12, 155–157  
Frankl, Viktor 12, 100, 140–142,  
146, 150, 155

FSB 10, 165

## G

Galich, Aleksandr 114  
Genet, Jean 175, 179–180  
Ginzburg, Evgeniia 12, 94, 113, 144,  
157  
Glavlit 49  
Glubokovskiĭ, Boris 91  
Golubovich, Aleksei 178  
Gorbachev, Mikhail 118–119  
Govorukhin, Stanislav 118  
Graham, Seth 102  
Great Terror, the 55–56, 102  
Gregory, Paul 44  
Gromov, Maxim 175  
Guberman, Igor 24  
Gulag;  
Costs of 44–45, 57  
Memoirs of 90–91, 94, 96  
Press 90–93  
Gumilev, Lev 177  
GUMZ [Glavnoe upravlenie mest  
zakliucheniĭ, Chief Department  
for Incarcerations] 92

## H

Hapgood, Isabel 151  
Hašek, Jaroslav 147–148  
Healy, John 176, 179  
Herling-Grudziński, Gustaw 69  
Hessler, Julie 47  
Hollywood 111–112, 113  
Holocaust 100, 151–152, 163  
Humour;  
Authorized 91, 93  
Black 12, 95, 98, 101, 103  
Carnivalized 99–100  
Coping mechanism 11–13, 100,  
102  
Soviet repression 89, 97, 102–106  
Underground 91, 94

## I

Information flow 10, 31

## J

Jailhouse Rock (film) 111–112  
James, William 140

## K

Ka-Tzetnik 135633 176  
Kaganovich, Lazar 47, 58  
Kalina krasnaia [Snowball Berry Red] (film) 113  
Kant, Immanuel 151–152  
Kazarnovskiĭ, Iurii 92–93  
Kennan, George 84  
Kessler, Gijs 45, 49  
Khodorkovsky, Mikhail 9  
Khrushchev, Nikita 61, 97, 103  
Kierkegaard, Søren 12, 139, 142, 150  
Koni, Anatoliĭ 151  
Konkin, Vladimir 118  
Kremlin 13, 105, 173  
Kulaks 46–49, 54–56, 58, 60–61, 98  
Kuziakina, Natalia 89

## L

Labor shirkers 48  
LaCapra, Dominick 138  
Lacenaire, Pierre François 80  
Laub, Dori 138  
Lem, Stanisław 120  
Lenin, Vladimir 30, 46, 98, 104, 111  
Lermontov, Mikhail 122  
Levinas, Emmanuel 138–139, 180  
Levtova, Marina 119  
Likhachev, Dmitriĭ 75–77, 101  
Limonov, Eduard 13, 163–179  
Lipman, Steve 89  
Liube 111–112, 115–123, 127–130  
Liubertsy 116–117  
Loss of social skills 32–34, 38–39  
Low morale 27–28

## M

Malcolm X 174, 178–179, 181  
Margalit, Avishai 163–164, 180  
Maslow, A. H. 13, 165–166, 169, 179–181  
Matvienko, Igor' 112, 117, 119, 128–129

McDonald, Tracy 44–45  
Meerovich, Mark 52  
Mel'nichenko, Mikhail 97, 103  
Melville, Hermann 140  
Ministry of Labor Reserves 54  
Molenie Daniila zatochnika [Supplication of Daniel the Prisoner] 113  
Molotov, Viacheslav 46, 48  
Montaigne, Michel 139, 154  
Morozov, Nikolaĭ 78

## N

Narodovoltsy 78  
National Bolshevik Party 13, 164, 172, 175, 178, 180  
Nautilus Pompilius 117  
Nazi concentration/extermination camps 89, 100, 140, 176  
Nero 139, 154  
New Economic Policy 44  
New Russians 114  
NKVD 55–56, 60, 103, 142  
Nosovskiĭ, Gleb 177  
Nove, Alec 59  
Novgorodtsev, Pavel 143  
Novospassky Monastery 155

## O

OGPU 46–50, 59–60, 90, 92  
Okunevskaiia, Tat'iana 89  
Omel'chenko, Elena 125–126  
On Measures for the Liquidation of Kulak Farms in Districts of Wholesale Collectivization (decree) 46  
Osokina, Elena 47  
Osorgin, Georgii 91  
Ostrovskiĭ, Aleksandr 94  
Ostrower, Chaya 89

## P

Passport law 48–49, 52, 54, 60  
Pater, Walter 177  
Pellico, Silvio 147, 150  
Penal System (see Prison)  
Perekovka [reforging] 93

Perestroika 97, 157  
 Plato 12, 90, 101  
 Pogodin, Nikolai 94  
 Politburo 13, 46–47, 50, 53, 61–62  
 Politzakliuchënyye (see prisoners, political)  
 Poniatiia [“understandings”] 27, 29–30  
 Prescott, John 170  
 Presley, Elvis 111–112  
 Prison;  
     Argot 114, 127  
     Belmarsh 164–167, 169, 171, 173  
     Butyrka 94, 178  
     Hierarchy 23–24, 26–31, 77, 81, 181  
     Iaroslavl 19, 94  
     Internal regulations 23, 34, 38  
     Lefortovo 165–167, 172–173, 181  
     Long and Short-term meetings 20–21  
     Norfolk 178  
     Reform 10, 38–40, 172  
     Solikamsk 119, 121  
     Soviet Union 43–44, 90, 95  
     Taboos 10, 25–29, 31  
     Theatre 89–94, 100  
     Tsarist 9, 11, 69–70, 78, 84, 90  
     Wayland 165–166, 170, 173  
 Prisoners;  
     Political 82, 90, 95–97, 100–101, 115, 137, 145, 178–179  
     Ordinary 29, 98, 100–101, 180  
     Female 32–33, 113, 125–128, 174, 178  
 Propiska [residence permit] 48, 168  
 Pugacheva, Alla 118–119, 124  
 Pushkin, Alexandr 76, 113, 117  
 Pussy Riot 9  
 Putilov, Boris 89, 99  
 Putin, Vladimir 9–10, 104–105, 114, 117, 130

## R

Rastorguev, Nikolai 112, 115–118, 121, 124, 127–130  
 Ratushinskaia, Irina 113, 174, 177–

179  
 Red Colour (see also Prison; Taboos) 29  
 Rivière, Pierre 139  
 Robinson, James 46  
 Rossi, Jacques 43  
 Rossman, Jeffrey 51  
 Rumble in Rhyl 170  
 Russkiĭ shanson 97, 106

## S

Sakharov, Andrei Nikolaevich 50–51  
 Savinkov, Boris 150  
 Savvat'evo hermitage 90  
 Self-actualisation 165, 169, 179  
 Settlement colonies [kolonii-poseleniia] 20, 38–39  
 Shalamov, Varlam 11, 69–71, 75, 77–84, 94–95, 113  
 Siberia 113, 137, 145, 148–149  
 Sicilian Mafia 70  
 Siniavskiĭ, Andrei 11, 70–76, 82–84, 96, 113  
 SLON 75, 90–93  
 Solovei, Sergei 175, 179  
 Solovetskiĭ krokodil 92  
 Solovki (see SLON)  
 Solteatr 91–92  
 Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr 12–14, 69, 91, 95, 101–102, 113, 142–143, 147–148, 150, 178  
 Sontag, Susan 138  
 Special settlements 43, 54–56, 61  
 St. Augustine 142, 177  
 Stagnation [zastoĭ] 96–97  
 Stalin, Joseph 9–11, 43–49, 51–52, 54–62, 93–98, 100, 103–105, 113, 118, 128, 137–138, 154–155, 157  
 Stalinism 105, 156  
 Stanziani, Alessandro 61  
 Starostin, Dmitriĭ 175, 178–179, 181  
 Stepniak-Kravchinskiĭ, Sergei 149  
 Such'i voĭny [“bitch wars”] 29, 79  
 Suicide 28, 176  
 Superiority theory 12, 90, 101

## T

- Terent'ev, Igor' 94  
Tertz, Abram (see Siniavskiĭ, Andreĭ)  
Thaw 95, 97  
Theory of carnival 12, 90, 99–100  
Theory of human motivation 165, 173  
Thorpe, Richard 111–112  
Tikhanova, Valentina 89  
Toker, Leona 78, 89, 101, 164  
Tolstoy, Alexandra 154–155  
Tolstoy, Leo 12–13, 137–138, 144,  
147–158  
Trade Union 49–51, 58, 61

## U

- Unauthorized job-changing [tekuchka  
kadrov] 11, 51–54, 59–61  
Urki [criminals] 96, 101

## V

- Velikiĭ perelom [the Great Turn] 93  
Veselaia, Elena 112, 130  
Vico, Giambattista 139–140  
Viola, Lynne 46, 60  
Visani, Federica 103–104  
Vysotsky, Vladimir 114, 118, 121

## W

- Wilde, Oscar 174–175, 177, 179–180  
World War II 29, 45, 47, 57, 60, 118,  
147

## Y

- Yakuza 70  
Yeltsin, Boris 114, 118, 129  
Yezhov, Nikolaĭ 45

## Z

- Zolotukhin, Dmitriĭ 12, 112, 122,  
128–129  
Zona, concept of 13, 19, 24–25, 113  
Zona Liube [Liube Zone] (film) 12,  
112, 118–120, 124, 126–130  
Zykina, Liudmila 118



## Notes on Contributors

**Helena Goscilo** is Professor of Slavic and East European Languages and Cultures at The Ohio State University. Her most recent publications include the co-edited volumes *Cinepaternity: Fathers and Sons in Soviet and Post-Soviet Film* (2010), *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia: Shocking Chic* (2011), and *Embracing Arms: Cultural Representations of Slavic and Balkan Women in War* (2012), as well as *Reflections and Refractions: The Mirror in Russian Culture* (2011), *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon* (2012), and *Fade from Red: The Cold War Ex-Enemy in Russian and American Film 1990–2005* (2014). Her current projects are a collection co-edited with Vlad Strukov, *Fame in Flight: Russian Aviation and Visual Culture* (2014), and a monograph preliminarily titled *Graphic Ideology: The Soviet Poster from Stalin to Yeltsin*.

**Andrea Gullotta** is Research Fellow at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice. He earned his PhD in Slavic Studies, along with the title Doctor Europaeus, at the University of Padua in 2011. His dissertation, devoted to the literature published in the magazines and journals of the Solovki prison camp, will be published by Legenda. He has held positions as Senior Lecturer of Russian Literature and Russian Language at the University of Palermo and Research Fellow at the University of Padua. Gullotta has published several articles in national and international journals and is editor and founder, together with Claudia Criveller, of the international peer-reviewed journal *AvtobiografiЯ: Journal on Life Writing and the Representation of the Self in Russian Culture*.

**Julie Hansen** is Associate Professor of Slavic Languages at the Department of Modern Languages and Research Fellow at the Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Uppsala University. She received her PhD from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She has published articles and book chapters on Russian and Czech modernism, exile literature, translingual literature, translation, and the theme of memory in literary fiction. She is co-editor of *Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature* (2013) and a special issue of the journal *Translation and Interpreting Studies* devoted to translation in Russian contexts. She is currently writing a book, funded by a research grant from the Swedish Research Council, which applies memory theory in interpretations of recent novels depicting the Communist period in Central and Eastern Europe.

**Martin Kragh** is a specialist on Russian and Soviet economic history. He defended his PhD at the Stockholm School of Economics in 2009, and is now Research Fellow at the Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Uppsala University. His articles have appeared in the journals *Europe-Asia Studies*, *War in History*, and *Journal of History of Economic Thought*. He is also the author of *A History of Russia: From Alexander II to Vladimir Putin* (published in Swedish in 2014) and the editor of *Swedish Business History in Russia, 1850–1917* (2014). His current research deals with the expropriation of foreign firms in the Russian Revolution, with special emphasis on its economic and social consequences.

**Inessa Medzhibovskaya** is Associate Professor and Chair of Literature in the Department of Literary Studies at Eugene Lang College, with a joint appointment at the New School for Social Research. She is the author of *Tolstoy and the Religious Culture of His Time: A Biography of a Long Conversion, 1845–1887* (2008; paperback ed. 2009) and has published widely on topics of Russian literature and intellectual history. Recent essays include “Dostoevsky and Education,” “Russian Classics on Trial: Reflections on Critics and Criticism,” “Tolstoy’s Problems in Historical Perspective,” “Goethe and Hegel in the Commissariat of Enlightenment,” “Tolstoy and the Bible,” and “Tolstoy’s Jewish Questions.” Her forthcoming books are *Tolstoy and the Fates of the Twentieth Century*; *Tolstoy’s Prisons*; and *Writing and Confinement*. She is also editor, introduction author, and contributor for the forthcoming volumes *Tolstoy and His Problems: Views from the Twenty-First Century*, and *On Life* (an annotated critical edition of Tolstoy’s work, *O zhizni*, co-translated with Michael Denner).

**Andrei Rogatchevski** is Professor of Russian Literature and Culture at the University of Tromsø in Norway. He is a graduate of Moscow State University and the University of Glasgow. He also studied at Charles University in Prague (the Podesbrady campus) and the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen. He has taught at the University of Glasgow, University of Helsinki, Masaryk University in Brno, University of Ostrava, University of Mainz/Germersheim, University of Ghent, and Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and held a research post at the Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Uppsala University. Among the publications he has (co-)authored/(co-)edited are: *Bribery and Blat in Russia* (2000), *A Biographical and Critical Study of the Russian Writer Eduard Limonov* (2003), *Filming the Unfilmable: Casper Wrede’s “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich”* (2010; 2nd ed. 2014), and the special issue of *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* (nos 2–4, 1999) entitled “East and Central European Émigré Literatures: Past, Present – and Future?”

**Igor Sutyagin** graduated from the Physics Department of Moscow State University (1988) and earned his PhD (1995) at the Institute for the USA and Canada (ISKAN) at the Russian Academy of Sciences. He then worked at the Political-Military Studies Department of ISKAN, and was eventually appointed Head of Section on US Military-Technical and Military-Economic Policy. In October 1999, Sutyagin was arrested by the FSB and accused of high treason because of a contract he had with a British-based consultancy to prepare Russian press surveys. In April 2004, he was sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment. In July 2010, he and three other Russian citizens were exchanged for ten Russian "sleeper" agents arrested in the United States. In May 2011, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Russian authorities had violated Article 5 § 3 and Article 6 § 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights in their treatment of his case, due to a lack of independence and impartiality of the trial court. Sutyagin is currently Research Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies in London. He has published over one hundred articles, as well as three books, in the Soviet Union/Russia, United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Switzerland.

**Sarah J. Young** is a lecturer in Russian at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London. A graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge, and the Universities of Manchester and Nottingham, she previously held posts at the University of Toronto and the University of Nottingham. She has written extensively on Dostoevsky, including a monograph, *Dostoevsky's "The Idiot" and the Ethical Foundations of Narrative* (2004), and a co-edited collection, *Dostoevsky on the Threshold of Other Worlds* (2006), and has published articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century labour camp narratives in journals including *Slavic Review*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, and *Journal of European Studies*. She is currently writing a book about narratives of imprisonment, hard labour, and exile in Russia, and developing a literary cartography project, "Mapping St. Petersburg" ([www.mappingpetersburg.org](http://www.mappingpetersburg.org)). She blogs about her research at [www.sarahjyoung.com](http://www.sarahjyoung.com).



ACTA UNIVERSITATIS UPSALIENSIS

*Uppsala Studies on Eastern Europe*

Editors: Elena Namli, Li Bennich-Björkman and Stefan Hedlund

---

1. KAREL DURMAN: *Lost Illusions. Russian Policies towards Bulgaria in 1877–1887.* 1988. (Published in *Uppsala studies on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* 1. ISSN 0284-3080)
2. VLADIMIR GLIGOROV: *Why do Countries Break up? The Case of Yugoslavia.* 1994.
3. JESSICA GIANDOMENICO: *Power Asymmetry Revised. Reconciling EU Foreign Policy Goals and Enlargement Conditionality in Western Balkans.* 2013.
4. *Pioneers in European Ethnobiology.* Editors: INGVAR SVANBERG & ŁUKASZ ŁUCZAJ. 2014.
5. *Punishment as a Crime? Perspectives on Prison Experience in Russian Culture.* Editors: JULIE HANSEN & ANDREI ROGACHEVSKII. 2014.

