

Cult of the ‘Urka’: Criminal Subculture in the Gulag, 1924-1953

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Abstract

Although a large body of work has been amassed on the Gulag a number of voices remain excluded. Criminal subculture had a profound influence on daily life in the camps yet academic study has lagged behind other groups, such as political prisoners. Without gaining a better understanding of the inner workings of the world of the criminals, our knowledge and understanding of Gulag society remains incomplete. This thesis contributes primarily to answering two broad questions within the current scholarship on the Gulag: (1) How were approaches and perceptions of criminality shaped during the period in question? And (2) What can we learn from the reconstruction of criminal subculture from the large literary corpus regarding life in the camps? These issues are not easily separated, with the second often self-consciously playing into the first. The first question is explored in the first section of the thesis, which examines a number of well-known images of criminal subculture across the revolutionary divide of 1917 and discussions of criminality found in the early prison press (1918-1930). The second section will reconstruct criminal life in the camps from the mid-1930s onwards, and address a number of principle questions such as: How did groups of criminal prisoners adapt to the process of 'prisonization' (adaption in the penal environment)? What methods of communication were used to transmit criminal norms? How important were methods of enactment, such as card playing, in the construction of penal hierarchies? What form did punishment rituals amongst criminals prisoners take? And, finally: How was conflict between criminal prisoners resolved and what effect did this have on Gulag society as a whole?

The thesis will look to test two principal arguments. Firstly, the resilience of criminal subculture, not only across the revolutionary divide of 1917 but throughout the entirety of the Stalinist Gulag. The creation of *illicit* hierarchies and development a number of 'informal' practices undermined attempts by Gulag authorities to fully control their inmate population, suggesting that the camps were as much a product of *neo-traditionalism* as an emblem of modernity. Secondly, the rendering of criminal subculture through various 'cult products' such as tattoo drawings, song collections, books, plays and films has resulted in a conflation of folklore and historical fact. Using a strong interdisciplinary approach with influences from social and cultural anthropology, ethnography, literature studies, criminology and penology, the reconstruction of these practices will demonstrate that perceptions of criminal subculture have often prevented a comprehensive study of its effect on daily life for all prisoners.

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Glossary

<i>Asmodey</i>	-	Prisoner merchants (C19th)
<i>Ataman</i>	-	Leader of criminal gang (C18th)
<i>Besprizornyye</i>	-	Orphaned or otherwise homeless or abandoned children
<i>Blatnyie</i>	-	Criminal
<i>Dukhovoi</i>	-	‘Brass’, important thief
<i>Yesaul</i>	-	Lieutenant in criminal gang (C18th)
<i>Farmazonshiki</i>	-	Forgers/Counterfeiters
<i>Frayera</i>	-	‘Outsider’
<i>Khipesnitsi</i>	-	Criminals who had perfected the art of seduction
<i>Klichka</i>	-	Nickname
<i>Koty</i>	-	Category of informant found within <i>lygash</i>
<i>Kruchiie</i>	-	‘Twisters’, prisoners noted for their cunning and treachery (C19th)
<i>Legavyi</i>	-	Figure of institutional ‘authority’/informer
<i>Lyagash</i>	-	‘Informants’
<i>Malina</i>	-	Gambling den or brothel, used by criminals to hide their loot
<i>Moshennnik</i>	-	Swindler
<i>Muzhiki</i>	-	Peasants/workers arrested for ‘everyday’ crimes (<i>byt</i>)
<i>Nalyoty</i>	-	Bank-robbers
<i>Opushchennyie</i>	-	‘Untouchables’, low ranked prisoner caste
<i>Pakhan</i>	-	Leader of criminal gang
<i>Podduvala</i>	-	Performs menial tasks for other prisoners (C19th)
<i>Schuler</i>	-	Hustler/Gambler
<i>Shestyorki</i>	-	Deputy in criminal gang
<i>Shtreybrekhera</i>	-	‘Scab’, strike breaker
<i>Shirmanshik</i>	-	Pickpockets

<i>Shishki</i>	-	Informants
<i>Shobla yobla</i>	-	'Rabble', mass of criminal prisoners
<i>Shpana</i>	-	Native inhabitant of prison/streetwise, experienced gang member
<i>Shtos/s</i>	-	Popular card game
<i>Such'ya Voina</i>	-	'Bitches' War', internal prisoner conflict (1948-52)
<i>Sukharnik</i>	-	'Husk', performs work duties for other prisoners (C19th)
<i>Suki</i>	-	'Bitches'
<i>Svodniki</i>	-	Pimps
<i>Vor-v-Zakone</i>	-	Thief-in-law
<i>Vor</i>	-	Thief
<i>Vshi</i>	-	'Lice', low-level criminal prisoners
<i>Yama</i>	-	Late nineteenth/early twentieth century urban slum
<i>Zhigan</i>	-	Low position in hierarchy (C19th)/prisoner authority (C 20 th)

Note on Translation and Transliteration

I use the Library of Congress system of transliteration, except in the footnotes and bibliography when a given work (or author name) has been published using a different system. All translations are my own unless stated otherwise in the notes.

Introduction



Throughout Gulag historiography and beyond, the image of the tattooed, scarred recidivist criminal remains. This is demonstrated by the above image, depicting the actor Colin Farrell in Peter Weir's 2010 film *The Way Back*. The main narrative arc of the film, based on former Polish prisoner Slawomir Rawicz's memoir *The Long Walk*, shows a group of prisoners escaping from a remote labour camp in Siberia and travelling around four thousand miles to freedom in India. During one of the film's opening scenes, Farrell's character Valka appears in the communal barracks swearing, performing a well-known gesture to imitate masturbation and playing cards 'on credit' (an agreement between both players to pay later), eventually stabbing his opponent after his refusal to hand over a sweater given to him by his wife. Following their flight from the camp and journey through the Siberian wilderness, the escaped prisoners eventually reach the border with Mongolia. At this point, however, Valka refuses to continue with the group, explaining this decision as a result of both his

patriotism and affection for Iosif Stalin who is seen clearly tattooed on his chest alongside Vladimir Lenin.¹

The above example demonstrates how images of criminality have often occupied a special place in the film and televisual history of modern Russia. This phenomenon is just as prevalent amongst the literary elite, having acquired the fascination of writers such as Fyodor Dostoevskii and Anton Chekhov. In his classic work *The Gulag Archipelago*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn notes the ‘glorification’ of criminals in a long list of works by writers, playwrights, poets and singers including Maxim Gorkii, Isaac Babel, Vselvold Vishnevsky, Viktor Nekraskov, Tatyana Yesnina, Andrey Aldan-Semyonov, Leonid Utyosov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Dimtri Shostakovich, Illya Selvinsky and Vera Inber.² Solzhenitsyn was undoubtedly correct by describing how the fictional rendering of criminals could conflate with their daily norms and practices. This is further demonstrated by returning to the image of Valka, whose portraits of Lenin and Stalin are accompanied by two ten-pointed stars at the top of each pectoralis muscle. These tattoos are indeed accurate in the sense that they correctly imitate those worn by members of contemporary mafia organisation *vory-v-zakone* (thieves-in-law), yet no specific evidence pertaining to their various rites and rituals can be found before the early 1950s. Rawicz’s account, not without other problems in terms of potential accuracy³, details that events took place almost ten years before this, in 1941. Moreover, Valka, the only Russian participant of the group escape, does not feature in Rawicz’s original memoir and appears to have been added as a result of the director’s artistic license.

Despite their potential for inaccuracies, accounts such as these can help demonstrate important continuities in prisoner subculture and help show its resilience, not only across the traditional boundary of 1917, but throughout the entirety of the Gulag and into the present. Unlike many prisoners sentenced under Article 58 of the criminal code, for whom imprisonment and

¹ *The Way Back*, directed by Peter Weir, 2010.

² The only work Solzhenitsyn reserved praise for was Vladimir Tendryakov’s *Three, Seven, Ace* (1960) which centred on the experience of a young prisoner in a remote logging camp: Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Arkhipelag GULag*. Vol.3, (Paris, 1974), pp.425-426.

³ Rawicz’s memoir was published in 1956, selling half a million copies and translated into 25 languages. Its authenticity has been questioned by another former prisoner, Wiltold Glinksi, who claims he was one of the original participants. Archival evidence, however, has contradicted both Glinksi and Rawicz’s versions of events. For more information: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/6098218.stm> & <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=34772> (Belorussian)

transportation (*etap*) was usually their first experience of incarceration, the subjects of this analysis were often arrested for crimes normally accepted to sanction in a modern state such as assault and theft. As will be demonstrated, there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that many were already well-versed in penal mores and norms which, according to writer Varlam Shalamov, 'did not arise in a vacuum but were founded on the traditions, customs and 'laws' of the criminal underworld of Tsarist Russia.'⁴

During late Imperial exile and *katorga*, the highest category of prisoners was known as *Ivans*, a status reportedly earned through their propensity to endure the often brutal forms of corporal punishment. Alongside this, there were also numerous other roles such as gamblers, merchants and those with the ability to instigate conflict between other inmates. Following the revolutions of February and October 1917, newspapers produced by prisoners in some of the earliest locations of forced labour regularly labelled recidivist inmates with the term '*svoi*' (a general term for 'one's own people') alongside several professional identities such as bank-robbers, swindlers and prostitutes.⁵ Alongside this, published memoirs from those who escaped the notorious camp on the Solovetskii archipelago continued to use one of the more popular terms, '*shpana*' (indigenous prison population), to describe the prisoner population en masse. The continued use of this approach reflects studies of late Imperial exile and *katorga* which similarly privileged the experiences of a relatively small number of representatives from the educated and political elite over the majority who came mainly from the peasantry. Citing W. Bruce Lincoln's work on Siberia, Sarah J. Young correctly asserts that 'history remembers little about this horde' whose 'faces do not readily emerge'.⁶

While a number of important accounts existed beforehand, the writings of camp survivors received much greater exposure following the 1962 publication of Solzhenitsyn's famous novella *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Since then, both English and Russian language memoirs have

⁴ Jane Caplan (ed.), *Written on the Body: the Tattoo in European and American History* (London, 2000), p.187.

⁵ This term originates from the Russian cultural practice of viewing certain persons as "our people", embodying the potential for trust, mutual understanding and reciprocity. Alena Ledeneva demonstrates how "svoi", despite a pronoun, was used in such contexts like a noun to imply an element of exclusion: Alena Ledeneva, *Economy of Favours*. pp.12-13. Daniel Healey also shows how the term was also used to designate fellow members of the homosexual subculture across the revolutionary divide of 1917 although its generally usage means was not unique to illegal or otherwise stigmatised groups: Daniel Healey. *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*. (Chicago, 2001), pp.36, 44, 47.

⁶ Sarah Young, 'Knowing Russia's Convicts: The Other in Narratives of Imprisonment and Exile of the Late Imperial Era', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 65:9, (2013), p.1700.

described the activities of ‘ordinary/common criminals’ by using a number of terms including *vor*, *blatnoi* and *chestnyagi*. For the title of this thesis, the author has preferred to use the more general *urka*, which can be found in survivor literature and listed in both V. F. Trakhtenburg’s 1908 dictionary *Blatnaia Muzyka* (‘Criminal Music’) and Jacques Rossi’s *The Gulag Handbook*. Former prisoner Rossi records *urka* as both a ‘powerful and audacious thief’, and a ‘hardened professional criminal.....any thief, including bitches’ (*cyka*)⁷. As indicated by this definition, the term *urka* includes inmates who took ‘soft job’ positions working for the camp administration. This group of prisoners would become more prominent during the period known as the ‘Bitches’ War’ (1948-52) which divided the criminal underworld and impacted the entire prisoner population.

Using the more general *urka* also helps avoid any potential problematic connotations with *vory-v-zakone*. Since the 1990s, *vory* have regularly been the focus of detailed scholarly investigation.⁸ As will be demonstrated throughout, this interpretation looks to highlight important differences between being an individual thief and/or part of a group of thieves’ (*vor/vory*) and membership in *vory-v-zakone*. Even the most prominent scholar of Russian organised crime, Federico Varese, acknowledges that *vory-v-zakone* only comprised between 6-7% of the total number of what he terms ‘criminal prisoners’ in the 1950s.⁹ Although Varese’s work importantly links them to the travelling *artel*’ in the nineteenth century, thieves-in-law became more prominent in the late Soviet era when they became one manifestation of the Russian mafia (even though they have always drawn upon members of all ethnicities). Although their position has been challenged recently by Valerii Anisimkov, the legacy of *vory-v-zakone*, in both scholarly and non-scholarly accounts of Russian penalty and criminality is beyond question.¹⁰ Whilst still locating the *vory* within the boundaries of this analysis, the author has chosen to investigate the larger group of prisoners (*urki*) during the period 1924-1953.

⁷ Jacques Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook: An Encyclopaedia Dictionary of Soviet Penitentiary Institutions and Terms Related to the Forced Labour Camps* (New York, 1989), p.304.

⁸ Federico Varese, *The Russian Mafia Private Protection in a New Market Economy* (New York, 2001); Vadim Volkov, *Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism* (Cornell, 2002); J. Serio & V. Razinkin, ‘Thieves Professing the Code: The Traditional Role of the Vory-v-Zakone in Russia’s Criminal World and Adaptations to a New Social Reality’, *Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement*, 4:1 (1995); Mark Galeotti, ‘The Russian Mafia: Consolidation and Globalization’, *Global Crime*, 6:1 (2004). Mark Galeotti, ‘The World of the Lower Depths: Crime and Punishment in Russian History’, *Global Crime*, 9:1–2 (2008); Gavin Slade, *Reorganizing Crime: Mafia and Anti-Mafia in Post-Soviet Georgia* (Oxford, 2013).

⁹ Varese, ‘Society of the Vory-v-Zakone’, p.522.

¹⁰ Valerii Anisimkov, *Rossiia v zerkalye ugolovnikh traditsii tiurmi* (St. Petersburg, 2003).

In the early Soviet state, the majority of prisoners under investigation in this thesis were often among those arrested as ‘socially dangerous’ elements. As Paul Hagenloh indicates, the concept of ‘social danger’ was written into Soviet law as early as 1922 through Article 49, which gave courts the ability to sentence certain individuals due to ongoing petty criminal activity and connections with the ‘criminal milieu’ (*prestupnaia sreda*) to banishment from major cities such as Moscow and Leningrad.¹¹ Similarly to how so-called counter-revolutionaries would later describe themselves as ‘Article 58ers’, during the 1920s the term ‘49ers’ was applied to anyone assumed to have been convicted under this article. The distinction between ‘harmful’ and ‘dangerous’ elements began to erode, however, in the early 1930s, as local and central police began to view both groups as part of a larger mass of urban criminals. This led to *OGPU* instructions in August 1932 which advised local authorities to divide ‘criminal and social-parasitic elements’ into three categories. This grouped together a number of disparate and marginalised cohorts such as prostitutes, organised bandits, and juvenile delinquents and was identical to schema which guided local *OGPU* administrators during the dekulakization drive.¹²

Survivor memoirs have regularly recalled how prisoners reportedly sentenced under the above crimes often developed their own internal hierarchies and regularly occupied the most coveted positions in communal barracks or during transportation. These accounts also suggest that entry into these hierarchies was often governed by an unwritten code which helped to not only dictate the most intricate details of their daily lives but also impacted relationships with other social groups (including camp employees). While this evidence suggests that the hegemony of these prisoners profoundly affected day-to-day operations of the camps, they remain marginalised in Gulag historiography. As Adi Kuntsman suggests, the class-based prejudices of some memoirists has created a dichotomy between ‘political prisoners’ and ‘common criminals’ which has been left largely unchallenged by researchers.¹³ This is particularly evident in Anne Applebaum’s Pulitzer Prize winning book *Gulag: A History* which, despite dedicating a ten-page section to the *urki*, offers little more analysis than replicating short passages from memoir accounts in order to describe ‘the terror, the robbery and the

¹¹ Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police: Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926-1941* (Baltimore, 2008), p.41.

¹² Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police*, pp.117-119.

¹³ Kuntsman, ‘With a Shade of Disgust’, p.310

rape inflicted on the other inhabitants of the camps'¹⁴ Similarly, while Steven Barnes' *Death and Redemption* demonstrates better analysis of shifting boundaries between prisoners, this divide continues to be reinforced in his section on 'political prisoners and common criminals' which also does little more than reproduce extracts from memoirs without looking into the importance of the various behavioural norms and rituals.¹⁵ The resilience of this dichotomy within pre-existing scholarship highlights one of the biggest problems when looking at the group of prisoners selected for this study. As previously noted, recidivists and criminal gangs were often referred to under a number of names (*urki*, *vory* etc.) which label them as being deviant from standard cultural norms. As noted in classic texts by Frank Tannenbaum, Howard Becker, Erving Goffman and David Matza, the application of negative or stigmatizing labels is unconstructive as it can shape societal attitudes and actively promote deviant behaviour.¹⁶ Even if these assumptions about their background were proven to be correct, not enough is known about the individual case studies of many of the subjects of this analysis to classify them in this way without rigorous investigation. As a result, this strict criminal vs political prisoner dichotomy has a detrimental effect on the development of what Wilson Bell defines broadly as Gulag culture.¹⁷

With that in mind, this thesis contributes primarily to answering two main questions within the current scholarship on Soviet criminality and penalty: How were approaches and perceptions of criminality shaped during the period in question? And: What can we learn from the reconstruction of criminal subculture from the large literary corpus regarding daily life in the camps? These issues are not easily separated, often self-consciously merging into each other (what Diego Gambetta describes as 'low life imitating art'¹⁸). The first question is explored in the first part of the thesis, which examines images of criminal and penal folklore across the revolutionary divide and discussions of criminality found in the pages of the early camp press of the 1920s.

¹⁴ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p.261-270

¹⁵ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, p.83-93

¹⁶ For more on 'labeling theory' see: Howard Becker, *Outsiders* (New York, 1963); Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York, 1963); David Matza, *On Becoming Deviant* (New Jersey, 1969); Frank Tannenbaum, *Crime and Community* (London, 1938).

¹⁷ Wilson Bell, 'Gulag Historiography: An Introduction', *Gulag Studies*, 2-3 (2010), pp.1-20.

¹⁸ Diego Gambetta, *Codes of the Underworld: How Criminals Communicate*, (Princeton, 2011), p.251

The second part will follow the work of penologists such as Donald Clemmer and attempt to understand Gulag society as a social phenomenon by demonstrating a number of processes in operation.¹⁹ This part of the thesis will look to reconstruct prisoner society and address a number of principle questions such as: How did groups of prisoners adapt to the process of ‘prisonization’ (assimilation in the penal environment)? What methods of communication were used to transmit criminal/penal norms? How important were methods of enactment, such as card playing, in the construction of penal hierarchies? What form did punishment rituals amongst prisoners take? And, finally: How was conflict between prisoners resolved and what effect did this have on Gulag society as a whole? In order to construct a more comprehensive picture of daily life in the camps it is therefore, vital to not only investigate internal hierarchies and behavioural norms but also how different groups of prisoners not only interacted with each other but also camp authorities.

A (brief) historiography of the Gulag

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed an interventionist ethos which not only forged the development of the European welfare state, but also contributed toward the massive application of state violence during this period. This was most visible in the utilisation of a number of institutions which offered the means to remove entire categories of people deemed unfit for the social body.²⁰ During the Stalinist era, everyone within the social body was subject to intense ‘categorisation’ as the regime embarked on widespread engineering projects which looked to reshape individuals into ideal Soviet citizens. One vital component of this was the reconstitution of the penal system, as a conglomeration of prisons from late Imperial exile and *katorga* was transformed into a vast, network of camps and colonies stretching from the central Asiatic steppe to the farthest reaches of Siberian tundra. Reflecting a strong punitive society, this array of detention institutions was also capable of

¹⁹ Donald Clemmer, *The Prison Community* (New York, 1958), pp.xv-xvi.

²⁰ For modernity in the Soviet context: Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995); Peter Holquist, ‘State Violence as a Technique: The Logic of Violence in Soviet Totalitarianism’, Amir Weiner (ed.), *Landscaping the Human Garden: Twentieth Century Population Management in a Comparative Framework* (Stanford, 2003); David Hoffman and Yanni Kotsonis (eds.), *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices* (New York, 2003); Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia: The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity, 1880-1930* (Cornell, 2008).

embarking on large-scale construction projects which attempted to rid the country of its perceived historic ‘backwardness.’

The emergence of modernity occupies an important place across a broad range of European historiography. Following this, Kate Brown has argued for more cross-national comparative studies which examine how the Gulag relates to an array of detention practices including, but not exclusive to, prison, ghettos, exile, slave colonies, North American reservations and Japanese-American internment camps.²¹ This view has helped placed the Gulag more squarely within a global history of unfree and restricted labour, as well as in the context of the industrial welfare state. As a result, the camp system as a whole is now viewed as part of a continuum of disciplinary practice and incarcerated space throughout the Soviet Union which included ‘regime-zone’ cities, ‘open’ cities and towns, collective farms and special settlements. Despite this, however, many continue to treat the system as one single, undifferentiated institution. What is commonly referred to as the ‘Gulag’ included, at various times, centrally-located prisons, *katorga* camp divisions, corrective labour camps, corrective labour colonies, prisoner-of-war camps, special settlements and non-custodial forced labour, alongside a number of special-purpose filtration camps, prisoner-of-war camps and scientific *sharashki*.²² The once innocuous bureaucratic acronym representing *Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerie* (Main Administration of the Camps) has been transformed into shorthand which rivals only ‘Holocaust’ in describing barbarism and systematic brutality.²³ By rhyming the title of his ‘experiment in literary investigation’, Solzhenitsyn helped refashioned the otherwise banal abbreviation to describe the repressive system in its entirety: from arrest and interrogation, transportation (*etap*), forced labour, the destruction of families, years spent in exile and fight to regain status in society, to the millions who never returned.

Although interesting discussions have begun regarding Spanish *reconcentrado* camps in Cuba and British-run camps in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War, the most common comparison

²¹ Kate Brown, ‘Out of Solitary Confinement: The History of the Gulag’, *Kritika*, 8:1 (2007), p.78.

²² Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, pp.16-27.

²³ GULag is an acronym for *Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerie* (Main Administration of the Camps), the particular Soviet central bureaucratic institution responsible for running the camp system. S. Barnes. p.259

remains Nazi concentration camps.²⁴ Although there were undoubtedly similarities in the way power relations operated, Steven Barnes demonstrates that, while the Nazi camps were a distinct system of absolute power, entry into the Gulag was not always a one-way ticket and extermination not an inevitable outcome. Furthermore, the Gulag played a fundamental role in the construction of Soviet civilization and, rather than solely isolating perceived enemies and providing slave labour, the purpose of the camps was also to ‘reclaim the margins’ of society through re-education.²⁵ Daily life in the Gulag was also more individualised than in Nazi concentration camps, a factor often attributed to a sociological view of the human subject as opposed to the Nazis’ biological definition of the enemy. Alongside this, another common comparison in regards to prisoner agency in Gulag remains the role of *kapo* or prisoner functionary (*Funktionshäftling*). The main difference in this instance is that the system of prisoner self-administration in the Nazi concentration camps was official policy, implemented from the top-down, while, in the Gulag, the hegemony of certain individuals/groups of prisoners was one of many ‘informal’ practices which helped to dictate camp life. A similar argument could be made here regarding prostitution (officially instituted for some prisoners and staff in the Nazi camps) which was also widely reportedly in survivor memoir from the Gulag.

Solzhenitsyn’s contention that ‘the Archipelago was born with the shots of the cruiser *Aurora*’ demonstrates how 1917 continues to be regarded as important rupture in regards to both the structure and size of the camp system. Viewing the camps solely in this fashion, however, can negate important links with pre-revolutionary penalty. Clear continuity from Tsarist-era penalty aided the expansion and development of the multiplicity of detention institutions of the Gulag, displayed most evidently in the distinct ‘geography of punishment’ in contemporary Russian penalty which continues to use the peripheries as a place of exile and incarceration.²⁶ This policy of exclusion by geographical separation represents a deep rooted response to deviancy which many Bolsheviks had

²⁴ Wolfgang Sofsky *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (Princeton, 1997); Reviel Netz, *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity*, p.389.

²⁵ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*.

²⁶ For more on the longstanding consequences of the ‘geography of penalty’ which developed in the Stalin era: Judith Pallot, ‘Russia’s penal peripheries: space, place and penalty in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30 (2005).

personal experience.²⁷ Both late Tsarist and early Soviet state attempted to ‘cleanse’ their polities in a form of violent state-craft termed as ‘population politics.’²⁸ Mark Bassin demonstrates how the imperial vision of Siberia was akin to a foreign territorial possession, becoming an expansive storehouse for people whose presence the authorities deemed to be socially or politically undesirable.²⁹ The utilisation of the farthest geographical reaches as a place of detention and removal from core society was by no means a solely Russian phenomenon, however, as many European states linked punishment to colonial enterprises. During the same period the British exiled convicts to a colony on Botany Bay³⁰, France sent convicted criminals to Guyana, Portugal banished undesirables to Mozambique, while a number of German states singled out those regarded as ‘particularly dangerous’ and deported them as far as Brazil or Siberia.³¹

The continuity of expelling ‘harmful elements’ to the peripheries is shown through the choice of the Solovetskii Islands as the one of the earliest forced labour camps.³² Initially used to incarcerate political opponents during the sixteenth century and utilised again during the Civil War, its symbolic importance is demonstrated by its continued function as a metonym for Soviet penalty, transcending the individual experience³³ to represent all victims of political repression.³³ Despite being exempt from the Corrective Labour Code of 1924, the archipelago became well known for its wide-scale use of penal reform, with articles about appearing in the British, German, French and US press.³⁴ The expansion of the camps onto the Karelian mainland demonstrated how implementation of the First Five Year Plan produced an eastward shift in the distribution of penal camps as the planned economy promoted higher rates of industrial growth in an attempt to erode the difference of levels between regions. The Second Five Year Plan aimed to further maintain this spatial levelling by envisaging a ‘widespread expansion of transport construction’ in which specialised regional economies on the periphery would supply raw and semi-processed materials for integrated industrial regions in the

²⁷ Pallot, *Russia's penal peripheries*, p.3. Stalin was himself arrested and exiled four times, escaping twice from Irkutsk province and twice from Vologoda province: Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York, 2003) p.18.

²⁸ Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police*, p.239.

²⁹ Mark Bassin, ‘Inventing Siberia; Visions of the Russian East in the Early Nineteenth Century’, *The American Historical Review*, 96:3, (1991), p.765.

³⁰ Alan Brooke & David Brandon, *Bound for Botany Bay: British Convict Voyages to Australia* (Richmond, 2003), p.31.

³¹ Nikolas Wachsmann, *Hitler's Prisons; Legal Terror in Nazi Germany* (New Haven, 2004), p.22.

³² Pallot, *Russia's penal peripheries*, p.4.

³³ Alexander Etkind, *Warped Morning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Stanford, 2013), p.14.

³⁴ Paul Gregory & Valery Lazarev (eds.), *The Economics of Forced Labour: The Soviet Gulag* (Stanford, 2005), p.163.

centre.³⁵ These perceived economic advancements occurred simultaneously alongside the a pattern of mass arrest followed by large-scale amnesty as the link between penalty, industrialization and collectivization created both a demand for labour and a pool of potential forced labourers.³⁶

The desire to exclude ever-finer classifications of ‘anti-Soviet elements’ during the Great Terror³⁷ was therefore mobilised for the attainment of national economic goals by a powerful central state intent on expanding its resource frontier.³⁸ Linking punishment to economic development meant that camps now became mobile, following the latest construction project. Throughout the 1930s the continued development of this ‘penal-economic utopia’ traversed treacherous political, social and cultural terrains populated by a number of groups and individual perceived to be alien or in some way obstructive to the Soviet project.³⁹ Following the launch of Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, the camp system became directly influenced by the effects of the Second World War. After the first substantial population decline in Gulag history, from 2.3 million at the time of the invasion to 1.2 million on 1st July 1944, the post-war period saw an upward trend which peaked at 2.45 million in 1953.⁴⁰ This period was further characterised by escalating levels of prisoner-on-prisoner violence and a well-documented period of prisoner rebellion which heightened following Stalin’s death in 1953. A combination of these events and mass amnesty played an important role in major changes to the camp system, permanently altering the size and the composition of its incarcerated population during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras.⁴¹

Although none offer an entirely monocausal explanation, previous scholarship has traditionally viewed the Gulag in two distinct yet overlapping ways, typically placing emphasis on either punitive or economic dimensions. Economic understanding portrays the growth of the camps as

³⁵ Baron, *Soviet Karelia*, p.152.

³⁶ On connections between the first five year plan and the creation of the Gulag: Alan Barenburg, *Gulag Town, Company Town: Forced Labour and its Legacy in Vorkuta* (Yale, 2014), p.18.

³⁷ Paul Hagenloh, “Socially Harmful Elements’ and the Great Terror”, Shelia Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Stalinism: New Directions* (London, 2000), p.303

³⁸ Pallot, *Russia’s penal peripheries*, p.4.

³⁹ Lynne Viola, “The Aesthetic of Stalinist Planning and the World of the Special Villages”, Nicholas Breyfogle, Abby Schra der & Willard Sunderland (eds.) *Peopling the Russian Periphery* (London, 2007), p.189.

⁴⁰ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, p.113.

⁴¹ In April 1953 the number of prisoners in camps and colonies was 2,466, 914. This number had dipped by 1960 to 550,882 (although does not include the 151, 247 prisoners in prison): Dobson, *Khrushchev’s Cold Summer*, p.2.

largely a result of crash industrialisation programs linked to the First Five Year Plan.⁴² Dalin and Nicholchevsky, editors of the volume *Economics of Forced Labour in the Soviet Union*, demonstrate the economic inefficiency by showing that, even in the chaotic world of Soviet industry the camps were far from profitable (something acknowledged even as early as the Solovetskii camps).⁴³ This is further underscored by David Nordlander's work on Kolyma and James Harris' study of forced labour in the Urals, with both emphasising that while economic primacy dictated the rise of the camp system, the elimination of 'enemies' took on a more important role in the late 1930s.⁴⁴

This original conception of this project as a micro study of a local Gulag site was influenced by such works as Nicholas Werth's *Cannibal Island: Death in a Siberian Gulag* and Nicholas Baron's *Conflict and Complicity: The Expansion of the Karelian Gulag, 1933-1939*.⁴⁵ Kate Brown, Steven Kotkin and, more recently, Alan Barenburg, have continued to demonstrate how the history of a single city or place can lead to profound insights about the Soviet experience.⁴⁶ The above works all demonstrate the continued importance of archival-based research in this area. Although some remain classified, central party archives have been extensively mined by scholars since the late 1980s.⁴⁷ Significant works to emerge from this includes Oleg Khlevniuk's *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivisation to the Great Terror*⁴⁸, Galina Ivanov's *Labor Camp Socialism*⁴⁹ and Edwin Bacon's *The Gulag at War*.⁵⁰ For many commentators, however, the most important archival contribution remains J. Arch Getty, Gabor Tamas Rittersporn and Victor N. Zemskov's *Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-war Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence*. Their detailed overview of the composition of Gulag inmates revealed that the Gulag released approximately 20% of

⁴² David Dallin & Boris Nicolaevsky, *Forced Labour in Soviet Russia*, (New Haven, 1947). Anne Applebaum states that 'the primary purpose of the Gulag, according to both the private language and the public propaganda of those who founded it, was economic' adding that these explanations are not 'entirely mutually exclusive either. Stalin might well have intended his arrests both to eliminate enemies and create slave labourers': Applebaum, *Gulag*, p.21.

⁴³ Gregory & Lazarev (eds.), *The Economics of Forced Labour*.

⁴⁴ David Nordlander, 'Origins of a Gulag Capital: Magadan and Stalinist Control in the Early 1930s', *Slavic Review*, 57:4 (1998), pp.791-812; James Harris, 'The Growth of the Gulag: Forced Labour in the Urals Region, 1929-31', *The Russian Review*, 56 (1997): 265-80.

⁴⁵ Nicholas Werth, *Cannibal Island: Death in a Siberian Gulag*, trans. S. Rendall (Princeton, 2007); Nick Baron, 'Conflict and Complicity: The Expansion of the Karelian Gulag, 1923-1933', *Cahiers du monde russe*, 42:2-4 (2001); Nick Baron, 'Production and Terror: The Operation of the Karelian Gulag, 1933-1939', *Cahiers du monde russe*, 43:1 (2002).

⁴⁶ Barenburg, *Gulag Town, Company Town*, p.6.

⁴⁷ Edwin Bacon, one of the first Western scholars to work in the central archives, provides a detailed consideration of quantitative debates in: Edwin Bacon, *The Gulag at War: Stalin's Forced Labour System in the Light of the Archives* (New York, 1994)

⁴⁸ Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag*, p.192.

⁴⁹ Galina Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism: The Gulag in the Soviet Totalitarian System*, trans. C. A. Flath. (New York, 2000).

⁵⁰ Bacon, *The Gulag at War*.

inmates each year, even at the height of the Great Terror.⁵¹ These findings have led Golfo Alexopolous to conclude that the Gulag operated a ‘revolving door’ of frequent arrests and frequent releases, challenging the interpretative framework created by early scholars that incarceration essentially represented a death sentence.⁵²

Although this thesis recognises the hierarchy of institutions associated with the Gulag, it is mainly focussed on corrective labour camps (ITLs) which were generally located in the farthest geographical reaches and include some of the most notorious locations such as Kolyma, Vorkuta, Noril’sk and Karaganda. These camps represent the direct descendants of the secret police system of the 1920s/early 1930s and often consisted of multiple compounds over a wide area.⁵³ Similarly characterised by a lack of staff and over-crowding, transit prisons were an important part of the transportation process (*etap*). Prisoners could face incarceration for several weeks at locations such as, Kem’, for Solovki, and Vtoraya Rechka, Bukhta Nakhodka, and Vanino Port, on route to Kolyma.⁵⁴ Along with corrective labour camps, memoirist renderings of transit camps often provide some of the most valuable insights into prisoner subculture, and will, therefore, be incorporated into the main body of this analysis.⁵⁵ Upon arrival, prisoners found that camps were sub-divided into a number of zones with control over inmate population regulated by periodical checks of prisoners travelling from zone to zone. Not only does expansion of corrective labour camps into a network of colonies and *lagpunkty* in this way reflect how zoned space and manipulation of hierarchies of access and distribution worked within Stalinist society⁵⁶, it also helps demonstrate how the evaluation of prisoners by camp authorities was based on perceived redeemability and an evolving categorisation matrix which included nationality, region of origin, social class, gender, military service, party

⁵¹ J Arch Getty, G. T. Rittersporn & V.N. Zemskov, ‘Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-War Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence’, *The American Historical Review*, 98:4 (1993), pp.1017-1049.

⁵² Golfo Alexopoulos, ‘Amnesty 1945: The Revolving Door of Stalin’s Gulag’, *Slavic Review*, 64:2 (2005).

⁵³ Nordlander, ‘Origins of a Gulag Capital’, p.793.

⁵⁴ For one of the few detailed descriptions on the difference between the intended functions and realities of a transit camp, in this instance Tomsk camp on route to Nazino: Werth, *Cannibal Island*: pp.86-120.

⁵⁵ The use of particular locations for *illicit* activities is discussed by Anton Olenik using the slang expression *bespredel* (“without limits”). Citing Abramkin and Chijov, Olenik notes that in contemporary Russian penalty certain locations, such as transit prisons, stand out for their ‘marked degree of bespredel’, which resonates clearly with depictions from many gulag memoirists: Olenik, *Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Societies*, p.104.

⁵⁶ Brown, ‘Out of Solitary Confinement’, p.94.

membership, criminal record and which article of the criminal code inmates were sentenced under.⁵⁷

As prisoners progressed through this matrix, in accordance with their good behaviour and perceived redeemability, there were opportunities for advancement into more privileged camp zones.⁵⁸

Incarceration in corrective labour camps was generally reserved for prisoners with sentences of more than three years. The largest number of ITL prisoners was consistently represented by prisoners sentenced for ‘everyday life’ crimes (*bytovye*) but inmate composition also included large numbers of Article 58ers and recidivists. One important feature of camp life in the ITL was utilisation of the collective (*kollektiv*) and the informer (*stukach*) which looked to employ a combination of peer pressure and fear to achieve daily economic, social and political goals. Although this collectivist principle also underpinned the organisation of people in the workplace, places of residence and during leisure activities, it manifest itself in the Gulag through the work brigade, in which a group of inmates, under the leadership of one particular prisoner (the *brigadir*), was set a daily production target. The leader would be responsible for mobilising fellow members to fulfil daily norm under the threat of sharing in the punishment of fellow prisoners if they failed to do reach these targets.⁵⁹ As Piacentini and Slade have shown, collective responsibility ensured that social control was extended beyond where authorities could reach. This enduring resilience of *carceral collectivism* was grounded by three elements: system of penal governance based on mutual peer surveillance, communal living through the housing of prisoners *en masse* in dormitories and the dispersal of authority and governance to prisoners themselves.⁶⁰ Removal of individualisation meant that survival in the camps often became dependent on avoiding bad brigades or bad brigade leaders.⁶¹ Although traditionally hostile toward institutional structures, recidivists often occupied privileged or ‘soft-job’ positions in the camp. As will be discussed, while this often formed one of their strategies of survival it could also bring them into direct conflict with other prisoners.

⁵⁷ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*. p.141.

⁵⁸ Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag*, p.192.

⁵⁹ Judith Pallot, Laura Piacentini & Dominique Moran, *Gender, Geography, and Punishment: The Experience of Women in Carceral Russia* (Oxford, 2012), pp.97-98.

⁶⁰ Laura Piacentini & Gavin Slade, ‘Architecture and Attachment: Carceral Collectivism and the Problem of Prison Reform in Russia and Georgia’, *Theoretical Criminology*, 19:2 (2015), p.180.

⁶¹ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, p.181

Sources and Methods

This is primarily a study of criminal subculture and its influence on daily life in the camps. It is not an attempt to add to the numbers debate regarding the number of deaths or releases, nor to try and explain the suggested punitive or economic primacy of the system. Rather, it seeks to make use of a varied source base to explore how prisoners interacted with each other at ground-level. Therefore, this analysis is based on a broad range of primary and secondary material. Following its original conception as a microhistory of one particular Gulag site, the key aims of the project were adjusted to produce a detailed investigation of interpersonal relations between *urki* and camp authorities. At that juncture, the proposed methodology was to produce an in-depth analysis of the two groups followed by one chapter dedicated to a local area study in a location where low-level employees operated at the point-of-contact with prisoners. After discovering problems finding archival evidence to support this hypothesis, and following consultation with scholars with experience working at local and regional levels, a decision was taken to halt the further exploration of this relationship. Nevertheless, one of the main components remained, to reconstruct criminal subculture and to investigate daily life in the Gulag from the perspective of one of its marginalised groups. To complete this study, the author has subscribed to a strong interdisciplinary approach with influences from the fields of social and cultural anthropology, sociology, ethnography, linguistics, and literature studies. This approach has also been heavily influenced by the work of a number of contemporary criminologists and penologists, such as Federico Varese, Gavin Slade, Elena Katz, Judith Pallot and Laura Piacentini, alongside classic texts by Donald Clemmer, Gresham Sykes and Irving Goffman.

In order to construct this methodology, the author has looked to develop Steven Barnes' appeal for scholars to 'take seriously the task of understanding the Gulag as lived experience from the widest variety of possible angles.'⁶² Barnes' *Kritika* article 'Researching Daily Life in the Gulag' challenges the various interpretative frameworks set up by previous historians who have focussed

⁶² Barnes, 'Researching Daily Life in the Gulag', *Kritika*, 1:2 (2000), pp.386-7

almost exclusively on using traditional memoir and archival based methods. This approach is evident in the first chapter of this thesis, which incorporates one of the ‘innovative’ sources suggested by Barnes’, Michael and Lidia Jakobsen’s *Pesennyi fol’klor GULAGa kak istoricheskii istochnik (1917-1939)*. The introductory essay to the first volume of the Jakobsen collection, containing 256 prison songs, gives little indication of how they could be utilised as a historical source, instead focusing on the popular bard Vladimir Vysotskii, and the best-selling publications which appeared in the 1990s. Although Barnes’ article suggests that the collection offers the possibility of exploring Gulag society from the perspective of ‘common criminals’, further exploration reveals that they are more comparable with other convict or slave songs which often focus on the topography of their environment and their lack of freedom (*nevolia*).

The Jakobsen collection does demonstrate, however, how important messages between prisoners were transmitted through various oral traditions such as storytelling, poetry and songs (almost always memorised and rarely written down). According to Clemmer’s seminal study *The Prisoner Community*, these folkways demonstrate carriers of inmate culture, with the contingency of the same characteristics and themes demonstrating their resilience, often having more of an effect on prisoners than a speech from the authorities.⁶³ Clemmer states how verses and stories could often control thinking, and, subsequently, attitudes and behaviour, becoming ways to illustrate social processes and serving as a means of social control by holding up traits held in esteem by the majority of inmates.⁶⁴ The examples selected for this study from the collection help demonstrate how, although inmates still had to make adjustments to their marginalisation and, borrowing Sykes term, the ‘pains of imprisonment’, prisoner norms were often founded on the traditions, customs and laws of the late Imperial period.

This approach is continued in chapter 4, which incorporates collections of tattoo drawings and dictionaries of penal slang. Not only did these sources contribute further toward the development of penal folklore, but they also played a deeper role in the construction of *illicit* hierarchies. Compiled during his 33 year career in the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs), former guard Danzig Baldaev’s

⁶³ Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, pp.172-177.

⁶⁴ Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, pp.172-177.

tattoo drawings were first published in Russia and then in three volumes by London-based FUEL Publishing under the title *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*. Using the Baldaev collection remains a problematic as it represents a lone source with the potential for inaccuracies in dating the images, often only attributed to a particular decade. Nevertheless, Baldaev's drawings provide a visual source often absent from the historical record and help demonstrate the transmission of norms and folkways through various signals. For the purposes of this analysis, drawings have been verified wherever possible using both survivor memoir and the work of criminologist Mikhail Gernet and the Moscow Bureau (which appears in longer translation for the first time in English). Baldaev's other publications highlights the interest in criminal and penal mores, apparent in numerous publications of slang, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In order to demonstrate continuity and change, the author has not only consulted these publications from the 1990s but a taken a broader chronological approach which includes V. F Trahkenburg's 1908 dictionary, reports from the camp press in the 1920s and Dmitrii Likhachev's socio-linguistic articles published in academic journals in the 1950s.

This thesis also draws heavily upon material from the published microfiche collection *The Gulag Press, 1920-1937*. Once only accessible in GARF (State Archive of the Russian Federation), the collection has been copied and is now available in a number of locations in the United States and across Europe, where it was viewed by this author in the British Library. Although questions remain over whether contributions were dominated by small, esoteric groups of prisoners and if inmates fully internalised their contents in the intended way, authorities clearly expended considerable resources (both financially and through labour) to publishing various newspapers and journals. Aided in some areas by paid advertisers and the income derived from selling copies, the quality reached the level of regular Soviet dailies and was sold in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kharkov along with being reportedly found outside the Soviet Union.

Although a number of scholars have engaged with the microfiche collection, their work has mainly focused on the mid-1930s onwards, during which camp newspapers were, as Barnes notes,

directed internally and often stamped with 'not for outside consumption'.⁶⁵ While Wilson Bell's detailed analysis of BAMlag newspaper *Stroitel' Bama* ('Builder of the BAM') provides a fascinating insight into how camp authorities attempted to re-educate its inmates through Soviet values of labour, he acknowledges the limitations of the source base by stating that, not only were the majority of articles related in some way to labour production, but most of the remaining dedicated to personal transformation or *kul'turnost'* (culturedness).⁶⁶ In her 1996 monograph, *Pressa Gulaga*, Alla Gorcheva recognises three distinct stages: *tyuremnaya pressa* (prison press, 1918-1927), *pechat' velikikh stroyek kommunizma* (print of the great construction projects of communism) and *lagermaya pressa* (camp press, 1935-1955). Without referring to Gorcheva's work, most scholars have continued to acknowledge this paradigm, clearly demonstrated in the publications themselves by the distinct shifts in tone, style and content. Other works to have used camp newspaper and journals, such as Anne Applebaum's *Gulag*, have been limited to translating short passages of text which fit into predefined notions of criminal behaviour, such as the formation of hierarchies and the use of a particular vernacular amongst prisoners. Not only does this thesis provide longer translations, helping to situate the documents in their appropriate context, it also uses a number of articles which have not been translated into any English language publication.

Although unclear where Gorcheva positions the Special Purpose Camp of Solovki (*SLON*), newspapers and journals produced on the archipelago, like other publications of the early prison press, have been acknowledged as allowing a relative amount of freedom to contributors (although still subject to OGPU censorship). Despite the excellent work on the Solovki camps, scholars have found it difficult to move conceptually beyond the territorial and psychological boundaries of the archipelago and position their work within wider discussions of early Soviet society. In order to overcome this, this thesis has looked to follow the flow of information between the camps and the 'mainland'. Not only were publications available to purchase via kiosks and subscription, but articles from judicial journals such as *Sud Ideot* were reproduced almost word-for-word in the pages of the camp press.

⁶⁵ Barnes, *Death & Redemption*, p.62

⁶⁶ Bell, Wilson, 'One Day in the Life of Educator Khrushchev: Labour and Kul'turnost' in the Gulag Newspapers', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 46:3-4 (2004), p.291

While continuing to integrate camp folklore and newspaper sources from the first section, the second section of the thesis (chapters 3-6) utilises the traditional mixture of archival and memoir sources familiar to Gulag scholarship. This follows a number of scholars who, in an attempt order to overcome the limitations associated with this methodology, have looked to reconstruct details about camp life within a broader conceptual framework.⁶⁷ The decision to take this approach was influenced by monographs such as Barnes' *Death and Redemption* which investigates re-education programmes and the Gulag's broader role in helping shape Soviet society through a combination of memoir sources and official documents drawn from both the central Gulag archival and material from Karlag, a labour camp in Kazakhstan. This has been continued by Wilson Bell's work on corrective labour camps (ITLs), corrective labour colonies (ITKs) and special settlements in Western Siberia which describes frequent contact between prisoners and non-prisoners. Similarly, Alan Barenburg's recent monograph on Vorkuta, has further challenged Solzhenitsyn's grand metaphor of the 'archipelago' (prison camps and colonies were islands separated from the mainland of Soviet society) which, until recently, has remained a fundamental assumption for scholars.

While the various benefits and potential problems with using survivor memoir are explored further in the following section, in terms of archival documents the author made two research trips to consult the main Gulag archive (f.9401 & f.9414) in GARF and later viewed materials from the same *fondy* in the British Library. Given the scale of the archive, this task was a particularly daunting one. The combined project of the Hoover Institution Archives and the State Archives of the Russian Federation to microfilm the archive, which amounts to more than 1.5 million frames, gives some indication of this. Unfortunately, the authors archival endeavours uncovered almost nothing relating to criminal subculture not reproduced in earlier studies by Federico Varese, Wilson Bell and Steven Barnes. One simple reason for this is that 'criminal prisoners' were often ascribed the identity 'bandits' (*bandity*) and/or 'recidivists' (*retsidivisty*) which at times amounted to no more than two prisoners acting together. Although possible to view internal memorandums and disciplinary procedures relating to activities such as drinking, playing cards, and oblique references to 'co-

⁶⁷ These works include: Barnes, *Death and Redemption*; Wilson Bell, 'One Day in the Life of Educator Khrushchev: Labour and Kul'turnost' in the Gulag Newspapers', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 46:3-4 (2004), pp.289-314.

habitation' (the Gulag's now well-known euphemism, *sozhitel'stvo*), these sources helped revealed little about daily life in the camps. Despite this, the overall experience of studying these materials provided important residual information in developing an understanding of what camp authorities *considered important* in the operation of the camps, even if this failed to match the picture constructed by many memoirists.

Further miscellaneous sources were also consulted during the course of the research process. Although they contain similar problems in regard to reducing prisoners to statistical abstractions, this includes a number of document collections such as *Deti GULAGa*, which proved to be more informative than the abridged version in English, and the seven-volume Rosspen collection *Iistoria Stalinskogo Gulaga*.⁶⁸ At an earlier stage, the reference work *Sistema ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei v SSSR: Sprovochnik* proved to be useful in conducting preliminary work on individual camp complexes.⁶⁹ The author has also made an attempt to utilise the various online materials now available. This includes the excellent *Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives* and *Mapping the Gulag* projects, which have helped immensely both in providing important information regarding memoirists and understanding the shifting geography of the camp system.⁷⁰ Although harder to trace the biography of their authors, further sources were consulted via the websites of various branches of the Memorial Society and the Sakharov Center's memoir database which contains around 1,000 published first-hand accounts.⁷¹ In particular, the online resources available through the Harvard Interview Project (*HIP*) also helped to provide a number of accounts which related to daily life in the camps.⁷² Brief comments on the potential reliability of oral history projects such as the *HIP* can be found in the following section.

Gulag and Memory

⁶⁸ N. Afanasiev et. al. (eds.), *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga: Konets 1920-kh – pervaiia polovina 1950-kh godov: Sobranie dokumentov v semi tomakh* (Moscow, 2004) & S. Vilenskii et. al. (eds.), *Deti GULAGa: 1918-1956* (Moscow, 2002).

⁶⁹ M. B. Smirnov, A. B. Roginskii & N. G. Okhotkin (eds.), *Sistema ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei v SSSR: Sprovochnik* (Moscow, 1998).

⁷⁰ See: <http://gulaghistory.org/> & <http://www.gulagmaps.org/>

⁷¹ See: <http://www.sakharov-center.ru/asfcd/auth/>

⁷² See: <http://hcl.harvard.edu/collections/hpsss/about.html>

As suggested above, first-hand accounts from former prisoners form a large part of the source base of this thesis. In order to reconstruct daily life in the camps, survivor memoirs remain essential as they can help record informal activities that either do not interest party bureaucrats or are conspicuously absent from the official record. Exclusive use of memoirs, however, is problematic as they sometimes appear a collection of partial, unreliable, individual and/or collective memory combined with the concerns of authors at the time they write. Gabor Tamas Rittersporn has further highlighted this, describing Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* as a series of rumours 'which then developed into an oral tradition and put down deep roots in collective consciousness' and a 'mixture – and often an inextricable one – of indisputable facts and of their trace, sometimes very imprecise or distorted, preserved by a collective memory that has been more concerned about elevating a memorial to the martyrdom of its guardians than with the authenticity of its traditions.'⁷³ While some of these problems are apparent in the debate surrounding the authenticity of Rawicz's *The Long Walk*, the preservation of oral traditions and development of collective consciousness (and how this has been distorted) represents one of the main aims of this thesis.

Contemporary researchers face the opposite problem from the first wave of Gulag scholars, who relied almost exclusively on a relatively small collection of survivor accounts. The database compiled by the *Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli*, containing both published and unpublished memoirs, lists almost 600 entries in a number of different languages.⁷⁴ A number of recent and pending publications would suggest this total is far from complete. Eyewitness accounts from this period have carried on a long tradition dating back to the imprisonment of Archpriest Avvakum and the Decembrists. While all display common morphological features and a pre-defined format specific to their genre, each of these has its own individual importance, containing slight variations in style, tone and point of view. According to Crane, this demonstrates the importance of writing the individual back into collective history and expanding historical discourse to conceptualise every one

⁷³ Gabor Rittersporn, *Stalinist Simplifications and Soviet Complications: Social Tensions and Political Conflicts in the USSR*, (Switzerland, 1991), p.145.

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http://www.memorialitalia.it/archivio_mem/gulag/gulag/frameset_biblio_generale.html

of us as historical writers, writing as historical actors.⁷⁵ Although a memoir cannot always provide us with a verifiable history, it does help fill out the archival record with a visual immediacy, thus allowing scholars connect to the human experience of the camps and show that official documents only partially record the ‘truth.’⁷⁶

Regardless of how compelling or evocative a memoir is, it still remains one person’s recollection, reflecting what they were most interested in telling, and what they had modified during the art of collection.⁷⁷ Memoirs are also rarely written at the same time as the events they describe, raising difficult but important questions regarding the malleability of memory and its reconstruction of events. The selective nature of memoir writing means that what authors choose to reveal can reflect their personal ideology and worldview not only during the period in question but following their release, as well a concern to testify and preserve the memory of their incarceration.⁷⁸ As former prisoners, memoir writers were victims of the state apparatus and, therefore inclined to a negative outlook, although it is important to note that not all memoirists were opponents of the regime before their arrest or became dissidents following their release. During the amateur memoir-writing boom of the late 1980s, however, many victims identified so strongly with the ideological position presented by survivors of the Soviet camp system that they suspended their independent memories and allowed books to speak for them.⁷⁹ This shows how the search for the ‘real truth’ can be perpetually elusive. It is possible for an author to dupe their audience, but it is equally plausible for them to deceive themselves by telling a false story, even if sincerely recalled. Advances in cognitive neuroscience show that people with traumatic memories have a tendency to block out parts of their own pasts, organising their memory in a series of fragmented, disjointed episodes rather than a linear chronology. Kathleen McGowan describes how our memories are highly dynamic and vulnerable, stating that ‘we alter our memories by just remembering them’ and that, without realising; ‘we continually rewrite the

⁷⁵ S. A. Crane, ‘Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory’, *American Historical Review*, 102:5 (1997) p.1384.

⁷⁶ Leona Toker, *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors* (Indiana, 2000) p.74.

⁷⁷ Nanci Adler, *Keeping Faith with the Party: Communist Believers Return from the Gulag* (Indiana, 2012), pp.6-8.

⁷⁸ Toker, *Return from the Archipelago*, p.74.

⁷⁹ Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia* (London, 2007), p.635.

stories of our lives.’⁸⁰ Although some memoirists have re-remembered and re-recorded their accounts differently in later life, both perceptions could have been right for that particular time and place.⁸¹

Discussing this problem in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Cuddon states that; ‘Everyone tends to remember what he wants to remember. Disagreeable facts are sometimes glossed over or repressed, truth may be distorted for the sake of convenience or harmony, and the occlusions of time may obscure as much as they reveal.’⁸² The memoirist Alexander Dolgun, a Gulag prisoner between 1948-56, describes his lapses in memory by stating; ‘Most of my story is what I remember, but some of it is what must have been.’⁸³ This echoes Bruno Bettelheim’s stance when writing in his own autobiography that anyone who undertakes such a task; ‘binds himself to lying, to concealment, to flummery.’⁸⁴ Moreover, it is also important to consider that these experiences only become history as they are gleaned, contextualised and disseminated, often with the help of mediators and translators. Nevertheless, significant numbers, convergent and comparative accounts of similar events, verification with records and relatively objective accounts and placing the narrator in the correct sociohistorical context can contribute to transforming unconditionally accepted testimony into conditionally accepted evidence.⁸⁵

Alongside the use of survivor memoirs, this thesis also draws upon a number of oral history projects. This includes most prominently the Harvard Interview Project (*HIP*) on the Soviet Social System, a large-scale sociological study in which recently-emigrated Soviet citizens were interviewed at length by an international team. Of particular relevance were any examples which recalled behavioural norms often associated with criminal subculture (located by searching for a number of key words found in the glossary). David Brandenberger has defended the importance and reliability of

⁸⁰ Kat McGowan, ‘How Much of Your Memory is True’, *Discover Magazine*, (July-August 2009). Available online at: <http://discovermagazine.com/2009/jul-aug/03-how-much-of-your-memory-is-true>

⁸¹ Adler, *Keeping Faith with the Party*, p.8

⁸² J. A. Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. 4th edition. (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998) p.176

⁸³ Figs, *The Whisperers*, p.633.

⁸⁴ Bruno Bettelheim, *Recollections and Reflections*, (London, 1989), p.ix.

⁸⁵ Adler, *Keeping Faith with the Party*, pp.6-8.

the *HIP* if used in conjunction with other sources.⁸⁶ Other scholars have also advocated the use of oral sources, with Orlando Figes stating that, ‘it can be cross-examined and tested against other evidence to disentangle true memories from received or imagined ones.’⁸⁷ As with memoirs, one of the biggest difficulties of obtaining accurate oral testimony is that the majority of former prisoners have now passed away, or are entering the later stages of their life.⁸⁸ Despite this, even those who criticise the use of memory-based sources have refrained from dismissing their use entirely. Encouraging a critical approach that looks to filter out the aspects of morality which led to memoir accounts being deemed as virtually ‘untouchable’ by early Gulag scholars, Arch Getty suggests that memoirs ‘can tell us what the camps were like, but not why they existed.’⁸⁹ Although questions over the nature of the system remain important the present study seeks to reconstruct precisely what camps *were like* and explore the Gulag as a lived experience.

While these sources often reveal details about camp society not found in archival documents, they typically represent a self-styled group comprised largely from amongst the *intelligentsia* and have a tendency to contain silences regarding taboo topics which transgress social boundaries. Despite this, reliance upon memoirists remains crucial as other prisoners were less likely to articulate their experiences in the form of written records.⁹⁰ Although no memoirs exist from the group of prisoners who form the core of this thesis, there has been growing discussion regarding the perspective of the camps from a range of different viewpoints. This has been prompted by the memoirs of Fyodor Mochulsky, a specialist assigned to a remote camp near Vorkuta. Although containing similar structural features to other memoirs, Mochulsky’s account reveals glimpses of the reality behind official documents and provides important insights into which orders were deemed important and which were ignored. It also helps to elucidate what camp staff really thought of their work and the

⁸⁶ David Brandenberger, ‘A Background Guide to Working with the HPSSS Online’, <http://hcl.harvard.edu/collections/hpsss/working_with_hpsss.pdf>, Last accessed: August 2015.

⁸⁷ Figes, *The Whisperers*. p.633

⁸⁸ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (London, 2002), p.295.

⁸⁹ Getty, J. A. *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)

⁹⁰ Andrew Gentes has also noted this in reference to prisoners in late Imperial prisons: Andrew Gentes, ‘Beat the Devil!: : Prison Society and Anarchy in Tsarist Siberia’, *Ab Imperio*, 2 (2009). p.206.

prisoners, opening up the possibility for discussion regarding the wider field of perpetrator studies.⁹¹

Demonstrating how how *urki* and camp employees could often occupy the same social sphere, Mochulsky's recollections draw comparisons with Primo Levi's description of the 'Grey Zone' which contrasts with binary images of victims and perpetrators.⁹²

Memoir descriptions of *urki* did not always transform them into an indistinguishable mass, as in late Imperial penality, but have had a profoundly different effect on how they have been viewed in collective memory, with memoirists often emphasising their disgust and placing them outside the boundaries of civilisation.⁹³ Depictions solely condemning the behaviour of recidivists were not always the case, however, as demonstrated in the examples cited below. Firstly, Eugenia Ginzburg's recollections of prisoner transportation to Magadan in the late 1930s and, secondly, Janusz Bardach description of Sverdlovsk transit prison in 1941:

'They were the cream of the criminal world: murderers, sadist, adept at every kind of sexual perversion...without wasting time they set about terrorising and bullying the 'ladies', delighted to find that 'enemies of the people were creatures even more despised and outcast than themselves...they seized our bits of bread, snatched the last of our rags with our bundles, pushed us out of the places we had managed to find...'⁹⁴

'The next morning he invited me to join the other *urkas* on one of the other bed boards. There were over twenty of them, all elaborately tattooed on their torsos, backs and arms. The emblems of naked women, striking snakes, soaring eagles, vodka bottles, machetes and playing cards identified these men as members of the underworld. Although I had difficulty understanding their jargon, they were more congenial than the military prisoners and I began to spend most of the days with them.'⁹⁵

Both descriptions are of equal importance, yet collective memory is mostly informed by the former.⁹⁶ For the above memoirists, their viewpoints would become reversed when Bardach is

⁹¹ Viola, Lynne, 'The Question of the Perpetrator in Soviet History', *Slavic Review*, 72:1 (2013).

⁹² Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York, 1989), pp.186–87

⁹³ Adi Kuntsman, "'With a Shade of Disgust': Affective Politics of Sexuality and Class in Memoirs of the Stalinist Gulag', *Slavic Review*, 68:2 (2009).

⁹⁴ Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, p.266.

⁹⁵ Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man*, p.107.

⁹⁶ For instance, the ten-page section dedicated to the *urki* in Anne Applebaum's *Gulag: A History* quotes from a number of memoirists, describing 'the terror, the robbery and the rape that thieves inflicted on the other inhabitants of the camps': Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp.261-270.

stabbed by an *urka* waiting to board a ship to Kolyma⁹⁷ while Ginzburg found relations with the criminals to not be relatively congenial when she worked in a camp medical ward, even finding herself warming to their humour.⁹⁸ While Bardach is by no means in the minority in his ability to evade the normal common criminal-political prisoner divide, a cursory look through his biography and camp experience provides an example of one of the main problems of the political prisoner/common criminal dichotomy. Although his intellectual background appears to qualify him for political status, his sentence for wartime military treason leaves him outside the margins of such fixed boundaries. Furthermore, Bardach's oratory skills became an important entry requirement in gaining the protection of a criminal authority, therefore increasing his chances of survival. As will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, the rigid system of classification often attributed to prisoners by camp authorities was not always replicated at ground level. Notwithstanding, incidents of sexual assault and violence, such as those described by Ginzburg, cannot be ignored. Moralising over them, however, can often negate the important role in enforcing hierarchies of power. Situating this behaviour within a broader framework of criminality and penalty will help aid our understanding of why these activities happened in certain locations, at certain times, and was often determined by the level of surveillance from camp authorities.⁹⁹

Cult of the 'Urka': Criminal Subculture in the Gulag, 1924-1953

As previously noted, this thesis is divided into two sections. Comprising of two chapters, the first section will look to principally address the question: How were approaches and perceptions of criminality shaped during the period in question? Chapter 1 will show how fictional representations changed from the traditional bandit narrative of the Late Imperial era to 'reforged' stories of the early Soviet period, demonstrating the new approach to criminality and treatment of prisoners.

Nevertheless, criminal subculture bridged the 1917 divide as behavioural norms continued to be circulated by oral tradition. Although this chapter will discuss the changes in criminological approaches,

⁹⁷ Bardach, *Man is Wolf*, p.178.

⁹⁸ Ginzburg, *Into the Whirlwind*, p.277.

⁹⁹ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p.xx.

during the early Soviet period, discussions of criminality not only took place outside the camps but can also be found in the early prison press (*tyurmenya pressa*) which allowed a number of prisoners to become active agents by writing about their experience of incarceration. Chapter 2 will demonstrate a link between penalty and increased criminal specialisation outside the camps. The examples discussed will show a more diverse prisoner society and ‘hierarchy of crime’ often absent from memoir accounts which often label prisoners with the overarching terms *urki/vory*.

The chronology of the second section of this thesis begins at the point when many future memoirists entered the camps in the mid-to-late 1930s. This section will look to address the question: What can we learn from reconstruction of criminal subculture from the large literary corpus on life in the camps? Therefore, chapter 3 will analyse how criminal prisoners made adjustments to the ‘pains of imprisonment’ through initiation and socialisation rituals. Furthermore, this chapter will also demonstrate how the *thieves’ law* demonstrates similarities with more diffuse prisoner codes during the same period. Chapter 4 discusses how behavioural norms were transmitted through forms of visual and verbal communication, such as tattoos and camp slang. These forms of enactment have taken a prominent place in camp folklore. The widespread dissemination of visual sources has often conflated folklore with historical fact. This chapter will, therefore consider their role in daily life in the camps by utilising the Baldaev tattoo collection alongside dictionaries of camp slang, articles from camp journals and the work of criminologist Mikhail Gernet. Chapter 5 will illustrate how images of card playing not only have a traditional symbiosis with Russian penalty but form an important part of structuring *illicit* hierarchies, helping to construct the Gulag’s sexual order and also became one of the ‘informal’ practices also conducted by camp employees. Chapter 6 explores the forms of punishment rituals which took place between inmates, showing how adherence to the prisoner code was maintained through an *ad hoc* court system which passed sentences from an elaborate spectre of punishment. The final chapter will also provide a close rendering of the conflict between prisoners known as the ‘bitches’ war’ (1948-52). With this near-mythical moment occupying a prominent place in camp historiography, this chapter will look to reconstruct events and highlight its effect on Gulag society as a whole.

Chapter 1

From Van'ka to *Vospitatel'*: Approaches and Perceptions of Criminality in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia.

The shadows of Ivan Osipov and Sonia Bliuvenstein loom large over late Imperial criminality. Better known by his alias, *Van'ka Kain*, Osipov's biography appears ideal for conventional bandit fiction as he merged seamlessly from *ataman* (nineteenth century term for leader of a criminal gang), to police informant and leader of special unit, before his subsequent re-arrest and exile to the Gulf of Finland.¹⁰⁰ Osipov is believed to have been born in Moscow in 1714, although the record from his criminal case gives the date as four years later. Similarly, details about Sonia Bliuvenstein's early life remain equally unclear, although court documents indicate she was born in the town of Povonzi, Warsaw Province, in 1846. As with Osipov, biographers have relied mainly on police and newspaper reports which detail her criminal activities in the second half of the nineteenth century under the name 'Son'ka - the Golden Hand' (Son'ka - *Zolotaya Ruchka*).¹⁰¹ The sphere of their respective criminal activities was relatively localised, Kain is reported to have control over Moscow's notorious Kitay Gorod district and Son'ka is most commonly associated with Odessa (although she travelled between cities to evade capture and commit further crimes). The notoriety of these two figures, however, has meant that have joined a select group of criminals, like Anton Krechet and Vasili Churkin, whose names became so familiar that songs and tales recounting their criminal activities were circulated throughout the Russian empire.¹⁰²

Extensive scholarly research has been carried out into the way marquee anti-heroes such as Van'ka and Son'ka have been mythologised, but not their influence on real life criminal and penal spheres. This mythologisation of the criminal underworld largely continued after the 1917

¹⁰⁰ In the eighteenth century, the word *ataman* meant both 'an elected leader among Cossacks' and 'the leader of a robber gang': David Gasperetti, *Three Russian Tales of the Nineteenth Century: The Comely Cook, Vanka Kain and 'Poor Liza'* (Northern Illinois Press, 2012), p.220.

¹⁰¹ Jeffery Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, (New Jersey, 1985), p.203; Gregory Breitman, *Prestupnii Mir*, (Kiev, 1901), pp.42-49.

¹⁰² Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, p.201. Miniature publishing industries created around other marquee criminals, such as The Kray twins: Dick Hobbs, *Lush Life: Constructing Organised Crime in the UK*, (Oxford, 2013), pp.58-88. The same phenomenon could also be observed regarding the activities of the bandit Vasili Churkin: Mark Galeotti, 'The World of the Lower Depths: Crime and Punishment in Russian History', *Global Crime*, Vol. 9, Nos. 1-2, February-May 2008, p.93.

revolutions, despite a different criminological approach which saw the traditional bandit narrative arc replaced by stories of reforging (emphasising the notion of redoing, or remaking, criminal character).¹⁰³ In order to demonstrate this process, the following chapter places 1917 in the middle, rather than its traditional place at the beginning or end of a particular historical narrative. This chronology allows for closer inspection of changes to criminological policy which took place during the transition from ‘old’ to ‘new’ world. The ‘seemingly natural relationship’¹⁰⁴ between real life and fictional criminals, what Diego Gambetta has termed ‘(low) life imitating art’¹⁰⁵, will be reconstructed throughout this chapter. Prominent stories, songs, plays and films from across the revolutionary divide will be used to highlight how fictional representations often fail to address the grim realities of crime, arrest and imprisonment. Regardless of their potential for embellishment and inaccuracies, these folkways remain important ‘carriers’ of inmate culture, helping to controlling thinking and ensuring adherence to criminal and penal norms.

Van’ka Kain

There remains some issue over the authorship of Ivan Osipov’s first-person accounts, generally circulated by hand. These are largely thought to be dictated by Kain, who claimed to be illiterate, and were published later under such titles as *On Vanka Kain, The Famous Thief and Rogue, a Brief Story* (St. Petersburg, 1775) and *The Life and Adventures of the Russian Cartouche, by name Kain, a Notorious Thief and Informer on People of that Trade, Who For His Repentance for His Villainy Received a Reprieve from His Death Sentence but Who For His Return to His Former Trade Was Exiled For Life to Hard Labour, First in Rogervik and then in Siberia, Written By Him Himself in 1764* (St. Petersburg, 1777). This second account compares Van’ka to both French thief Louis Dominique Garthousen, better known by his alias ‘Cartouche’, and the adventurer ‘Rocamboles’, created by Pierre Alexis Ponson du Terrail, semi-fictional criminals who provide important points of

¹⁰³ Julie Draskoczy, ‘The Put’ of Perekovka: Transforming Lives at Stalin’s White Sea-Baltic Canal’, *The Russian Review*, 71 (January 2012), p.36.

¹⁰⁴ See the introductory essay from the special edition of *Media History: John Carter Wood & Paul Knepper, ‘Crime Stories: Criminality, Policing and the Press in Inter-war European and Transatlantic Perspectives’*, *Media History* 20, no. 4, (2014).

¹⁰⁵ Diego Gambetta, *Codes of the Underworld: How Criminals Communicate*, (Princeton, 2011), p.251; Alix Lambert, *Crime: A Series of Extraordinary Interviews Exposing the World of Crime – Real and Imagined*, (Hong Kong, 2008).

reference in both fictional and non-fictional accounts of late Imperial and Soviet penalty.¹⁰⁶ Despite these earlier publications it was only through the talents of *lubok* writer Matvei Komarov that Kain's story was brought to a wider audience.¹⁰⁷ Utilising his skills as a 'professional literary adaptor', Komarov transformed around sixty stories found in the earlier accounts into the first best-seller in Russian literary history. Komarov's 1779 account, *The True and Detailed Account of the Good and Wicked Deeds of the Russian Rogue, Thief, Robber, and Former Moscow Police Spy Vanka Kain, And of His Entire Life and Strange Adventures*¹⁰⁸ included the addition of a preface, epigraph and explanatory footnotes, alongside other literary devices such as dialect, slang, deliberately misspelt words and rhyming *raeshniki* (a type of doggerel structured around lines of unequal length that rhyme in pairs).¹⁰⁹ Moreover, it also was based on conversations with a number of criminal associates, and an 1795 interview with Kain himself while he awaited the outcome of the special commission which would sentence him to *katorga*.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ For comparisons of both late Imperial and Soviet prisoners to Cartouche and Rocambole: Dyomin, *The Day is Born of Darkness*, p.19; Vlas Doroshevich, *Russia's Penal Colony in the Far East: A Translation of Vlas Doroshevich's "Sakhalin"*, trans. Andrew Gemtes, (London, 2011), p.236. An account of Cartouche's life was translated into Russian and appended to the second printing of Komarov's *Vanka Kain*, issued in 1779.

¹⁰⁷ Meyer Galler & Harlan Marques, *Soviet Prison Camp Speech: A Survivors Glossary* (Madison, 1972), p.41.

¹⁰⁸ David Gasperetti, 'Fact and Fiction in Matvei Komarov's *Vanka Kain*', ASEEES Convention, (San Antonio, 2014). Used with kind permission of the author.

¹⁰⁹ David Gasperetti, *Rise of the Russian Novel: Carnival, Stylization and Mockery of the West*, (DeKalb, 1998), p.63.

¹¹⁰ Gasperetti, *Rise of the Russian Novel*, p.63.



Fig. 1 – Front cover of *Istoriia Van'ki Kaina, so vsebiego, syskami, rozyskami I sumazbrodniou svad'boiu.* (St. Petersburg, 1815).

Following Komarov's critical and commercial success, abridged versions began to appear in a number of different forms including sensationally-titled adventures available cheaply in the lubok press.¹¹¹ Continued interest in Kain's stories meant that nineteenth century biographer G. V. Esipov was able to reconstruct parts of his biography using official documents. The main differences highlighted by Esipov included his suspected participation in the killing of a border militiaman, the abduction of several children from a religious school and a series of fires in Moscow in the spring of 1748 which destroyed over 2,000 buildings, all of which were omitted from Komarov's light-handed, benevolent treatment.¹¹² By then, however, the popular anti-hero had been already been cast, and subsequent publications saw reprisals in a number of different roles from an unremorseful recidivist, as in Misha Evstigneev's *Vanka Kain, a Collection of Stories from the Life of the Courageous Criminal, Detective and Bandit* (1869), to a sinner redeemed through service to the community in the

¹¹¹ Louise McReynolds & James Von Geldern (eds.), *Entertaining Tsarist Russia: Tales, Songs, Plays, Movies, Jokes, Ads, and Images from Russian Urban Life, 1779-1917*, (Indiana, 1998), p.23.

¹¹² G. V. Esipov, 'Van'ka Kain', *Osmnadtsatyi Vek: Istoricheskii Sbornik*. 3, (1867), pp.276-342.

anonymous serial *The Adventures of Vanka Kain* (1918).¹¹³ One further persona, 'Kain the Informer', saw Van'ka take the guise of a reformed, law-abiding citizen and echoed the popularity of detective stories from Britain and the United States which featuring popular characters such as Nat Pinkerton, Nick Carter and Sherlock Holmes.¹¹⁴

Allowing for some artistic license, one explanation for these different machinations is that the real-life story of Ivan Osipov does not fit easily comfortably into the conventional bandit fiction motif.¹¹⁵ Similar to a criminal enterprise led by another notorious *ataman*, Mikhail Zaria ('Dawning/Daybreak'), with whom Kain was often aligned, new recruits were required to pay a subscription (*paya*) and give an address in criminal argot, initiation rites which demonstrated their loyalty and induction into the group. These entry barriers demonstrate some similarity to organised crime and mafia gangs of the twentieth century, of whom Kain's operation has been cited as an influence.¹¹⁶ Finding himself at the head of his own enterprise in Moscow, Kain denounced his trusted *yesaul* (lieutenant/assistant)¹¹⁷, *Kamchatka*, who was sentenced to hard labour on the testimony of his former boss.¹¹⁸ Following an appeal to Senator Prince Kropotkin for pardon, Kain agreed to become a high-profile police informant and leader of an investigations team which arrested many of his former associates. Following repeated abuses of his authority, mainly consisting of confiscating items from individuals he had apprehended, Kain's eventual downfall in this role came after police clerk Nikolai Budaev petitioned against him for abducting and raping his wife. Kain denied this charge, and instead, when tortured under the cat-o-nine-tails', released a stream of obscenities against the sovereign (the Russian equivalent of *lèse-majesté*, where any offence against the monarchy was barred by government edict). For this crime, Kain was transferred to The Office of Secret Investigations, a political police established by Peter the Great, where he was subject to torture before

¹¹³ Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, p.201.

¹¹⁴ Boris Dralyuk, *Western Crime Fiction Goes East: The Russian Pinkerton Craze 1907-1934*, (Boston, 2012).

¹¹⁵ Skarbeck, D. *The Social Order of the Underworld*. p.26 For a further discussion of how figures like Kain or Churkin may have influenced Twentieth Century 'banditry': Galeotti, *The Lower Depths*, p.93.

¹¹⁶ Van'ka's criminal enterprise, despite its ephemeral nature, is sometimes understood as one of the precursors to organised crime in Twentieth Century Russia and symbiotic of the relationship between the underworld and state structures: Phil Williams (ed.) *Russian Organized Crime: The New Threat?* (London, 1997), p.39; For a further discussion of the criminal *artel'* during the pre-revolutionary era: Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, pp.192-193.

¹¹⁷ In the eighteenth century, *yesaul'* was used to indicate a lieutenant (assistant) in a criminal gang, or the rank of captain in a Cossack detachment: Gasperetti, *Three Russian Tales of the Nineteenth Century*, p.220.

¹¹⁸ Espiov, 'Vanka Kain', p.304, 323.

pleading guilty to all crimes committed as a police officer. Subsequently, and in keeping with the punishment of the time, Van'ka was flogged with the knout, branded on the forehead and had his nostrils removed before he was exiled to Rogervik in the Gulf of Finland.¹¹⁹

Alongside the above incidents, other less transparent episodes in Kain's biography omitted from the versions deemed fit for public consumption. While a police officer, he reportedly blackmailed the widow of a soldier, who had refused his advances, to become his wife by denouncing her in late December 174. Kain's future bride remained in prison until finally consenting to marry him in 1743, later taking becoming an accomplice in his crimes. The historical record also differs in regards to Van'ka's eventual downfall. According to the official investigation into his case, Kain was arrested on the complaint of a soldier from Kolomensky regiment (and former orderly to Peter the Great) whose fifteen year old daughter had been abducted from her home and raped on January 17th 1749.¹²⁰ Regardless of these apparent contradictions, Van'ka's name had by now become synonymous with the new wave of crime fiction. V. F. Potapov's *Vanka Kain, a Russian Tale in Verse* (1859) carried no association with the real-life figure, nor did the figure which appeared in the serial novels of the Moscow *Kopieka* in 1910.¹²¹ Alongside this, a popular late Imperial wrestler also competed under his name, although it is not clear whether he was a villain or hero.¹²² Kain's influence also remained within criminal and penal spheres, with Sergei Maksimov reporting how some of his 'dark phrases' were preserved (*sokhranilas'*) by prisoners in the punitive institutions he visited to research his 1861 study *Sibir' i Katorga*. The phrases overheard were in fact examples of Kain's infamous rhyming *raeshniki*, replicated in many of his various publications. According to Maksimov, these included 'Drink water like a goose, eat bread for a swine, let the devil work for you, but not I'¹²³, which indicated his contempt for authority figures, and 'The kite has flown beyond the sea and has not come back a swan', an old proverb indicating that there is no changing who you are. These were

¹¹⁹ Williams, *Russian Organised Crime*, p39.

¹²⁰ Gasperetti, 'Fact and Fiction in Matvei Komarov's Vanka Kain'.

¹²¹ Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, p.202. A popular late Imperial wrestler also competed under the name *Van'ka Kain*: Louise McReynolds, *Russia at Play: Leisure Activities at the End of the Tsarist Era*, (New York, 2003), p.142.

¹²² McReynolds, *Russia at Play*, p.142.

¹²³ This was written by Kain on a note nailed to his former owner Filatiev's door after he and Kamchatka returned to steal a trunk full of money from his bedroom: Gasperetti, *Three Russian Tales*, p.117.

often used disparagingly by prisoners either toward prison officials or during their interrogation. This demonstrates how the notoriety of Kain's image continued to be retained in the collective consciousness of Tsarist penalty.¹²⁴

Son'ka Zolotoya Ruchka

Van'ka was not the only notorious criminal to leave a lasting effect on the late Imperial penalty. Arguably, a deeper impression was left by the various portraits of Son'ka *Zolotoya Ruchka*. Adding to the confusion regarding her early life, Son'ka used a variety of names to carry out her crimes, reportedly married several times and often contradicting newspaper reports by lying about her age. Alongside this, rumours were also abound on circulation Sakhalin that, following her arrest and incarceration, Son'ka managed to escape the colony by replacing herself with a fake stand-in.¹²⁵ Apprehended on many occasions, authorities routinely failed to collect sufficient evidence and Son'ka was often released without charge. However, when members of her criminal gang 'Jacks-of-Hearts' ('*Chervonnye valety*') were arrested in 1876, under suspicion that they had sold the house of a Russian governor to a member of the British House of Lords against the knowledge of the owner, Son'ka lost the support of her criminal protectorate.¹²⁶ Following one minor conviction and three years hard labour, her continued criminal activities resulted in subsequent re-arrest and exile to Sakhalin. Observations of Son'ka posited by Anton Chekhov and Vlas Doroshevich during their visits to the island are contemporaneous with newspaper reportage of the time which focused on the appearance and sexuality of female criminals, albeit in a less flattering way than many of the fictional accounts which portrayed Son'ka as an archetypal *femme fatale*.

In his 1890 study, Chekhov commented that: 'Looking at her, it is impossible to believe that not long ago she was beautiful to such a degree that she charmed her prison guards, as she did in Smolensk, for example, where the overseer helped her to escape and himself ran away with her' and

¹²⁴ Sergei Maksimov, *Sibir i Katonga* (St. Petersburg, 1900), p.163. Alongside the examples mentioned, there is a further quote noted by Maksimov which references how, after Kain had been arrested for stealing from some merchants, Kamchatka hid keys inside a number of *kalaches* (wheat bread in the shape of a lock) allowing Van'ka to escape from prison. Unfortunately, I have been unable to translate the exact phrase from Maksimov's account. For a description of the original story: Gasperetti, *Three Russian Tales*, p.130.

¹²⁵ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.310.

¹²⁶The name 'Jacks-of-Hearts' reportedly came from the association with Pierre Alexis Ponson du Terrail's Rocamble adventure *Le Club des Valets de Coeur*: Elena Katz & Judith Pallot, 'From Femme Normale to Femme Criminale in Russia: Against the Past or Toward the Future?', *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, Vol. 44 (2010), p.111.

added how, at the time of their meeting, Son'ka was 'perhaps' in her mid-forties and a 'small, skinny, already greying woman with a crumpled, old-womanish face.'¹²⁷ Journalist Vlas Doroshevich also discussed Son'ka's appearance stating that she was not a famous 'Mephistopheles' or a Rocambole in a skirt' but a 'sobbing *starushka*-mat' (old woman).¹²⁸ Similar to the literary techniques used in Komarov's account of Van'ka Kain, Doroshevich wrote his dispatches from the island in a 'situated language' which included *katorga* songs and expressions and led to some criticism.¹²⁹ This led to some criticism, seeing him labelled an 'untalented scoundrel' by poet Alexander Blok and his audience described as the 'unsophisticated provincial' by poet and literary critic Zinaida Hippus. Yet for others he was the 'King of the Feuilletonists', and played a key role in the emerging discourse among the growing Russian middle-class.¹³⁰ Embracing this title, and the socio-economic changes which made his audience distinct, Doroshevich laced his dispatches from the penal colony with doses of sex, violence and human suffering, seeing them first appear in a number of different newspapers and journals before a compiled edition of his work was published by I. D. Syntin in 1903.¹³¹

Doroshevich's reports contained similarities with some of the most recognisable accounts of late Imperial penalty, but was arguably influenced most by Fyodor Dostoevskii's *Notes from the House of the Dead*. Published in 1861, this fictionalised memoir was frequently referenced and discussed with both 'educated' prisoners and camp personnel, with the journalist even replicating the writer's style in both his descriptions of individual prisoners and important events in the colony.¹³² Doroshevich's trip was also partly conceived in response to Anton Chekhov's visit to the island in 1890. In his introduction to the English translation of Doroshevich's work, Andrew Gentes highlights how this can be seen by the journalists comments in a eulogy written shortly after Chekhov's death in which Doroshevich suggested that the abundance of statistical figures hindered the great writers

¹²⁷ Anton Chekhov, *A Journey to Sakhalin*, trans. Brian Reeve, (Cambridge, 1993), pp.112-113.

¹²⁸ Katz, E. & Pallot, J. 'From Femme Normale to Femme Criminale in Russia', p.132. Doroshevich also added that; 'It's hard to judge by her face a woman who has lived through such moments! She said she was thirty five; but had she not I would have guessed her a woman in her fifties': Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.309-314.

¹²⁹ Louise McReynolds, *The News Under Russia's Old Regime: The Development of a Mass-Circulation Press*, (New Jersey, 1991), p.164.

¹³⁰ Louise McReynolds, 'V. M. Doroshevich: The Newspaper Journalist and the Development of Public Opinion in Civil Society', Edith Clowes, Samuel Kassow & James West (eds.), *Between Tsar and People: Educated People and the Quest for Public Identity in Late Imperial Russia*, (New Jersey, 1991), p.232

¹³¹ Doroshevich had also been an occasional contributor to the Moscow daily *Russkoe Slovo* (The Russian Word) which the publisher I. D. Syntin also owned: McReynolds, 'V. M. Doroshevich', p.241.

¹³² Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.xxi.

artistry and was completed out of a desire to be ‘serious, serious, serious’.¹³³ Doroshevich’s situated language, laden with prison argot and featuring *katorga* songs frequently overlapped the same topics as Chekhov’s more soberly work, even describing the same prisoners and camp personnel; one of whom happened to be Son’ka.¹³⁴ One of the key features of Doroshevich’s dispatches was the inclusion of the staged photograph in manacles shown below, taken for the benefit of a local photographer and sold as a postcard, which also appeared in a number of other accounts of pre-revolutionary penalty (fig.2).¹³⁵



Fig. 2 – Photograph of Sonia Bliuvshtein in manacles, reproduced in a number of works including Doroshevich, *Sakhalin* & Chekhov, *A Journey to Sakhalin*.

Doroshevich acknowledged the influence of Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, which he considered to be particularly apt in his discussion of prisoner tattoos (discussed in chapter four). This

¹³³ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.xxi.

¹³⁴ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, pp.309-315.

¹³⁵ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.311.

Lombrosian influence was also evident in the inclusion of a number of other individual photographs to indicate ‘prisoner types’. These images followed a more general trend during the period, and are comparable to illustrations by George Kennan’s companion Mr. Frost included in his twin volumes *Siberia and the Exile System* (1891).¹³⁶ Notwithstanding, Doroshevich’s description of Son’ka did not fit entirely into Lombroso’s emphasis on masculine traits which, he argued, could be regularly seen in the physiognomy of female offenders.¹³⁷ Instead the journalist portrayed Son’ka in a feminised role as patron of an almshouse and gambling den in Alexandrovsk Post (part of the ‘free’ sector of the island).¹³⁸ Chekhov added to this description by suggesting that several crimes had been committed while Son’ka was ‘at large’, including the murder of shopkeeper Nikitin and 56,000 roubles stolen from the Jewish exile Yurkovsky.¹³⁹ Despite the alleged murder, Son’ka’s popular image has continued to be associated more with the ‘dame’s craft’ (*damskii promysel*), based on the assumption that theft was the easiest, safest and most practical way into the criminal world for women.¹⁴⁰

These descriptions of Son’ka are conflated with reports of female criminals from ‘respectable society’ or those deemed to be aspiring social climbers. The growth in the popular press and publishing during the period of the great reforms brought the Russian public face to face with the ‘criminal class’ with which they shared their streets.¹⁴¹ Newspapers now reported avidly on trials of criminals, including the case of two bodies found in the St. Petersburg suburb of Ligovo which recorded how the crowd of thrill-seeking women ‘treated the affair as an adventure story by popular French novelist Ponson du Terrail’.¹⁴² Other famous cases involving female defendants included El’ka Zaz, the ‘Queen of Stylish Hairdos’, a member of the *vitrioleuse* (a group of women who gained notoriety in pre-revolutionary Odessa for throwing acid at duplicitous husbands and lovers).¹⁴³ The fascination with female crime was also apparent in reports from the 1910 Venice trial of Maria Tarnovskia, the so-called ‘Diva of Death’. Tarnovskia’s trial caught the imagination of the

¹³⁶ Young, ‘Knowing Russia’s Convicts’, pp.1702-1703.

¹³⁷ Lombroso, *The Female Offender*. For a further discussion regarding criminological theories of female crime in Russia: Sharon Kowalsky, *Deviant Women: Female Crime and Criminology in Revolutionary Russia, 1880-1930*, (DeKalb, 2009), pp.40-48.

¹³⁸ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.309-314.

¹³⁹ Chekhov, *A Journey to Sakhalin*, p.113.

¹⁴⁰ Katz & Pallot, ‘From Femme Normale to Femme Criminale in Russia’, p.123.

¹⁴¹ Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia: The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity* (Cornell, 2008) p.9.

¹⁴² McReynolds, *The News Under Russia’s Old Regime*, p.138.

¹⁴³ Roshanna Sylvestre, *Tales of Old Odessa: Crime and Civility in a City of Thieves*, (Northern Illinois, 2005), pp.154-176.

international media, as a trail of bodies of men willing to kill, or be killed, for her was left across Europe. Although described as ‘no beauty’, the quasi-pornographic nature of Tarnovskia drew the attention of a large crowd who gathered every day to see her arrival by prison gondola. The trial showed how reports regularly switched the focus back to the deviant nature of the men involved, or classified acts of murder as products of ‘maternal love’, ‘passion’ or ‘on the grounds of sex’.¹⁴⁴ The widely circulated reports of El’ka Zaz and her compatriots had a different effect. Although relatively small in number, these descriptions left readers with the impression that there was no such thing as a ‘typical’ *vitrioleuse*, and that she could appear in any neighbourhood and be of any social class or ethnic origin.

Two recent television serials have seen a revival of Son’ka’s popularity. This renewed interest has attracted regular visitors to a headless statue in Moscow’s famous Vagankovskoye Cemetery, reportedly paid for by admirers of her talents.¹⁴⁵ The first of these serials, 2001’s ‘Sonka - Golden Hand’, aired in a prime time slot on *Rossiya* and attracted twenty nine per cent of viewers to its first episode despite breaking news regarding the death of former President Boris Yeltsin. This was followed six years later by a second series which, despite its setting as a period drama, continued to blur fact and fiction.¹⁴⁶ Both television serials depict one of Son’ka’s most infamous crimes, confirmed by biographers and police reports.¹⁴⁷ In May 1883, a smartly-dressed Son’ka entered the store of a renowned St. Petersburg jeweller and presented the visiting card of a local psychiatrist. Announcing that she was the psychiatrist’s wife, Son’ka selected some expensive jewellery and asked for them to be delivered to the address of her ‘husband’. Following this, she later paid a visit to the psychiatrist and persuaded him that her husband, a jeweller, was mentally ill and pursued a number of unpaid bills which existed only in his head. After begging the psychiatrist to see him, she warned that she would have to deceive her husband into a consultation by telling him there was a bill to be settled.

¹⁴⁴ Vlas Doroshevich, now writing for *Russkoe Slovo*, was one of the most prominent journalists to report on the Tarnovskia trial: Louise McReynolds, *Murder Most Russian: True Crime and Punishment in Late Imperial Russia*, (Cornell, 2013), pp.171-200.

¹⁴⁵ ‘A headless statue in Vagankovskoye Cemetery is crisscrossed with scratched messages. “Sonya, help me pull off my last job” one man writes, signing himself Kostya. Other requests are more general. ‘Sonya, help me find happiness’, Tanya writes, dating her message with the year 2006. Lighting candles and leaving small coins, they appeal for her help in successfully committing their own crimes, or just in ‘surviving in this life’, as several put it: ‘The Princess of Crime’, *Moscow Times*, April 27th 2007: http://www.themoscowtimes.com/printhttp://www.themoscowtimes.com/arts_n_ideas/article/the-princess-of-crime/356582.html (accessed: 02/12/2014).

¹⁴⁶ ‘The Princess of Crime’, *Moscow Times*.

¹⁴⁷ Victoria Khiterer, ‘The King and Queen of the Russian Underworld’, ASEEEES Convention, (San Antonio 2014). Used with kind permission of the author.

Once this elaborate set-up was complete, Son'ka greeted the jeweller as he entered the house, taking the jewels and showing him to the door of her 'husband', escaping with the valuables as the psychiatrist tried to reason with his prospective patient. Alongside this, Son'ka is commonly associated with the technique known as *Guten Morgen* (starting the day by robbing sleeping men in hotels). Dressed in her usual high societal (sometimes referred to as 'elegant lady') appearance, Son'ka would enter an occupied hotel room and begin searching for money or jewellery. If the sleeping gentleman awoke she would start to undress as if she were at home in her own bedroom. Acting confused and embarrassed for her 'mistake', she would appeal to the gentleman for leniency, which normally resulted with them having sex and Son'ka leaving with the takings.¹⁴⁸

Director Viktor Merezhko has stated that viewers should empathise with his 2007 character¹⁴⁹, reinforced by an opinion poll conducted amongst the viewers of the TV serial who stated that Son'ka was considered to be a 'hero of our time'.¹⁵⁰ Son'ka's crimes, however, had a clear impact on her unsuspecting victims with the one owner of one home rented without his permission committing suicide after his name appeared in the press.¹⁵¹ Notwithstanding, commentators continue to focus on how she targeted high society clientele, often using the alias 'The Baroness'. Son'ka would also reportedly employ a number of peripheral actors including a rented baby, babysitter and 'father', a former army captain found in a *yama*, the notorious urban slums which provided the focus of Maxim Gorkii's *Na Dne* ('The Lower Depths', 1901) and Alexander Kuprin's *Yama* ('The Pit', 1909-1915).¹⁵² This focus on class is best demonstrated in M.D. Klefortov's *Sonka of the Golden Hand* (1903), which begins with a young Son'ka surrounded by poverty. After marrying a wealthy gentleman and moving abroad, she finds that raising a family does not meet her 'aspirations' and returns to Russia. Klefortov's Son'ka proceeds to defend her life of crime by claiming that she 'served the poor' in a similar way to her bandit predecessors. Although eventually captured, this leads to public applause at Son'ka's trial and her arrival on Sakhalin with the respect and admiration of fellow

¹⁴⁸ Katz & Pallot, 'From Femme Normale to Femme Criminale in Russia', p.123.

¹⁴⁹ 'Of course they should feel sympathy; of course they should feel compassion, although, in fact, she was a robber. She stole from dukes, princes, jewellers and bankers; she didn't rob poor people. She stole from people who had money bursting out of their pockets': 'The Princess of Crime', *Moscow Times*.

¹⁵⁰ Katz, E. & Pallot, J. "From Femme Normale to Femme Criminale in Russia: Against the Past or Toward the Future?" p.112.

¹⁵¹ Khiterer, 'The King and Queen of the Russian Underworld'.

¹⁵² Khiterer, 'The King and Queen of the Russian Underworld'.

prisoners. Self-justification and support from the *vorovskoi mir* ('thieves' world') gave Klefortov's Son'ka the impression of a 'successful' criminal, an image further cultivated by the pulp novels of Count 'Graf' Amori which would serve as the basis for a series of silent films directed by Yury Yurevsky and Vladimir Kasyanov in 1914/15.¹⁵³ Despite the obvious reasons financial reward for targeting wealthy victims, Son'ka's reputation as a defender of the lower classes has almost certainly been enhanced by her fictional representations. This is symptomatic of the traditional bandit narrative in general,¹⁵⁴ and in Son'ka's case best demonstrated through her popular song (replicated in Klefortov's book) which expresses the traditional criminal norm of defiance against institutional structures:

But sometime the people will know
that I did not steal for myself
but for those who suffer,
who are oppressed by want,
who die from hunger,
who are compelled to steal by need.
Then, truly, everyone will say:
Yes, let her be blessed.¹⁵⁵

The turmoil and social upheaval of the revolution and Civil War years oversaw a clear shift in criminological and judicial practices, yet the discussion of these notorious figures from the late Imperial period did not disappear entirely. The image of Son'ka was evoked in one of the first projects to emerge from the Moscow Bureau for the Study of Criminal Personality and Crime (*Moskovskii kabinet po izucheniiu lichnosti prestupnika i prestupnosti*), established by the Moscow

¹⁵³ Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900*, (Cambridge, 1992), p.24.

¹⁵⁴ For further examples: Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester, 1959), pp.13-29.

¹⁵⁵ Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, p.204. This is also a feature of Komarov's *Vanka Kain*, who ridicules religious figures such as the priest who officiates at his wedding and his former owner, the Moscow merchant Peter Dmitrievich Filatiev: Gasperetti, *Three Russian Tales*, p.116, 155-160.

Department of Criminal Investigation (MUUR). Son'ka was referenced alongside Abbess Mitrofani and the famous Moscow murderer Pertov-Komarov in the introduction to the edited volume *Prestupnyi Mir Moskvy* (The Criminal World of Moscow).¹⁵⁶ Instigated in spring 1923 by V. L. Orelanskii, a member of the Moscow Soviet, the office for the Study of Criminal Personality brought together representatives of various disciplines including criminology, anthropology, psychiatry and statistics was heralded not only as Russia's first such institution, but one of the first of its kind in Europe. The work of the Bureau was led by Mikhail Gernet, a graduate of Moscow University's law school who, after a research trip through the major European centres of criminological study, became the acknowledged leader of the left-wing criminologists following the 1906 publication of his dissertation *Obshchetvennye Prichiny Prestupnost* (The Social Causes of Crime) which traced the development of criminology through the enlightenment tradition.¹⁵⁷

Operating under the auspices of the Moscow Health Inspection for Places of Incarceration (a sub department of the Moscow Health Department) allowed the Bureau to send students from Moscow State University into prisons to collect information.¹⁵⁸ This resulted in the 1924 volume, which contained articles from different contributors on a range of criminal activity including; bandits and robbers, murders, 'one case of a mutilated husband', recidivists, thieves, swindlers, producers of *samogon* (homebrew), 'modern criminal psychopaths and the fight against them', and 'tattoos in places of incarceration in the city of Moscow' which was written by Gernet himself. The introduction to the volume, also penned by Gernet, contrasted the approach of the Russian sociological school to Lombrosian methods which argued that a type of primitive atavism determined criminal proclivity in both men and women, and underlining that understanding criminality and its changeability was dependent on conditions of time and place.¹⁵⁹ This showed how, according to Daniel Beer, liberal predecessors like Lombroso unwittingly made an important contribution to the Bolsheviks own

¹⁵⁶ Abbess Mitrofani (Baroness Praskovya G. Rosen) was a member of the *Sisters of Mercy* who was convicted in 1874 for alleged financial machinations following a Moscow trial widely discussed in the press. Both Son'ka and Mitrofani were described as Moscow equivalents of 'the world's greatest crook', Thérèse Humbert, who pretended to be the heir of an imaginary American millionaire named Robert Crawford: Mikhail Gernet, *Prestupnyi Mir Moskvy*, (Moscow, 1924), p.vi.

¹⁵⁷ Kowalsky, *Deviant Women*, pp.38-39.

¹⁵⁸ Kowalsky, *Deviant Women*, p.58.

¹⁵⁹ Gernet, *Prestupnyi Mir Moskvy*, p.xli

program of social transformation.¹⁶⁰ Regarding crime as a social ill caused by an unfair class structure and a reflection of social, economic and political developments, the overarching thesis of the volume emphasised that certain forms of crime found permanent residence in the urban environment.¹⁶¹

Gernet acknowledging that, while the crime of each country had its own history, this was not written by notorious individuals but by the nameless masses (referred to as *shpana*, indigenous prison population).¹⁶² According to Gernet, this group did not just fade into the background but determined the general character of crime itself. The modern fight against crime, therefore, was to push back the entire army of crime, not just to focus on its ‘generals and commanders’. Therefore, the main attention of the Bureau was not solely focused on the personality of well-known figures. Only a combination of these two approaches, combined with various statistics, would create an understanding of the structure of crime in big cities. Furthermore, Gernet emphasised an international approach, citing a number of studies from Venice, Paris, Madrid and Rome, which showed that common characteristics existed but did not look beyond the borders of those particular countries. Statistics demonstrated that cities were ‘hotbeds of crime’, creating favourable conditions for pickpockets, speculators and prostitutes. According to Gernet, all kinds of vice, carousing and ‘fast living’ showed how the city could be considered a modern-day ‘Babylon, Sodom and Gomorrah’.¹⁶³

Alongside the edited volume, the Bureau published a yearly journal *Prestupnik i Prestupnost’* (The Criminal and Crime) which examined specific crimes such as hooliganism, murder, sex crimes and poverty. In addition to his work at the clinic, Gernet had a growing collection of literature produced by prisoners, believing that all newspapers and magazines by prisoners should be preserved fully at the institute.¹⁶⁴ Regularly publishing reviews of the camp press in judicial journals, Gernet considered media as a means of education, comfort and motivation, adding that this freed creativity. Prison journals, he stated, should not be full of complaints or single out individuals for special treatment, with their success resting on the discussion regarding the experiences of prisoners in

¹⁶⁰ Kowalsky, *Deviant Women*. p.13; Beer, *Renovating Russia*, p.209.

¹⁶¹ Gernet emphasised the progressiveness of the capital and the clear distinction between rural and urban crime. For a further discussion of ‘The Geography of Crime’ during this period: Kowalsky, *Deviant Women*, pp.116-145.

¹⁶² Gernet, *Prestupnyi Mir Moskvy*, p.ii.

¹⁶³ Gernet, *Prestupnyi Mir Moskvy*, p.vi.

¹⁶⁴ Alla Gorceva, *Pressa Gulaga* (Moscow, 1996), p.25.

tandem with cultural and educational policy.¹⁶⁵ The approach of the Bureau, however, which understood that the individual character of the criminal rested at the centre of the problem of criminality, made them increasingly susceptible of criticism by the late 1920s for incorporating supposedly ‘Lombrosian elements’.

Pedagogicheskaiia Poema

Despite the work of a team of Leningrad researchers who criticised the ‘glorification of negative heroes and overemphasis on sexuality’¹⁶⁶ of Soviet films of the 1920s, audiences responded to an estimated 400% hundred per cent increase in recorded crime with a renewed fascination with the criminal underworld.¹⁶⁷ Ubiquitous lone criminals from pre-revolutionary literature were now denied freedom of individuality and faced the prospect of membership in the collective.¹⁶⁸ Retaining some of the same essential characteristics, portraits of criminal subculture were forced to make changes in order to adapt to this new ‘Sovietized’ outlook. The fight against criminality not only featured in the work of the Moscow Bureau but also provided the subject of Anton Makarenko’s famous pedagogical work ‘The Road to Life’ (*Pedagogicheskaiia Poema*, 1933), which described the fictional Gorkii colony for young delinquents.¹⁶⁹

Makarenko reportedly began to develop his educational theories under the wings of the Ukrainian secret police from 1927 onwards, although his profile would remain relatively low until publication in the 1930s.¹⁷⁰ *Pedagogicheskaiia Poema* was preceded by Nikolai Ekk’s well-known 1931 film *Putevka v Zhizn*¹⁷¹, with which Makarenko assisted with writing the screenplay. *Putevka v Zhizn* was the first Soviet speaking film and aired at Venice, although this international acclaim was

¹⁶⁵ Gorceva, *Pressa Gulaga*, pp.29-30.

¹⁶⁶ Louise Shelley, “Soviet Criminology after the Revolution”, *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Vol. 70, No. 3 (Autumn, 1979), p.394.

¹⁶⁷ Stites, *Russian Popular Culture*, pp.61-2.

¹⁶⁸ Draskoczy, *Belomor*, p.49.

¹⁶⁹ Draskoczy, *Belomor*, p.71-2.

¹⁷⁰ Felicitas Fischer von Weikerstahl points out that, while OGPU orders from Solovki were similar to Makarenko’s educational theories, which stressed order and discipline and he was able to develop his theories under the wings of the Ukrainian secret police from 1927 onwards, there is no direct link between OGPU and Makarenko at any earlier stage of his career. Felicitas Fischer von Weikerstahl, “The OGPU, Re-education and the Solovki Camp Press”, BASEES Annual Conference (Cambridge, 2015). Used with kind permission of the author.

¹⁷¹ Usually ‘*Road to Life*’ but sometimes referred to in English as ‘*Path to Life*’ or ‘*Start in Life*’: James Von Geldern & Richard Stites (eds.) *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia: Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays and Folklore, 1917-1953* (Indiana, 1995), p.227-8.

not at the expense of a nationwide ‘cinefication campaign’ which saw thousands of travelling projectors (*peredvizhki*) rolled out through the countryside. This helped the film break the previous record held by 1926’s *Miss Mend* by taking 15 million roubles.¹⁷² Featuring songs previously banned during NEP, the colony was frequently likened to the urban slum, where crime and hooliganism often ran rampant.¹⁷³

Famine and social disorganisation of the revolution and Civil War had seen around 4.5 million children displaced by 1921.¹⁷⁴ These groups of youths, usually numbering up to twelve but occasionally larger, are most commonly referred to as *besprizornyi* (orphaned or otherwise homeless and abandoned children). Mirroring adult gangs, whose spheres of influence overlapped their own, they developed behavioural rules and norms which displayed similarity from one region to another.¹⁷⁵ These norms were often transmitted by older figures and reflected by the use of the term *shpana* to indicating an experienced streetwise gang member.¹⁷⁶ Progression through internal group hierarchies is again demonstrated in the gang’s use of *klichki* (nicknames) which mocked juvenile traits along with applying diminutive forms of female names to boys, including some who worked as prostitutes.¹⁷⁷

Although found in other social environments, *klichki* have long been considered a special feature of the criminal world (although it is important to note clear analytical difference between code names, *noms de guerre* and nicknames).¹⁷⁸ Similar to initiation tests and rituals involved in young offender institutions in the UK, *klichki* indicated transition to the criminal sphere and formed a key part of signalling information to those both inside and outside of their immediate social group. Former

¹⁷² Denise Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge, 1992), p.173-4.

¹⁷³ Gerald Smith, *Songs for Seven Strings: Russian Guitar Poetry and Soviet Mass Song* (Bloomington, 1984), p.70; Anton Makarenko, *The Road to Life*, trans. I. Litinov, & T. Litinov (New York, 1973), p.20, 43; Stites, *Russian Popular Culture*, p.48.

¹⁷⁴ For an account of these figures: Alan Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia, 1918-1930* (California, 1994), p.211.

¹⁷⁵ Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, p.36-7

¹⁷⁶ This feature is also highlighted in regards to contemporary territorial youth gangs: Svetlana Stephenson, ‘Violent Practices in Moscow’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 64, No. 1, January 2012, p.75.

¹⁷⁷ Ball, *And Now My Soul has Hardened*, p.40. Although Ball does not mention any female gang members, Joan Neuberger describes the role played by women in her study of hooliganism in early twentieth century St. Petersburg: Joan Neuberger, *Hooliganism: Crime, Culture, and Power in St. Petersburg, 1900-1914* (California, 1993), p.37.

¹⁷⁸ Gambetta, *Codes of the Underworld*, p.230. In Frederico Varese’s account of *vory-v-zakone*, criminal names were often formulated through elaborate initiation rituals and best understood as second names similar to a number of religious ceremonies. However, one feature of *klichki* is that one individual may have several different nicknames and Varese acknowledges that in initiation rituals recorded from 1950s onwards, multiple *klitchki* could cause confusion during ‘crowning’ ceremonies, which were instrumental and marked entry into the brotherhood. Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, pp.192-201.

prisoner Dmitri Likhachev's 1935 article on thieves' slang stated that 'every thief has his own nickname, he tattoos it or its symbol to his body and does not change it even if the criminal investigators know it'.¹⁷⁹ This shows how nicknames were retained even if it was detrimental toward continued criminal activities. Often borrowing terms from the animal kingdom, nicknames became a special source of pride and criminal 'honour' and could be applied not only to individuals, but the entire gang. Moreover, derogatory names could also be used as a punishment which relegated individuals down the hierarchy.¹⁸⁰

Studies of penal slang demonstrate that *klichki* could be divided into a number of categories, often retaining an original, patronymic or surname with an individual nickname 'added on'. This included geographical names, often indicating territorial boundaries, psychological features, physical traits or outward appearances.¹⁸¹ Further categories include; animals, famous characters, objects, religion and age.¹⁸² Former prisoner Jacques Rossi also adds 'unfitness for camp life' and a number of derogatory terms towards different ethnic groups, women and homosexuals in the detailed list of nicknames compiled in his *Gulag Handbook*.¹⁸³ Similar categories of nicknames existed for prisoners in the US during the same period, with the most common names deriving from five categories (locality, nationality, physiognomy and stature, criminal technique and some outstanding personality trait). Noting a number of derogatory names which could be applied to prison officials, Clemmer describes how, while they were often stereotypical and lacked originality, nicknames not only added colour to conversations but could also be used as a means of classification.¹⁸⁴

Alongside *klichki*, other behavioural norms exhibited by street gangs also included the practice of tattooing. This is demonstrated by a study of juveniles in the Moscow Labour Home in 1924 by the Moscow Bureau which described 37 out of 146 as having at least one tattoo.¹⁸⁵ Groups also often contained a clear hierarchical structure, with a steady influx of new recruits and control

¹⁷⁹ In his article of thieves' slang, Dmitrii Likhachev included *klichki* in his discussion of the 'magical nature' of speech, recalling how it helped control the penal environment and displayed an individual's 'criminal dignity'. Dmitrii Likhachev, 'Cherty Pervobytnogo Primitivizma Vorovskoi Rechi', p.61, 68.

¹⁸⁰ Likhachev, 'Cherty Pervobytnogo Primitivizma Vorovskoi Rechi', p.61, 68.

¹⁸¹ Stanjer, *Seven Thousand Days in Siberia*, p.105, 133.

¹⁸² Gavin Slade, *Reorganizing Crime: Mafia and Anti-Mafia in Post-Soviet Georgia* (Oxford, 2013), p.120.

¹⁸³ Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.162.

¹⁸⁴ Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, pp.91-93.

¹⁸⁵ Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, p.39.

over specific territorial locations, such as market places and train stations. Their own specific argot contained a number of terms from adult criminal spheres but also jargon which was directly related to the urban environment. Knowledge of these terms was often deployed as initiation tests for new recruits alongside beatings and a number of other probationary tasks. Keeping these entry barriers high created both assurances that new recruits were not imposters and imposed costs on potential traitors. In order to sort between high and low quality candidates, signals which only genuine candidates were produced, in this case comprised from the specific social and cultural context of the street.¹⁸⁶

Most groups featured at least one leader, known as a *vozhak*, *glot* or *glavar*'. Usually the oldest and physically strongest member assumed this position, making decisions, enforcing discipline and in some cases demanding payment (cigarettes or other items) from other members. Some observers also reported that street gangs in the 1920s contained a communal fund which would be divided up among all members equally or according to the weight of their contribution to criminal activities.¹⁸⁷ While there were occasional leadership challenges, decisions made by senior figures were usually met with widespread obedience. In the absence of a leadership figure (either through arrest or other extenuating circumstances) the group cohesiveness eroded until a new leader emerged. Reports stated that dominant members retained authority over lower ranked individuals, appropriating the best food portions and sexually abusing other members. Certain norms relating to discipline gained widespread currency, with loyalty being most respected attribute and betrayal regarded as the most serious transgression. Cheating at cards or failing to pay debts were also considered serious infractions of the street gangs code of conduct. According to Ball, the most cohesive groups were the ones in which a sense of separation and alienation had fully matured and a sense of group boundaries had developed, particularly in their animosity toward outsiders.¹⁸⁸

Further studies of children would continue link both street culture and juvenile colonies into larger criminal and penal spheres. Contrary to orders from the Children's Commission at height of

¹⁸⁶ Slade, *Reorganizing Crime*, p.120.

¹⁸⁷ Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, p.39.

¹⁸⁸ Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, p.37.

rehabilitationism in the early 1920s which forbid the practice, large numbers of juveniles continued to be incarcerated in adult institutions.¹⁸⁹ Juveniles within the camps were often viewed as the ideal site for re-education programs as they had no formal family structure to rely on. The Belomor official Semen Moiseev made a clear connection with juvenile pedagogical theorists by writing that prisoners were taught ‘according to Makarenko’s methods’ (*po metodam A. S. Makarenko*).¹⁹⁰ While the transformative process envisaged by Makarenko differed from re-education programs practised following the growth of the camps, the experience of juvenile and adult incarceration continued to follow similar tracks. Although the homeless problem had largely diminished by the mid-1920s, juvenile criminality soared again in 1929 during collectivization. In spring of the same year, the OGPU, who controlled both labour camps and children’s colonies, began to send juvenile delinquents to Solovki in an alleged attempt to quell rumours about unfavourable conditions in the camps.¹⁹¹ Further hardening of judicial practices from the mid-1930s also exacerbated this practice.¹⁹² Survivor memoirs reported children as young as seven or eight in the Gulag proper, with Rossi stating: ‘often a thief of 8-10 will conceal his or her address or name of parents and the police won’t make a fuss. They’ll just write down ‘age about 12’ in the records and that allows a judge to send them ‘legally’’.¹⁹³ Peter Solomon describes how this was aided by fissures in the judicial process. Confirmed by legal journals, convictions of children under the age of twelve were usually cancelled on appeal but Solomon is quick to clarify this rested on the cases making it to appeal in the first place.¹⁹⁴

This situation only began to be formulised on 11th June 1935 when a *NKVD* directive suggested that ‘remand isolation facilities’ in the normal prison system (*OMZ*) be used specifically for juveniles.¹⁹⁵ Nevertheless, these facilities continued to be afflicted by similar problems to the system as a whole. A report from a juvenile facility in Moscow, dated 19th February 1941, stated that ‘weak supervision’ (*slabogo nadzora*) resulted in prisoners beating each other, playing cards, stealing

¹⁸⁹ *Deti Gulaga*, Doc. 16, (17th April 1921), p.16.

¹⁹⁰ Draskoczy, *Belomor*, p.71.

¹⁹¹ It is commonly reported how OGPU hoped that the presence of children would make the horror stories less believable: Michael Jakobsen, *Origins of the Gulag: The Soviet Prison Camp System, 1917-1934*, (Kentucky, 1993) p.123.

¹⁹² Getty, Rippensporn, & Zomskov, ‘Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-War Years’, p.1026.

¹⁹³ Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.200.

¹⁹⁴ Peter Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice Under Stalin* (Cambridge, 1996), p.206.

¹⁹⁵ *Deti Gulaga*. Doc. 114, p.194.

clothes and food and engaging in sexual perversions (*dopuskayut polovyye izrasheniya*).¹⁹⁶ While regulations stated that juveniles should be confined apart from adult prisoners, these policies were either almost impossible to enforce or simply broken.¹⁹⁷ In instances where separation proved to be effective, juvenile barracks, set apart from other prisoners in the same fashion as male and female ‘zones’, were often designated no-go areas for other prisoners and camp staff.¹⁹⁸ Adult prisoners who were interned with juveniles would often be appalled by their behaviour. In a description which echoes those of adult recidivists, Romanian prisoner E. A. Kersonovskaya stated how fourteen and fifteen year olds in her labour camp would openly and noisily engage in sexual relations and boast about the favours they had provided to gain extra rations.¹⁹⁹ Later, Solzhenitsyn dedicated a chapter of to ‘the kids’ (*maloletki*), distancing them from *besprizorniki*, and describing the transition to adult criminal spheres:

‘After the children’s colony their situation changed drastically. No longer did they get the children’s rations which so tempted the jailers – and therefore the later ceased to be their principle enemy. Some old men appeared in their lives upon whom they could try their strength. Women appeared on whom they could try their maturity. Some real live thieves appeared fat-faced camp storm troopers, who willingly undertook their guidance both in world outlook and training in thievery.’²⁰⁰

Like Kersonovskaya, Solzhenitsyn described the sexual activities, colourful stories and boasting of the *maloletki*. Alongside this, he noted how they retained, as the principle characteristic of their conduct, concerted action in both attack and resistance. According to Solzhenitsyn, this made them stronger and freed them from restrictions, recalling how ‘thieves’ and juveniles held sway in the Krivoshchekovov Penalty Camp No.2 of Novosiblag, with junior members imitating violent techniques and language of elder prisoners.²⁰¹ This link is reinforced in contemporary work on post-communist Georgia which demonstrates the role punitive institutions play in recruitment and states

¹⁹⁶ *Deti Gulaga*. Doc. 288, p.363.

¹⁹⁷ Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.199.

¹⁹⁸ Catriona Kelly, *Children’s World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890-1991* (Yale, 2007), p.236.

¹⁹⁹ *Deti Gulaga*, Doc. 258, p.428.

²⁰⁰ Solzhenitsyn, *Arkipelag GULaga*, Vol.2, p.443.

²⁰¹ Solzhenitsyn, *Arkipelag GULaga*, Vol. 2, p.446-7. See the longer description of “glaza vykolu” in chapter five. Jacques Rossi also lists this alongside a number of other techniques. Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.79.

that the most basic grounds for survival is maintaining an influx of new, committed members. Slade describes how flexible supplies of human resources are necessary to form resilience and that trust networks which fail to achieve this are unlikely to last more than a single generation.²⁰² This is certainly an appropriate hypothesis to test in light of the ‘revolving door’ of Gulag inmates, and the entry barriers for inclusion in criminal gangs which are explored in chapter 4.

Aristokraty

Although other pedagogical concepts were deployed elsewhere, the rehabilitative theory of *perekovka* (‘re-forging’) gained precedence at the White Sea-Baltic Canal, where it also became the title of the camp newspaper.²⁰³ The theory of *perekovka* was based on ideas developed by the Bolsheviks in the early 1920s in an attempt to understand and prevent crime in the post-revolutionary era. In volumes such as *From Crime to Labour* (1936) the labour camp was viewed as the ideal site for remarking prisoners attitudes, organising cultural-educational work, and promoting the importance of collectively as a work principle through *sorevnovanie* (competition) and *udarnichestvo* (shock-worker mentality). Implicit in *perekovka* was the philosophy that, through forced labour and ideological conditioning, it was possible to create ‘new’ people who embodied the ideology and spirit of the age.²⁰⁴ This process was reflected in both the camp newspaper and the pages of *The History of the Construction* (edited by Maxim Gorkii) in which biographies of male and female criminals were recalled in order to distinguish them from the person they were transformed into.²⁰⁵ Prisoners were encouraged to submit re-forged stories to the camp journal, although some could highlight an inverse trajectory in which criminal mentors could be as influential as the camp *vospitatel’* (education officer).²⁰⁶

²⁰² Slade, *Reorganizing Crime*, p.118.

²⁰³ Draskoczy, *Belomor*, p.79.

²⁰⁴ Cynthia Ruder, *Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal*, (Florida, 1998), p.2.

²⁰⁵ Draskoczy, *Belomor*, p.56.

²⁰⁶ ‘Koshelev soon meets and befriends Vas’ka-Svistun (“Vaska the Whistler,” or, in slang, “Vaska the Liar”), a vodka-drinking criminal, and asks him how he is able to procure so much food and drink. Enamored of Vas’ka’s criminal lifestyle and the luxuries it affords, he “decides to start upon this path” himself.⁷² It is significant here that the author uses the same—and very loaded—term in Russian for the pathway that brings him to a life of crime as well as to a life of honest labor: *put’*. It is possible, in turn, to see

Within individual camps and colonies educational work was operated under the auspices of the Cultural-Educational Department (KVCh), subordinate to both the camp leadership and the central Gulag Cultural-Educational Department.²⁰⁷ Alongside supervising campaigns such as the Stakhanovite movement, the KVCh led cultural activities inside the camps, including campaigns to eradicate illiteracy, sponsored political lectures, oral readings of newspapers and the creation of slogans, photographs and illustrations which were similar to those which adorned the workplaces of Soviet society at large. Among the most prominent of these examples were wall newspapers (*stengazety*) which publicised the camps most productive shock workers and publically shamed the worst.²⁰⁸ Cultural-Education work through the KVCh was divided into subdivisions (*chasti*), each of was led by a *vospitatel'*, a prisoner whose roles included organising professional and technical training courses alongside maintaining 'red corners' which were areas reserved for ideology and focus on Soviet leaders.²⁰⁹

An article from the June 1934 edition BAMlag newspaper *Stroitel' Bama* ('Builder of the BAM') described the daily routine of one of the camp educators. BAMlag, along with BelBaltlag and Dmitlag, was part of a number of camps dedicated to the building of the Moscow-Volga Canal. Established on 10th November 1932, BAMlag became one of the largest camp complexes in the Gulag, reaching a peak of over 200,000 inmates, before it was closed on May 22nd 1938 following its re-organisation into several smaller camps. Educator Khrushchev's duties, according to the article, included motivational speeches about work production and checking statistics on norm fulfilment while, in the evenings, he oversaw cultural work including balalaika recitals, drama rehearsals and conversing with camp 'correspondents' (*lagkory*) in the red corner.²¹⁰ Although still a prisoner, the educational officer was often a central figure in the conversion of fellow inmates. Despite this, there

Vas'ka as a sort of inverse *vospitatel'*; a teacher or reformer who educates him about a life of stealing rather than a life of labour while changing his world and habits': Draskoczy, 'The Put' of *Perekovka*', p.42.

²⁰⁷ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*. p.57; Wilson Bell, 'One Day in the Life of Educator Khrushchev: Labour and Kul'turnost' in the Gulag Newspapers', Canadian Slavonic Papers, Vol. 46, Nos. 3-4 (September-December 2004), pp.289-314.

²⁰⁸ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, p.63-64.

²⁰⁹ Draskoczy, *Belomor*, pp.43-44.

²¹⁰ Wilson Bell also notes how Educator Khrushchev also pays particular attention to matters of personal hygiene: Bell, 'One Day in the Life of Educator Khrushchev', p.290.

were regular instances when disciplinary proceedings were brought forward against the *vospitatel'* for incidents such as drinking and card playing.²¹¹

Rehabilitation theories such as *perekovka* also played a central role in a number of popular works. This included Aleksandr Avdeenko's semi-autobiographical novel, *I Love*, written in the early 1930s about an orphan thief who became a shock worker in Magnitogorsk after re-education in a commune for the homeless.²¹² Much more prominent than this, however, was Nikolai Podogin's 1934 play *Aristokraty* (*The Aristocrats*) which followed similar themes to his other works devoted to the expansion and strengthening of the Soviet state.²¹³ Podogin's play was based on his visit to Belomor as part of the 120-strong delegation of writers who produced the collectively written volume *The History of Construction*.²¹⁴ Featuring a recidivist as its main character, Kostia, *Aristokraty* was received favourably and declared the best play of the 1934/5 season. It was also later adapted for the screen in Evgenii Chervikov's 1936 film, *The Prisoners* (*Zakliuchennyye*), in accordance with the original plan envisaged by Podogin from the material he collected on his trip.²¹⁵ While the title of the play was contemporaneous with penal slang²¹⁶ it offered a diluted view of criminal subculture.²¹⁷ The play's main character, also referred to under the nickname 'the Captain', quickly became a stock figure in 'official' narratives, appearing on the front cover of the Belomor issue of the magazine *USSR in Construction*.²¹⁸

²¹¹ Former prisoner Dmitrii Vitkovskii recalled that 'usually the educators withdraw into an attic or another barrack, play cards, eventually manage to get drunk and enjoy various thieves' amusements': Draskoczy, *Belomor*, p.44.

²¹² Bell, 'One Day in the Life of Educator Khrushchev', p.294.

²¹³ Ruder, *Making History for Stalin*, p.155.

²¹⁴ The *History* included oblique references to criminal subculture, in the same style as later Gulag memoirs. This is particularly evident in the chapters 'The Story of One Reforging', dedicated to the re-forging of the thief and swindler Rottenburg, and 'Women at Belmorstroy'. For a comprehensive analysis of the volume: Ruder, *Making History for Stalin*.

²¹⁵ Ruder, *Making History for Stalin*, p.168

²¹⁶ These wryly ironic comments saw Sukhanovo referred to as 'the monastery' and Lubianka 'the hotel': Draskoczy, *Belomor*, p.120.

²¹⁷ Jeremy Hicks highlights the importance of pointing out differences between film and screenplay: Jeremy Hicks, 'The Archipelago of Gulag Film', p.181-2. Gerald Smith also describes how songs sung in the performance of *Aristokraty* 'could not be published under any circumstances': Smith, *Songs for Seven Strings*, p.72.

²¹⁸ Draskoczy, *Belomor*, p.123.



Fig. 3 – Kostia-like figure playing accordion in the Belomor-themed issue of USSR in Construction (*SSSR na Stroike*).

Aside from pages of official publications, the name Kostia features regularly in *blatnye pesni*. Although previous scholarship has suggested a link, this appears to be a result to the success of an earlier song entitled ‘Kostia-the-Sailor’ rather than Podogin’s play.²¹⁹ Nevertheless, the song variants of Kostia have often appeared alongside a female accomplice whose name later became the title of a song originally named ‘On the Way To Work – I Wanted to Drink’ (*Kak-To Bylo Delo – Vypit’ Zakhotel Ya*). In this instance, the euphemism ‘To Work’ referred to someone on their way to carry out a crime and was regularly included in lists of criminal and penal slang from the same period. The ditty became more popular under the title ‘Murka’, a diminutive of Maria, with memoirist Fyodor Mocuisky recalling how prisoners sung several songs, including ‘Hello, My Murka, Hello, Dear’ from

²¹⁹ Robert Rothstein, ‘How it was Sung in Odessa: At the Intersection of Russian and Yiddish Folk Culture’, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (Winter, 2001), p.792.

the hold during their transportation to Pechlorlag in 1940.²²⁰ It was also sung outside of the camps by the intelligentsia following mass amnesty in the 1950s, as described by poet Evgenii Evutshenko.²²¹

Different versions of the song begin by described criminal gangs travelling from Amur, Rostov or Kabul to Odessa.²²² They all portray Murka as cunning, brave, and feared amongst her peers, with one version describing that she was so successful that she could afford patent leather shoes from state-run department store Torgsin. At the beginnings of the song, Murka was not portrayed in a traditional role as a 'kept woman' (*soderzhanka*) but as the leader of a band of professional criminals. In itself this makes the song unique in the canon of prison songs as it describes the activities of a prolific female criminal.²²³ During the course of the song, however, it is revealed how Murka (Sara or Khas'ka Rabinovich in a Jewish variant²²⁴) had violated the criminal code and was, therefore, assassinated.²²⁵ One of the most popular variants of the song is reproduced below:

A gang arrived in Odessa from Amur.
In the gang were criminals, 'hustlers' (*schuleri*).
The gang engaged in dark deeds
And were watched by Gubcheka.

Chorus:

Eh, Murka, you are my *Murenochek*,
Murka, you are my little kitten,
Murka, Maroussia Klimova,
Forgive your lover.

A woman spoke for them, she was called Murka,

²²⁰ Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss*, p.5

²²¹ Smith, *Songs to Seven Strings*, p.81-82

²²² Dzhekobsen & Dzhekobsen, *Pesennyifol'klor GULAGa*, p.155. Despite making more sense, both geographically and because it was more renowned for its links with criminal underworld, to use Rostov rather than Amur, Mikhail and Lidia Jakobsen suggest that Amur was picked for its rhyming properties with 'Murka'/'Urka'.

²²³ Dzhekobsen & Dzhekobsen, *Pesennyifol'klor GULAGa*, p.159.

²²⁴ Michael and Lidia Jakobsen describe how the fifth variant of the song was a form of Jewish anecdote which, like many others, emerged and received popular distribution after the death of Stalin: Dzhekobsen & Dzhekobsen, *Pesennyifol'klor GULAGa*, 160.

²²⁵ This was sometimes done using the slang word for bullets, *masliny* ('black olives').

Skilled and brave she was.
Even evil criminals feared Murka.
A thief's life she led.
. . .
Days were replaced by nights of dark nightmares,
Many of the gang were caught.
But now we shall discover quickly, who became a 'snitch' (*legavyi*),
And punish them for their betrayal.

As soon as someone finds out anything,
We should not hesitate.
Sharpen the knife, get the gun,
Get the gun – lay it down ready.

On the way 'to work', we wanted to drink.
We dropped into a chic restaurant.
There sat Murka in a leather jacket,
And a revolver sticking out from under.²²⁶

The original version, which appeared before the revolutions, was not linked with any specific location, instead telling a story of adultery and immediate personal retribution. The variants which appeared in Odessa and Moscow after October 1917, however, were imbedded in the social and political context of the new Soviet state. These later versions all described how, after a series of failures, the criminal gang became suspicious of Murka and discovered that she had become an informant for, in the Moscow variant, the Criminal Investigation Department (*MUR*) or , in the Odessa version, the local emergency committee, *Gubcheka*. The original variant described how Murka was spotted dancing with a 'young dandy', yet in later versions she was now seen in a restaurant with a revolver hidden under a leather jacket (the unofficial uniform of the *Cheka*). The

²²⁶ Dzhekobsen & Dzhekobsen, *Pesennyi Folk'lor GULAGa*, p.153.

gang decided that this deception would put their entire enterprise in danger. For this, they decreed that Murka should receive the most severe punishment, demonstrated in the song's final stanza:

Hello my Murka, hello, my dear

Hello, my Murka, and *adieu*.

You betrayed our *malina*,²²⁷

And for that you get the bullet.

Regardless of Murka's demise, the song helps reflect how criminologists looked back on the years of war and revolution as a period that stimulated a significant transformation of women's engagement in the public sphere and viewed female criminality a progressive trend which brought women into greater contact with the outside world.²²⁸ They suggested that their role in the domestic environment often prevented women from engaging in criminal activity to the same extent as men, yet once they had entered the criminal world they had a harder time leaving than their male counterparts. In 1924 recidivism rates for women with more than two convictions exceeded the proportion of men, and by 1926 were greater almost universally. Using data from the 1926 prison census, penologist B. S. Utevskaa emphasised that 'a woman more quickly becomes a habitual criminal' suggesting that, faced with few options after their release, ex-prisoners quickly returned to their old habits.²²⁹ For criminologists, these higher rates of recidivism indicated an inability to fully embrace the new way of life offered by the Soviet system. This was often attributed to their traditional isolation in the domestic sphere, the broad influence of female physiology and their increased involvement with the 'struggle for existence'. The difficulty of subsequent rehabilitation further reinforced perceptions of the 'backwardness' of women and widespread understanding of their social position.²³⁰

²²⁷ *Malina* is commonly used to describe a criminal 'den', where activities such as gambling took place and stolen items could be concealed from the police and criminal investigators.

²²⁸ Kowalsky, *Deviant Women*, pp.95-6.

²²⁹ Kowalsky, *Deviant Women*, p.106.

²³⁰ Kowalsky, *Deviant Women*, p.107.

The relationship between male and female criminals, and how their traditional roles were preserved in penal folklore, is further explored in the song *Na Moldavanke Muzyka Igraet* ('Music is Playing in the Moldavanka').²³¹ Moldvanka was an area of Odessa which gained notoriety at the turn of the century for its 'dark alleys, filthy streets, crumbling buildings and violence'.²³² The song was based on a prototype listed in a 1923 article as one of the 'songs of hooligans and the lumpen-proletariat that are, to our great regret, still heard among working-class youth'²³³ yet the association with the White Sea- Baltic Canal project dates the most popular version to the early 1930s. Most variants begin in an Odessa beer hall, where the local *pakhan* is drinking away recent profits and mourning the incompetence of those around him. Suddenly he remembers the skilled pickpocket Kol'ka, who has been incarcerated at Belomor, and decides to send a female accomplice, Maroussia (also Masha or Murka), to arrange his escape. Maroussia arrives at the camp to find that Kol'ka is wearing the patch of a 'shock-worker' and has no desire to return to his former life.²³⁴ As a result of his collusion with the authorities, thus breaking one of the main tenets of the criminal code, the *pakhan* orders that Kostia should be killed immediately. Following Maroussia's protestations, the song ends with silence in the Moldavanka as it transpires that the very same day Kol'ka had been murdered by fellow prisoners (referred to as *shpana*) as they were being transferred between camp barracks and work site.

Music is playing in the Moldavanka,
The beer hall is buzzing and drinks are flowing,
At a table drinking away profits
Odessa *pakhan* Kostia-the-Invalid.

In a separate room sits the pakhan,
Feeding Maroussia rose wine,

²³¹ Some versions of the song also appeared under the title 'The song about Kol'ka the pickpocket' (*Pesnia o Kol'ke-Shirmache*).

²³² Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa*, p.48.

²³³ Rothstein, 'How it was Sung in Odessa: At the Intersection of Russian and Yiddish Folk Culture', p.794.

²³⁴ Dzhhekobsen & Dzhhekobsen, *Pesennyi folk'lor GULAGA*, pp.335-38.

And, by the by, he has in his sights

Her pretty beautiful face.

He says, pushing a snack,

And warming her with wine and obscenities:

‘Listen, Masha, dear baby,

We will be lost without Kolka-the-pickpocket.

The pickpocket lives at the Belomorkanal,

Pushing a wheel-barrow, using a pickaxe,

And ‘outsiders’ (*frayera*) have become twice as rich,

Without him, who will give us a skilled hand?

Go there, Masha, my dear

And arrange the pickpockets’ escape.

So hurry up, do not hesitate

Before a ‘good man’ perishes.

Maroussia travels by postal train.

Here she is at the camp gates.

It is time on this pink dawn

For a jolly *lagernyy razvod* (transfer between barrack and work site).

Here comes Kolka in a leather raglan,

In military ‘costume’, and bright shiny boots.

In his hand he holds various papers,

And on his chest a ‘shockworker’ badge.

‘Ah, hello, Masha, my dear,

Greetings to Odessa, and its rose gardens.

Tell the thieves, that Kolka has grown,

Into a hero in the flames of work!

Also, tell them - he no longer steals,
He has abandoned his criminal life forever,
He understands a new and different life here,
Give to him by the Belomorkanal.

Farewell, Masha, my dear,
Send my regards to *Odessa-Mama*.
Here is Maroussia already at the train station
Buying a return ticket.

Music is playing in the Moldavanka,
The beer hall is buzzing and drinks are flowing.
Maroussia pours a glass of vodka,
Pakhan gives the following speech:

‘We, small thieves, have our strong laws,
And by these laws we live.
And if Kol’ka has dishonoured himself,
We will threaten him with the knife (*perom*).’

But then Maroussia stood and said:
‘Don’t touch him or I will ‘snitch’.
I realised the job of the canal
And I know the price of thieves’ (law) and the knife’.

In the Moldavanka music cannot be heard,
The beer hall is no longer buzzing.
At the table there only tears are shed
By *pakhan* Kostia-the-Invalid.

And on the same day at the Belomorkanal

Shpana decided to murder the thief.

And on early morning, during *lagernyy razvod* (transfer)

Kolka-the-Pickpocket was no more.²³⁵

Selected stanzas from the song have previously been used to highlight elements of a reformed story in Kol'ka's biography. However, the main narrative arc clearly describes how low-ranking criminals (such as pickpockets and female accomplices) often fall victims to those in the ranks above them. Both this song and 'Murka' (except in its original form) describe a straightforward transgression of the criminal code where the gang is betrayed by one of its members. This is further apparent in two stanzas appended to a later version of the song which describe how the female accomplice (in this variant Man'ka) had also learned the rehabilitative lesson of the canal and was proud of the former pickpocket Kol'ka. After threatening to turn in the gang into the authorities if they punish him for his betrayal, a decision is made by the pakhan to murder Man'ka along with Kol'ka:

Then rose Man'ka, rose and said:

'Don't touch him or I will 'snitch'.

I realised the meaning of the canal,

It is for this I am proud of Kol'ka'.

Then three *urki* left the *malina*

And put the bitch (*suku*) Man'ka 'under the fence' (*pod zabor*).

'Die, snake, before you 'snitch',

Die, Man'ka or I am not a thief.'

²³⁵ Dzhokobsen & Dzhokobsen, *Pesennyi Folk'lor GULAGa*, p.335-38. Moldavanka was an area of Odessa notorious for its 'dark alleys, filthy streets, crumbling buildings and violence': Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa*, p.48.

Although also reflecting criminal norms and taking place in the redemptive setting of the labour camp, many songs of the early twentieth century continued to retain common nineteenth century themes such as betrayal, revenge, dislocation and lack of freedom (*nevolia*).²³⁶ The continuation of common topoi means that much of the canon of *blatnaia pesni* only obliquely refers to the activities of professional criminals. One prominent exception to this is the song ‘we are Pilots-Raiders’ (*my letchiki-nalyotchiki*).²³⁷ Reproduced in several different collections, the song demonstrates how *nalyoty* (bank-robbers) formed a recognisable group in early Soviet criminal and penal spheres.²³⁸ The song also projects the image that *nalyoty* were influential enough to reach across different institutions, and looks to cultivate fear amongst other prisoners who came into contact with them:

We are pilots-raiders (bank robbers),
 Night-time burglars,
 Our motto – *the winged ace*.²³⁹
 We are pilots-raiders,
 Night-time burglars,
 We are a horrible union.
 We can get everywhere,
 We burn everywhere,
 And everywhere is now right here!²⁴⁰

Another important message regarding the criminal code could be found in a further song prominently featuring two professional criminals. The song was based on plot of a poem describing a

²³⁶ Smith, *Songs for Seven Strings*, p.72.

²³⁷ Raiders (*nalyotchiki*) referred to bank robbers while pilots (*letchiki*) appears to have been mainly chosen for its rhyming properties.

²³⁸ Armed robbery was also referred to by using the term *gop-stop*: Likhachev, ‘Cherty’, p.84; Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.83. Trakhtenburg’s 1908 dictionary contains a different description of ‘*nalyot*’, referring to them as opportunistic criminals whose actions were not pre-meditated: Trakhtenburg, *Blatnaia Muzyka*, p.41.

²³⁹ This referred to an individual who committed a daring heist and fled successfully afterwards. Dzhekobsen & Dzhekobsen, *Pesennyi Folk’lor GULAGa*, p.382.

²⁴⁰ Dzhekobsen & Dzhekobsen, *Pesennyi Folk’lor GULAGa*, p.327.

pair of Russian Grenadiers captured in France (presumably during the Napoleonic Wars, 1799-1815).²⁴¹ Modifying the soldiers to professional criminals, ‘Two Urka’s left a Soviet *Klichmana*’²⁴² was thought to have first appeared around the time of NEP, although the beginnings of conversion to a popular song began in early 1930s. Boris Glubokovskii, a prisoner on Solovki, remembered the song titled as simply ‘*Urka*’ in his book *49* which was published through the camps official newspapers organs and sold by vendors in Moscow and St. Petersburg (see next chapter). Boris Shiryayev, another Solovki prisoner also recalled the song. Shiryayev was a former White Guard, first arrested during the Civil War. Although he managed to escape before he could be executed, Shiryayev was rearrested in 1922 and his sentence commuted to ten years imprisonment. Arriving in 1923 as one of the first groups of prisoners, Shiryayev soon became one of Solovki’s most prominent cultural figures. Released and exiled in 1927, he soon found himself facing re-arrest but managed to escape at the beginning of the Second World War. Imprisoned by the Third Reich, Shiryayev spent several months in a concentration camp before being transferred to a ‘camp for displaced persons’. Facing deportation back to the USSR, Shiryayev again managed to escape to Italy where he sold dolls and wrote books up until his death in 1959.²⁴³ Shiryayev replicated the song in his 1956 book ‘The Inextinguishable Icon-Lamp’ (*Neugasimaia Lampada*) albeit with slightly different wording to the Glubokovskii version. Regardless of the difference in these two variations, core message remained: that the *urka* in question was willing to die before they were caught by the authorities (*legavyie*):

Two urkas left a Soviet *klichmana*,
 From the Soviet *klichmana* they were going home:
 The minute they stepped into their ‘rotten’ *malina*,²⁴⁴
 They were under ambush.

My loyal comrade, my nice comrade!

²⁴¹ Unfortunately, the Jakobsen’s collection does not date the original poem. The term grenadier, however, had mostly been abolished by the time of the Crimean War (1853-56).

²⁴² *Klichmana* is a reference to the penalty isolator (SHIzo).

²⁴³ Andrea Gullotta, ‘The ‘Cultural Village’ of the Solovki Camp: A Case of Alternative Culture’, *Studies in Slavic Cultures*, Vol. xi, p.21.

²⁴⁴ Michael and Lidia Jakobsen indicate that the criminals’ den (*malina*) had been under surveillance by the authorities and was, therefore, compromised. Dzhekobsen & Dzhekobsen, *Pesennyi Folk’lor GULAGA*, p.388.

Burning wounds on my chest...
One ceases, and the other begins,
And the third wound on my chest....

My loyal comrade, my nice comrade!
Bury my body at the *ban*²⁴⁵
Let the feeble-hearted *legavyii* (authorities) laugh,
I died a heroic *urka*.²⁴⁶

Although the 1917 revolutions marked a clear shift in criminological approaches, penal and criminal norms continued to be circulated by oral tradition. These various folkways continued to share understanding of the authorities and their actions, becoming vital carriers of inmate subculture. While some aspects of criminal folklore were clearly intended to uphold a certain aesthetic, they also provided important reference points for future prisoners and writers alike. This can be seen in use of Van'ka's phrases in late Imperial *katorga* and again in Mikhail Dyomin's first-person story *The Day is Born of Darkness*, where the activities of Son'ka are recalled by Margo, 'The Queen', head of a local Rostov den.²⁴⁷ Moreover, Kain's biography is also regularly cited as one of the earliest compilations of criminal songs and argot, with two songs appended to the second printing of Komarov's book. Although this edition is now long out of print, one of the songs could also be found in one of Likhachev's scholarly articles, where it was attributed to the *Comprehensive and Truthful Story of Van'ka Kain* (Moscow, 1793). The song was also notable for describing how notorious figures such as Van'ka, Stenka Razin and Gavrioushka were ashes (*prakh*) against the card game

²⁴⁵ Yelistratov's dictionary of Moscow slang describes *ban* as a public place often inhabited by criminals, such as a train station: V. C. Yelistratov, *Slovar' Moskovskogo Argo* (Moscow, 1994), p.32.

²⁴⁶ Dzhekobsen & Dzhekobsen, *Pesennyi Folk'lor GULAGa*, p.284.

²⁴⁷ Dyomin, *The Day is Born of Darkness*, p.192-3.

taking place.²⁴⁸ Thus, it helps to demonstrate another key feature of the criminal world, signalling to others that you are bolder and more daring than anyone who had come before:

Stenka Razin, Sennoi and Gavrioushka
Van'ka Kain and 'False Christ' Andriuska,
Though their deeds are glorious, and not shameful,
They are ash in comparison with our card games.

You have no shame or conscience.
Fools in here do not notice
That cards are scored and marked,
On both even and odd.

We wear nice jackets, although without coats.
We are much more cheery than local simpletons
Looking where to play, where to have lunch
If only we could get hold of a fool.²⁴⁹

The use of *klichka* further highlights the ways in which real life and fictional criminality intersect. This feature can be observed from Van'ka and *Kamchatka*, whose name bears no relation to the place but because he was a fugitive from a sail-making factory, to other associates such as Mikhail *Zaria*, the Wolf, the Monk, and the Hat.²⁵⁰ After the revolution this continued with Makarenko's *besprizorniki*, most prominently Tomka 'Zhigan', leader of the 'Wild Boys' in the 1931 film version, the names given to members of street gangs and Kostia, 'The Captain', from Podogin's

²⁴⁸ Stenka Razin was the Cossack leader of a peasant rebellion in 1670-71 which took place in the southwest area of the Volga. Murdering many members of the upper classes, Razkin's ranks swelled to 200,000 but were defeated by a Muscovite army at Simbirsk, where he was captured and executed. Gavrioushka likely refers to the bandit Gavril Starchenok, whose criminal activities around Kostroma are recorded in archival material. 'False Christ' Andriuska likely refers to the serf and 'False Christ' Andrei Petrov, part of a sect of flagellants connected with the St. John the Baptist convent. A 'False Christ' features in Komarov's *Vanka Kain* when a merchant's wife describes to Van'ka a man feigning to be mute and wandering the streets barefoot in just a shirt. Like David Gasperetti, I have not been able to further identify Sennoi (who is described by Komarov as simply a 'brigand').

²⁴⁹ Likhachev, 'Cherty', p.64.

²⁵⁰ The origins of the word 'kamchatka' suggest that it indicated 'linen or patterned fabric': Gasperetti, *Three Russian Tales*, p.216.

play. One key difference between Son'ka, Marina Tarnovskia and El'ka Zaz is that their respective nicknames ('Golden Hand', 'Diva of Death' and 'Queen of Stylish Hairdos') appear to have been awarded to them by the *boulevard* press, although a cursory look through the names of female recidivists found in later Gulag memoirs reveals many *klichki* were constructed using the same features as their male counterparts. The use of nicknames moved beyond simple imitation, however, and helped structure criminal and penal hierarchies.

Prison songs demonstrated a further carrier of inmate culture, and that fact that they retained the same characteristics and themes demonstrates their strength, often having more of an effect on prisoners than a speech from the authorities.²⁵¹ Verses could control thinking, and, subsequently, attitudes and behaviour of inmates, becoming stories which illustrate a social process and serving as a means and form of social control by holding up traits held in esteem by the majority of inmates and setting up standards of behaviour.²⁵² Legends such as Murka and Kostia (and their various other guises) represent the main principles accepted by the criminal world; not reporting on fellow criminals, defiance against the authorities and being willing to die before capture. These factors have been overlooked in previous scholarship, which have either focused on the re-forged narrative or the Jewish influence of the songs origins. Common misconceptions of criminal folklore during this time was not limited to plays, books and films, however, as the growth of the police camp system during the 1920s created another forum for discussions of criminality.

²⁵¹ Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, pp.172-177.

²⁵² Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, pp.172-177.

Chapter 2

Criminality in the *Tyuremnaya Pressa*

Although contributions of inmates toward publications have a long history in penal institutions worldwide, often viewed as an important part of a prisoner's rehabilitative process, camp journals and newspapers have regularly been used to demonstrate their use as ideological tools for the Soviet regime. There is little doubt, however, that these activities grew exponentially alongside the development of the Gulag, reaching a mountainous figure of 487 publications by the mid-1950s.²⁵³ Within this vertiginous total, clear distinctions can be drawn between different stages. According to Alla Gorcheva's monograph *Pressa GULAGa*, newspapers of the *tyuremnaya pressa* (prison press) could be found in various places of detention from 1918 to 1927 while camp journals from *pechat' velikikh stroyek kommunizma* (print of the great construction projects of communism) were produced on a number of larger work sites such as the White Sea-Baltic and Moscow-Volga canal projects. The third period, *lagernaya pressa* (camp press), more typically associated with straightforward propaganda, were produced across a number of corrective labour camps (such as Karlag and Dmitlag) between 1935 and 1955.²⁵⁴

Unlike their later usage as part of the camps re-education program, early publications of the *tyuremnaya pressa* offered a degree of freedom to their contributors, allowing prisoners a degree of agency by writing about their experience of incarceration. Moreover, some of these journals appear to be conscious of their appeal to wider readers, as publications were circulated outside of the camps (sometimes by prisoners themselves). The journals which reached a larger audience often contained more discussion of criminality than those directed internally, with articles often adopting the same criminological discourse and tying into wider debates about the nature of crime. Moreover, a number of these articles read more like ethnographic studies, and therefore provided an insight into a group of prisoners later marginalised by Gulag historiography.²⁵⁵ Even reports which demonstrate the same common criminal/political prisoner dichotomy more commonly associated with Gulag memoirs

²⁵³ Andrea Gullotta, 'A New Perspective for Gulag Literature Studies: The Gulag Press', *Studi Slavistici*, viii (2011), p.97.

²⁵⁴ Alla Gorcheva, *Pressa Gulaga* (Moscow, 1996), pp.113-163.

²⁵⁵ Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Stanford, 2013), p.64.

describe a more diverse constellation of prisoners than expressed elsewhere.²⁵⁶ This chapter will investigate the discourse on criminal subculture found within the pages of the *tyuremnaya pressa*. This will allow for a closer reconstruction of penal society, a first step in identifying penal hierarchies and behavioural norms which will be discussed further in the following chapters.

Tyuremnyye Byt' (Prison Life: Types and Mores)

Appearing in the immediate aftermath of the revolution and Civil War, participation in journals and newspapers formed part of the re-education program that has often been associated with the development of the camp system. Prisoners were usually solely tasked with being reporters, although some were also tasked with selling publications in the surrounding areas.²⁵⁷ In the embryonic stages of the press, the administration of each institution became the official publisher and quality of publications depended on the funding they had available, although commercial advertisements were also eagerly accepted. Early journals were mostly handwritten or copied using polygraph machines, although by the mid-1920s the majority of publications were produced on typewriters. Directors and members of the editorial board were often handpicked from among management cadres, while security staff and guards also contributed by writing editorials and ideological articles.²⁵⁸

Almost all camps published 'news bulletins' through the *Kul'turno-Vospitatel'nyi Otdel* (KVO) of that particular camp. In larger labour sites, the KVO also published cultural-literary journals in which inmates could contribute. Alongside this, they also published a series of booklets containing short stories, poems, placards and music. Most bulletins were in A3 format and each normally contained four pages. Quality of printing of both bulletins and journals was acceptable and pictorial material rivalled that of the Soviet dailies as most camps had their own printing shops on site. Bulletin frequency ran at one to three times a week while central bulletins had a press run which

²⁵⁶ Ben Crewe lists a typology which includes a number of different categories, although he does warn that these are 'approximations of social life and always present distinctions that are more marked and rigid than their messy realities': Ben Crewe, *The Prisoner Society: Power, Adaptation and Social Life in an English Prison* (Oxford, 2009), pp.155-224. See also Donald Clemmer's chapter on 'social groups in the prison community': Clemmer, *The Prison Community*. pp.111-133.

²⁵⁷ Leo van Rossum, *The GULAG Press, 1920-1937* (Leiden, 2000).

²⁵⁸ Gullotta, 'A New Perspective for Gulag Literature Studies', p.100.

was estimated between 3000 and 25000 (divisional bulletins range from 300-1000). Non-serial publications averaged 3000-5000 copies. Most publications were in Russian, with two or three in Ukrainian and one each in Uzbek, Kazakh, and Tatar respectively.²⁵⁹ Found among this early collection were a number of journals which all went under the title *Golos Zaklyuchennogo* ('Voice of the Prisoner'). These were published in a number of locations including Ekaterinburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Odessa and Gomel and Tashkent.

Alongside Voice of the Prisoner, one of the most prominent publications was the Vyatlag (Viatka) journal *Za Zheleznoi Reshyotkoi* ('Behind the Iron Bars'). This success reportedly owed much to its director Yuri Bekhterev, later transferred to a managerial position in GUMZ (*Glavnoe Upravleniie Mestami Zaklyucheniia*, 'Main Administration of Places of Detention').²⁶⁰ As one of the most celebrated publications, Behind the Iron Bars was distributed to other prisons and camps, available to subscribers across the country and also found abroad.²⁶¹ The Vyatlag camp itself was among the earliest forced labour sites and operated under the auspices of the GPU (State Political Administration) who were also responsible for the administration of camps near other major urban centres such as Suzdal. Prisoner composition in GPU facilities included political prisoners (members of socialist parties, Mensheviks, SR's and Left SR's and anarchists), counter-revolutionaries (mainly members of pre-revolutionary political parties) and criminals who were considered 'incurable'. While numbers of political prisoners and counter-revolutionaries declined in the early 1920s yet the number of the latter category rose in line with changes to the judicial code, providing half of the GPU's overall total of 200,000 in 1922.²⁶²

Prisoner composition in GPU facilities was reflected in an article entitled 'Prison Life: Types and Mores', found in the September 1923 issue of Behind the Iron Bars.²⁶³ The article was written and

²⁵⁹ van Rossum, *The GULAG Press*.

²⁶⁰ For a more detailed biography of Yuri Bekhterev: Gorceva, *Pressa Gulaga*, p.26-27.

²⁶¹ The only other journal which could be found abroad was *Solovetskie Ostrova*: Gullotta, 'A New Perspective for Gulag Literature Studies: The Gulag Press', p.100; Gorceva, *Pressa Gulaga*, pp.25-26.

²⁶² During this time the definition was altered to 'most dangerous', which allowed the GPU to retain custody of the prisoners. This meant that, while the overall total of prisoners dropped to 110,000 by the end of the following year, more than 100,000 fell into this new category: Jakobsen, *Origins of the Gulag*, p.112-113.

²⁶³ K. E. Utomskii, 'Tyuremnyi Byt', *Za Zheleznoi Reshyotkoi*, No.4, September 1923, pp.10-17.

signed by, in his words, the ‘desperate’ prisoner K. E. Utomskii, a former prince regarded as an ‘enemy of Soviet power’. Following his transfer from Butyrka, Utomskii was reportedly delighted to contribute toward the camp journal, and used the forum to express his discomfort in the camp and identify himself as a *zhigan* (in his interpretation one of the lowest ranks in prisoner hierarchy).²⁶⁴ Furthermore, the Vyatlag camp was described as ‘a real school’ which provided ‘courses of the second stage of moral training for future skilled, ‘stylish’ criminals’.²⁶⁵ Recalling a number of inmate ‘species’²⁶⁶, Utomskii stated that much was already known about so-called ‘raiders’ (*nalyoty*, bank-robbers). Like the song from the previous chapter, his article clarified that *nalyoty* were united in a ‘special corporation’ which strictly watched over their particular laws and ruled over a chain of ‘more subtle and less obvious exploiters’ and ‘unfortunates’ (*neschastnyie*) This term used by Utomskii, as Sarah J. Young has shown, was the name popularly used to describe ordinary convicts in late Imperial period as discussed in a number of studies of exile and *katorga*.

Amongst the lower-ranked prisoners, Utomskii described the ‘informants’ (*lyagash*), as someone who shared in profits while also securing good will and trust from lower administration officials. This was done, he claimed, by providing the prison authorities with ‘summaries’ regarding the activities of other prisoners. Utomskii found it both comical and strange that ‘informants’ would often fool guards by providing them with false information and generally promoted the interests of the prisoners above the authorities. Found broadly within this category of informants were also prison ‘cats’ (*koty*).²⁶⁷ Utomskii described these ‘dandies’, as small-time criminals who had the desire to stand out among other prisoners (sometimes by wearing riding breeches) and always appeared to be rushing around while carrying out their business. His description displays some similarities to Vlas Doroshevich’s observations of prisoners known as ‘twisters’ (*kruchie*) on the Tsarist penal colony

²⁶⁴ Gorceva, *Pressa Gulaga*, p.35.

²⁶⁵ Dmitrii Likhachev remarked how, in penal slang, prison was often referred to as an ‘academy’ or ‘university’. These terms could also be observed in studies of French and US underworld slang in the 1930s, although Likhachev pointed out that this gave an ‘illusion of translation’ and they were just common metaphors: Likhachev, “Cherty”, p.59. K. E. Utomskii, “Tyuremnyye Byt”, *Za Zheleznoi Reshetkoi*, No.4, September 1923, p.10.

²⁶⁶ Utomskii lamented that, amongst other things, he was forced to pay other prisoners for hot water: K. E. Utomskii “Tyuremnyye Byt”, p.10.

²⁶⁷ In penal slang the terms ‘kot/koshka’ are usually used to indicate pimp/prostitute: Trahkenburg, *Blatnaia Muzyka*, p.31. These terms can also be used, however, to indicate the lesbian lover of a prostitute: Breitman, *Prestupnii Mir*, pp.50-56. Daniel Healey includes a description of a criminal case from 1893 involving a man who finds his former prostitute wife in bed with another former prostitute: Daniel Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago, 2001), pp.52-53.

Sakhalin. Referred to as *katorga*'s toreador, Doroshevich noted that these prisoners were well-known for their cunning, wit, tenacity and treachery. Regardless, they were still viewed with a certain fondness and admiration as they conducted dealings between the authorities and prisoner merchants (*asmodey*).²⁶⁸ Utomskii's description differed from Doroshevich's view in this sense, as he lamented their 'pathetic morals, harmful activities, and persistent interference in the lives of other prisoners'.

Found below this category of informants were the 'demonically large and beautiful' prisoners referred to as *shpana*. According to Utomskii, prison society 'leaned toward' this group, allowing them to tax 'care packages' from other inmates. This was compared to the Tsarist practice of tribute (bribing government officials), with almost no one objecting to the custom, which was firmly established and universally observed. Although intimidated by the prisoners ranked above them, these small, petty thieves grouped together, forming a caste of prison 'pariahs' who jealously guarded their own laws and customs. *Shpana* were described as, first and foremost, card masters, and included hustlers (*schuleri*) and pimps (*svodniki*) within their ranks. Utomskii detailed how these experienced, seasoned prisoners formed a company with mutual responsibility and a rigorously thought-out system. Prison, he stated, provided them with 'best factory' of cards and generated money for a number of different individuals from the owners of card decks who rented them, suppliers who provided the raw materials, draftsmen who drew various images upon them to, finally, the 'master artists' themselves.²⁶⁹

Although Utomskii's article, as elsewhere, clearly described the activities of *shpana*, clarifying the origins of the term is somewhat problematic. V. F. Trakhtenburg's 1908 dictionary lists *shpana* it as the 'indigenous' prison population, describing them as a 'herd' and associating their behaviour directly with the shared experience of penalty (eating together, sleeping together and so on). This etymology also displays similarities to Doroshevich's description of *shpanka* (also 'herd'),

²⁶⁸ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.206.

²⁶⁹ K. E. Utomskii, "Tyuremnyye Byt", p.12

in reference to ‘first-timers’ and ‘short-termers’ on Sakhalin.²⁷⁰ In English language memoirs, however, *shpana* is used more broadly to refer to criminal prisoners *en masse*, with no distinction between other groups such as *nalyoty*.²⁷¹ This can be observed in a 1926 memoir by S. A. Malsagoff, a Chechen prisoner who participated in a group escape from Solovki.²⁷² Malsagoff dedicated a chapter to describing criminal activities inside the ‘distributing hut’ on Popov Island. These activities included stealing items from other prisoners (and fighting over them), card games played for money and negotiations with guards in order to exchange stolen goods for alcohol. Like Utomskii’s article, Malsagoff recalled the unwritten internal discipline which bound *shpana* into one indivisible unit, describing how their code was ruthlessly applied to traitors (*sutchenyi*) who were immediately executed.²⁷³ Another participant in the group escape, Yuri Bezsonov, also described the activities of ‘real criminals’ (no transliteration) on Popov Island, recalling how they were a disciplined body with laws of their own and displayed a stubborn refusal to work for the authorities.²⁷⁴ The descriptions of Bezsonov and Malsagoff resonate with those found in later Gulag memoirs, which depict similar activities alongside an unwritten code stipulating hostility towards authority, and harsh punishment for anyone discovered to be colluding with the camp regime.

Prezhde i Teper’ (Then and Now)

As indicated by Bezsonov and Malsagoff, discussion of *shpana* could be found in reports from the iconic labour camp that spread across the Solovetskii archipelago.²⁷⁵ Although the idea had originally been proposed in May 1920 by an article which selected Solovetskii Island as an ideal site for a work camp, the Solovki Special Purpose Camp (*Solovetsky Lager’ Osubogo Naznacheniiia*) was officially

²⁷⁰ Trakhtenburg, *Blatnaia Muzyka*, p.67; Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.194.

²⁷¹ Sarah Young refers to the absence of individuality when discussing the views of Late Imperial commentators toward ‘ordinary convicts’ who were mainly from the peasantry: Young, ‘Knowing Russia’s Convicts’, p.1700.

²⁷² S. A. Malsagoff, *An Island Hell: A Soviet Prison in the Far North* (London, 1926), p.57 & pp.83-93. Malsagoff directly refers to *shpana* as ‘ordinary criminals’ (which is how they were also described by Vladimir Korolenko in his short stories about Sakhalin). For a further description of the transfer point on Popov Island: Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent: Prisoners of the Soviets* (London, 1935), pp.240-250. For more on the problems with escapees and stranded prisoners on the Island of the Revolution (Kem’): Baron, *Soviet Karelia*, p.85.

²⁷³ Malsagoff claimed that the ‘distributing hut’ held around 1,400 *shpana*: Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, p. 83-88.

²⁷⁴ Yuri Bezsonov, *My Twenty-Six Prisons and My Escape from Solovki* (London, 1929), pp.213-214.

²⁷⁵ Alexander Etkind describes how Solovetskii functions as a metonym for Soviet penalty, transcending the individual experience and representing all victims of political repression. This is demonstrated by the Solovetskii stones in Moscow and St. Petersburg which have become a permanent site of mourning and remembrance: Etkind, *Warped Morning*, p.7.

established in June 1923.²⁷⁶ Although its acronym, *SLON*, originally referred to the administration of labour camps from the regional capital Arkhangel'sk, following a fire to the Transfiguration Cathedral on the 25th May the entire island was transferred to the security services and the administration relocated to the archipelago.²⁷⁷ Following the new constitution of July 1923 which separated the GPU from republican-level NKVD organs and subordinated them to the newly established United State Political Administration (*Ob'edinyonnoie Gosudarstvennoie Politicheskoe Upravleniie* or *OGPU*) the population on Solovki rapidly accelerated from the 150 prisoners who were transferred there in late summer 1923 to around 7,000 two years later.²⁷⁸

Driven by its pursuit of self-sufficiency, Solovki housed 70% of OGPU prisoners and had increasing to a total of 21,900 by 1928.²⁷⁹ As the peak of its population in mid-1930 the camp was responsible for 65,000 prisoners and had begun to spread across the Karelian mainland.²⁸⁰ *SLON* encompassed the entirety of the archipelago, including transit points at Arkhangel'sk and Kem' and work camps on the smaller Mukol'skii, Anzerskii, Kond and Zaietskii islands. Officially, there were nine separate sites although reports also claimed that some prisoners were kept in more primitive conditions near to where they performed work duties, including farming, fishing and tree felling.²⁸¹ Theoretically, female prisoners were incarcerated separately (with a large number housed on Zaietskii Island) while the main island of Solovetskii had its own particular topography.²⁸² This included a number of work battalions inside and outside of the main kremlin, which became the new permanent residence of the camp authorities (*USLON*). As demonstrated in the case of Naftalii Frenkel, a former

²⁷⁶ According to the article in the Arkhangel'sk edition of *Izvestii* the 'harsh environment, the work regime, the fight against forces of nature will be a good school for all criminal elements.' Roy Robson also describes how, in October 1921, the Soviet government had approved the study of Solovki's main buildings as 'monuments outstanding for their historical-artistic importance' and that a small of preservation experts led by Pavel D. Baranovskii began studying the buildings in May 1922 until this was halted by the fire in 1923: Robson, R. *Solovki: The Story of Russia Told Through its Most Remarkable Islands*, p.204

²⁷⁷ Robson, *Solovki*, p.202

²⁷⁸ Although Roy Robson puts the figure in 1923 at around 6,000 (Robson, *Solovki*, p.206-7) it seems likely that it was slightly more: Jakobsen, *Origins of the Gulag*, p.113.

²⁷⁹ The Special Department (*Spetsotdel*) administered the OGPU places of confinement. During this time, the head of the Solovki administration (*USLON*) was the exiled Estonian communist F.I. Eikhmans who had begun as director of the Solovki Local History Society: Robson, *Solovki*, p.229.

²⁸⁰ Robson, *Solovki*, p.243.

²⁸¹ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p.44.

²⁸² Dmitrii Likhachev, *Reflections on the Russian Soul: A Memoir*, (Budapest, 2000), pp.94-99.

prisoner who rose through the ranks to become camp commander,²⁸³ administrators attempted to cut costs by utilising inmates as warders, guards, clerical workers, and supervisory personnel.²⁸⁴

Former prisoner Dmitrii Likhachev described how prisoner work battalions included First Company, reportedly comprised of ‘privileged’ inmates who sided with the administration and lived in quarters behind the cathedral. Several companies (Two, Three, Eight, Nine and Ten) held clerical positions while Sixth Company which was comprised of monks, priests and bishops. Company Thirteen often served as ‘quarantine’ for new arrivals before they were sent to labour in Company Fourteen, located inside the burned-out cathedral. Companies outside the kremlin walls were Fifteenth, described as the ‘most criminal’, and Sixteen, whose prisoners worked in the camp cemetery.²⁸⁵ Andrea Gullotta describes how *intelligentsia* formed a ‘cultural village’ which included participation in a range of activities such as academic seminars, the criminological department (*Krimkab*) and the camp theatre.²⁸⁶ Although participation in the theatre often depended upon prisoners dropping ‘deplorable habits such as gambling, using foul language etc.’, Likhachev’s memoir notes that Ivan Komissarov, ‘king of all the *urki* in the Solovetski archipelago’ was chosen as understudy for the role of Arbenin in Lermontov’s *Masquerade*.²⁸⁷ Moreover, criminal recidivists created a short-lived theatre company of their own in 1925, although (like a number of other small groups comprised of Ukrainian and Belorussian prisoners) this was subsumed by the newly formed theatrical and arts council headed by former warder Yuri Blumberg within a year.²⁸⁸

²⁸³ Draskoczy, *Belomor*, p.24. Along with Ivan Seletskii, Frenkel was the reported innovator of the work-for-food system which spread throughout the network of forced labour camps: Jakobsen, *Origins of the Gulag*, p.121.

²⁸⁴ This last category was made up of former GPU-OGPU operatives convicted of criminal offenses, and former officers and men of the White Army. USLON staff was small, Solzhenitsyn maintains it never exceeded forty people in each division, although this number does not include warders, guards and clerks at Kem’: Jakobsen, *Origins of the Gulag*, p.114.

²⁸⁵ Robson, *Solovki*, pp.220-1.

²⁸⁶ Andrea Gullotta, ‘The ‘Cultural Village’ of the Solovki Camp: A Case of Alternative Culture’, *Studies in Slavic Cultures*, vol. xi, p.11. For more on the criminological department, *Krimkab*, housed on the third-floor of a former guest house beside the landing platform, see chapter four.

²⁸⁷ Natalaia Kuziakina, *Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp*, p.73; Likhachev, *Reflections on the Russian Soul*, p.129.

²⁸⁸ Kuziakina, *Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp*, p.73.

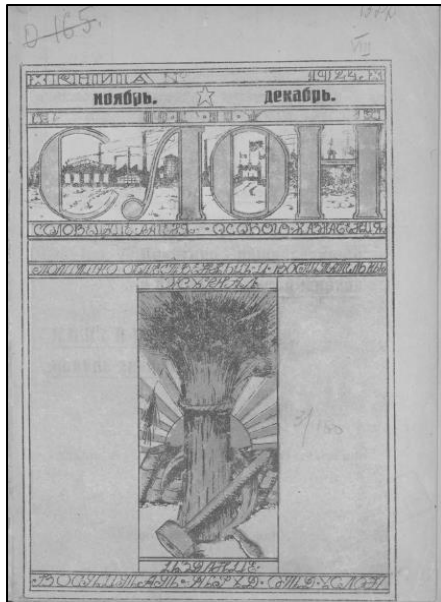


Fig. 4 – Front covers of the November/December 1924 issue of *SLON* and the August 1925 edition of *Solovetskie Ostrova*.

The range of cultural activities on was recorded in Solovki's official newspaper organs *Solovetskie Ostrova* (Solovetskii Islands) and *Novye Solovki* (New Solovki). First published in March 1924 to coincide with the opening of the theatre, the journal *SLON* (from the acronym given to the camp) contained articles written by camp staff and prisoners who were invited to express themselves through stories, poetry, and cartoons.²⁸⁹ In less than a year, circulation of *SLON* grew from fifteen copies to a circulation of around two hundred. From the first publication of the following year the journal changed its name to *Solovetskie Ostrova* and now also included essays on psychology, economics, international politics and biology. Eventually it would reach a circulation of around three thousand copies, was available at kiosks in Moscow and Leningrad or via postal subscription for five roubles annually or fifty kopecks per issue. Alongside *Solovetskie Ostrova*, the weekly newspaper

²⁸⁹ From the beginning of the camp the OGPU had a wall newspaper (*stengazeta*) which only staff of the 95th Northern Camps OGPU Division were allowed to contribute: Gullotta, 'The 'Cultural Village' of the Solovki Camp', p.12; Kuziakina, *Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp*, p.23.

Novye Solovki commenced publication in January 1925 and was printed across four pages, containing information about camp life alongside national and international news.²⁹⁰

Both newspapers were suspended, however, at the end of 1926 with little explanation. Officially, the press became part of the journal *Karelo-Murmanskii Krai*, although only a handful of regular writers contributed. In August 1927 GUMZ published a decree for a more general clampdown on content in all prison magazines and journals. The document, signed by People's Commissar of Internal Affairs A. Beloborodov and Deputy People's Commissar of Internal Affairs Egorov Shirvindt, began the process of a more centralised management for the overall prison press and meant that every issue now had to be monitored.²⁹¹ These changes meant that, in most cases, there would now be one main paper per institution, with each department (*otdeleniie*) publishing its own supplements. In autumn 1929, however, *Solovetskie Ostrova* and *Novye Solovki* began publication for a second time. This re-emergence was somewhat unexpected with some linking it to the visit of Maxim Gorkii's to the island following negative reports and the publication of memoirs in Germany, France, China and the United States. From 1929 onwards, *Novye Solovki* became a more straightforward ideological newspaper (typical of the later *lagernaya pressa*) while *Solovetskie Ostrova* continued with the same features as before, albeit with some changes to its layout.²⁹²

Alongside these journals and newspapers, the Solovki press also produced other publications. This included a study by former actor Boris Glubokovskii, sentenced to ten years imprisonment in 1924.²⁹³ Glubokovskii was a regular contributor to *Solovetskie Ostrova* and prominently advertised on their list of contributors. A full page advertisement in the April 1926 edition encouraged readers to purchase his collection of 'journalistic essays into life, ethics and psychology of *shpana*' available not only Solovki and Kem', but also in Moscow, Leningrad and Kharkov.²⁹⁴ Glubokovskii acknowledged in his introduction, that while titles often gave little away, in this case it was very significant.²⁹⁵ His

²⁹⁰ Gullotta, 'The 'Cultural Village' of the Solovki Camp', p.13.

²⁹¹ Gorceva, *Pressa Gulaga*. p.27.

²⁹² Gullotta, 'A New Perspective', pp.105-6.

²⁹³ Glubokovskii was arrested for his involvement in the 'Ganin case' which alleged that a small circle of intellectuals had formed a group known as 'The Order of Russian Fascists': Gullotta, 'The 'Cultural Village' of the Solovki Camp', p.21.

²⁹⁴ *Solovetskie Ostrova*, No.4 April 1926 p.154.

²⁹⁵ Boris Glubokovskii, 49 (Moscow, 1926), p.3.

collection (expanded from articles in the camp journal²⁹⁶) was simply titled *49* after the article of the criminal code which gave the courts the right to sentence individuals deemed ‘socially dangerous’ due to ongoing criminal activity and connections with the ‘criminal milieu’ (*prestupnaia sreda*) to three years of banishment from major soviet cities.²⁹⁷ Glubokovskii confirmed how this referred more broadly to the mass of criminal prisoners on Solovki whose ranks included ‘recidivist-thieves’, prostitutes, brothel landlords and ‘loafers/parasites’ (*tuneyadtsy*). Like Mikhail Gernet, Glubokovskii linked criminality to mass urbanisation, describing the influx of prisoners from big cities with haggard faces, haggard psyche and haggard morals.²⁹⁸ Glubokovskii would also refer to these prisoners as ‘49ers’, reminiscent of the term later used by self-styled political criminals (‘58ers’).

Glubokovskii outlined his criminological approach, describing how, before starting with treatment one should carefully examine the psychological operation of the criminal world. This period for criminals, he stated, marked their epoch of ‘*Sturm und Drang*’ (‘storm and stress’).²⁹⁹ Therefore, in order to break through their caste of ‘*noli me tangere*’ (‘touch-me-not’)³⁰⁰ one must first listen to their songs, read their manuscripts, and learn their biographies. Glubokovskii’s work also contained a lengthy definition of *shpana*. Describing them as ‘small headed fools’ (*zabubennyie golovushki*), Glubokovskii stated that they were not only representatives of the criminal world, but in fact their proletariat and spokesperson.³⁰¹ The description also outlined how number of criminal activities fell within this category, including pickpocketing, burglary, stealing from bath-houses, train stations and the shelves of shops, counterfeiting goods and banknotes (*farmazonshiki* or *kukolniki*) and mastering the art of seduction in order to perform their crimes (*khipesnitsi*).

According to Glubokovskii, the main ‘dreams and aspirations’ of these small-time criminals were to snort cocaine and drink *samogon* in noisy drinking dens to a chorus of criminal songs played

²⁹⁶ Boris Glubokovskii, ‘Pesni Shpani’, *Solvetskie Ostrova*, No.4-5, April-May 1925, pp.57-60.

²⁹⁷ Hagenloh, *Stalin’s Police*, p.41.

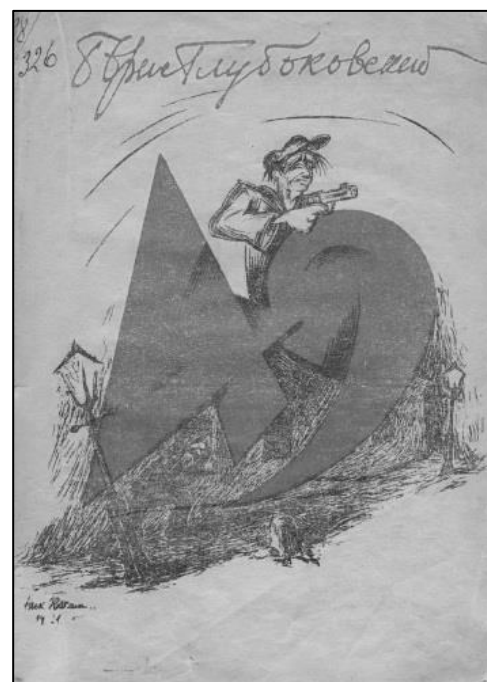
²⁹⁸ Glubokovskii, *49* (Moscow, 1924).

²⁹⁹ Glubokovskii is comparing this period to ‘Storm and Stress’ the German literary movement of the late 18th century that sought to overthrow the Enlightenment cult of Rationalism.

³⁰⁰ A reference to ‘touch me not’ or ‘don’t tread on me’, the Latin version of words, according to John 20:17, spoken by Jesus to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection and also used on the Gadsden flag during the American War of Independence.

³⁰¹ Glubokovskii, *49*, p.5

on the accordion.³⁰² Glubokovskii further recalled how penal society on Solovki could be divided into three groups: *svoi* (one's own people), *frayera* ('outsiders') and *legavyie* ('authorities'). This division into three distinct castes displays similarities to the hierarchical structure discussed in the following chapters, in which criminal prisoners would continue to define political prisoners as *frayera*, alongside *muzhiki* ('peasants' or 'workers') and *suki* ('bitches'). In Glubokovskii's account, however, the most contempt was reserved for *legavyie* who represented security organs such as the GPU. These prisoners were sworn enemies of *shpana*, who often used the hurtful proverb 'you are a bitch, worse than a *legavyie*' as a way of insulting fellow inmates.³⁰³ This reference to a 'bitch' (*suka*) as being worse than *legavyie* is an important precursor to events during the period of prisoner-on-prisoner violence covered in the final chapter. Falling within the group '*svoi*' (one's own people), *shpana* were seen as inviolable (*neprikosnovennyie*) and comprised of numerous professional identities. The third of these categories, '*frayera*', were often victims of *shpana* and viewed as a cash cows, or cattle to be slaughtered, rather than being universally hated.³⁰⁴



³⁰² Glubokovskii, 49, p.5

³⁰³ Glubokovskii, 49, p.6

³⁰⁴ Glubokovskii, 49 p.6

Fig. 5 –Advert for Boris Glubokovskii’s ‘49’ in the April 1926 edition of *Solovetskie Ostrova* alongside the front cover.

Even before the publication of Glubokovskii’s work, discussion of *shpana* had already gained precedence in the camp journal. This can be seen in two corresponding articles from the May 1924 edition of *SLON* (before the title changed to *Solovetskie Ostrova*). The first article, titled ‘Then and Now’³⁰⁵ was written by former priest Alexei Trifilev who described how, since the revolution, criminal elements had increased significantly and that ‘in prisons, in places of compulsory labour, in general, any place with prisoners...we now have before us a kind of criminal known under the name *shpana*.’ The goal of his article was to draw parallels between inhabitants of Dostoevskii’s *House of the Dead* and the ‘negative people’ found on Solovki, clarifying that this was the same type contained in recent fiction, such as Gorkii’s play and Kuprin’s novel.

Trifilev described how complex processes preceded the production of heroes and heroines of Gorkii and Kuprin’s work. Since Dostoevskii, he stated, ‘a lot of water had flowed from Siberian and Russian rivers’ and that, during the revolution, ‘we witnessed (both) Russian valour (*doblest*) and the negative effects of its character.’³⁰⁶ While not everything could be bright, kind and sacred in the soul of the Russian people and, clarifying that he did not claim, like Dostoevskii, that there was ‘high-spirited beauty’ to be found in *shpana*, Trifilev described how he had the opportunity to build friendly relations with them. In order to avoid excessive ‘idealisation’, Trifilev paraphrased Dostoevskii by stating ‘you say that I don’t know *shpana*, but I’m already halfway through my sentence and I live with it, eat with it, drink with it, have worked, more than one ‘calloused’ day (of hard labour) with it...and nowhere, in Butyrka, in Arkhangelsk, not here in Solovki did I shy away from rapprochement with these people.’³⁰⁷ Suggesting that it was not possible to ‘revive’ the study of *shpana* unless skilfully approached in this manner, Trifilev addressed the camp *vospitatel*’ Vadim Strukgof directly, suggesting that he had the opportunity to reach a large public with speeches and articles about his

³⁰⁵ A. L. Trifilev, ‘Prezhde i Teper’, *SLON*, No.3, May 1924, pp.39-49.

³⁰⁶ Trifilev, ‘Prezhde i Teper’, p.41.

³⁰⁷ Trifilev, ‘Prezhde i Teper’, p.47.

educational assumptions. Clearly unhappy with Strukgof, Trifilev stated that in half a century there were a number of approaches to the Russian criminal ‘soul’ and, in his eyes, a curious question arose: ‘whose approach is more correct and expedient?’³⁰⁸

Trifilev’s criticism of the *vospitatel* was not well-received in the pages of *SLON*, of which Vadim Strukgof was a member of the editorial board and responsible for the socio-political section.³⁰⁹ Printed directly alongside Trifilev’s lengthy article was a retort from a prisoner named ‘Tiberius’, a regular contributor who has been noted as a frequent apologist of the administration.³¹⁰ The opening of his short reply ‘Flick on the Nose of National Identity’³¹¹ praised citizen Trifilev’s ‘high quality’, and for being a ‘patriot and Slavophile’. Tiberius went on to question, however, why he would try to find any benefits of specifically ‘Russian’ *shpana*. Critical of the comparison to Kuprin and Gorkii, Tiberius suggested that his vulgarization and ‘hooliganism’ of the Russian people was naïve and stated that the ‘waste of the proletarian environment could be found anywhere there were thieves (*vory*), ‘informants’ (*shishiki*), prostitutes and provocateurs.’³¹² Suggesting that no-one doubted that ‘*shpana* and hooligans’ were products of the autocracy, Tiberius rubbished Trifilev’s claim that all the evils of the Russian ‘tramp’ ended with the last vestiges of Christianity. ‘What an analyst!’ Tiberius scoffed sarcastically, adding: ‘where were you, citizen Trifilev, with the native Russian *shpana* you love so dearly during the Tsarist state?’ Suggesting that he had merely appealed to charity and philanthropy and stuffed it into religious pamphlets, he returned criticism back to Trifilev, asking: ‘what have you done for the Russian proletariats, who fell to the bottom and degenerated into thieves, ‘informants’ and scabs (*shtreykbrekhera*)?’³¹³ Tiberius stating that if he (Trifilev) was none too fond of national character then he might perhaps find a better ‘path’ in curing social evil elsewhere. Tiberius concluded by defending the criticism of Strukgof by suggesting that a better use of Trifilev’s energies would be expended in devoting time to his own experiments rather than waiting ‘patiently’

³⁰⁸ Trifilev, ‘Prezhde i Teper’, p.47.

³⁰⁹ Vadim Strukgof was also responsible for the social-political section of the journal which contained many of the more detailed articles relating to criminality.

³¹⁰ Roy Robson suggests that ‘Tiberius’ was a communist exile and his real name was Tobias, Tverie, or Tveros: Robson, *Solovki*, p.231. Natalia Kuziakina adds that ‘Tiberius’ was a former Bolshevik agitator who became an apologist of anything done by the administration: Kuziakina, *Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp*, pp.25-26.

³¹¹ Tiberii, ‘Shelchok po Nocu Natsinalnoi Samobitnocti’, *SLON*, No.3, May 1924, pp.50-52.

³¹² Tiberii, ‘Shelchok po Nocu Natsinalnoi Samobitnocti’, p.51.

³¹³ Tiberii, ‘Shelchok po Nocu Natsinalnoi Samobitnocti’, p.52.

for future articles from the *vospitatel'*.³¹⁴ This heated exchange between Trifilev and Tiberius highlights the importance of the early camp press as a relatively open forum for discussion. On one hand, the attack on Trifilev's religious background and the defence of *vospitatel'* seems fairly straightforward in the context of the new Soviet state (and in order to protect his position within the camp). On the other, however, by placing importance on social conditions, Trifilev was, perhaps unknowingly, repeating discussions being undertaken by criminologists during the same period. Focus on the importance of the environment which had produced the characters of *Na Dne* and *Yama* would continue to be a regular feature of the camp journals.

Solovetskoe 'Dno' (Solovetsky 'Lower Depths')

Comparisons to notorious urban slums also provided the subject of an extended essay by an anonymous prisoner ('G.A. B—in') which stretched across three consecutive journals.³¹⁵ The first part of *Solovetskoe 'Dno'* (a reference to the Gorkii play) first appeared in January 1925 edition of *Solovetskie Ostrova* and told the story of 'D', a prominent figure described as 'prosperous' among other inmates. Sentenced to Solovki under article 49, 'D' held the post of assistant in his work division, but, according to the author, was less interested in this position, and more in being compared unfavourably with *shpana*. According to the author, his 'justifiable motives' for this special attention was that he was capable of more violent and profitable crime than these low ranking prisoners.

³¹⁴ As Tiberii's article was, generally, written in a sarcastic tone, I am assuming he means the opposite here: Tiberii, 'Shelchok po Nocu Natsinalnoi Samobitnocti', p.52.

³¹⁵ G. A. B—in, 'Solovetskoe Dno: Ocherki po Issledovaniyu Mira', *Solovetskie Ostrova*, No.1, January 1925, pp.51-54.



Fig. 6 – ‘Solovetskoie ‘Dno’ from the January 1925 edition of *Solovetskie Ostrova*.

The second part, in the February 1925, edition focused on the question of ‘shirkers’ (*simulyanty*). The article again referenced criminal society by describing how *shpana* were drawn to activities such as cards, theft and other ‘negative phenomenon’ yet were particularly unfriendly toward ‘shirkers’, a section of the camp which defined itself as specifically ‘not *shpana*’.³¹⁶ The author describes how he tried to associate in the brain of one representative of *shpana* the need to ‘work’ on ‘shirkers’, capitalists and all idlers’ to contribute to labour production. The response he received however was that ‘in normal life they are beaten, here they are sent to *Sekira*’. This was a reference to the punishment isolators found inside the Church at the top of Mount Sekirina where prisoners were at times stripped and forced to sit upon a ‘perch’ for hours on end, and whose steps were utilised as a form of torture as guards were rumoured to have strapped prisoners to logs and rolled them down the giant wooden staircase.³¹⁷

³¹⁶ G. A. B—in, ‘Solovetskoie Dno: Prodolzheniye’, *Solovetskie Ostrova*, No.2, February 1925, pp.51-54.

³¹⁷ Robson, *Solovki*, p.227.

The third part, in the March 1925 edition, discussed the practice of 'blat' (influence or personal connections), referring to the practice as a 'social anomaly' but 'very characteristic' of the sociology and psychology of Solovki prisoners.³¹⁸ According to the author, *blat* played a significant role in camp life, recalling the suspicion directed by prisoners against each other and their constant fear of dirty tricks and 'informants' (*stukach*).³¹⁹ This environment, according to the author, gave birth to and nourished the practice of *blat*, a common danger which 'continued to be worshipped' by inmates. The article stated how *blat* was 'sought after, cherished and groomed' and that anyone involved in this practice should be regarded as a criminal. Suggesting that it was natural for *shpana* to take part in *blat*, as they were yet to understand social welfare, the author recalled how this activity negatively affected the general well-being of the entire camp. The article also acknowledged the widespread nature of this problem, and that victory in the struggle for complete eradication of *blat* guaranteed opportunities for improvement in life for all prisoners.³²⁰ Each part of this essay demonstrates particular features of daily life to be explored in later chapters. The first part clearly identifies a hierarchy between prisoners which placed 'D' above other inmates. Although the second part of the essay distances *shpana* from 'shirkers' it nevertheless indicates that some prisoners were able to refuse work duties, undermining the ability of camp authorities to fully control their incarcerated population. Finally, the third part of the essay demonstrates how informal practices often superseded formal procedures. Following the expansion of the camps in the mid-1930s, personal connections such as *blat* continued to play an important role in camp life, creating a certain level of flexibility which allowed the system to function at ground-level regardless of directives issued from the centre which were often considered to be unrealistic.³²¹

The link between penalty and criminal spheres outside the camps continued in an article titled 'Criminals in the Big City' found in the February 1925 edition of *Solovetskie Ostrova*.³²² The brief opening abstract, written by the Solovki editors, described the content of the article as 'extremely characteristic of Solovki where the 'criminal element' provided the predominant contingent of

³¹⁸ On the extent of *blat* networks: Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours*.

³¹⁹ G. A. B—in, 'Solovetskoe Dno: Prodolzheniye', *Solovetskie Ostrova*, No.3, March 1925, pp.62-64.

³²⁰ G. A. B—in, 'Solovetskoe Dno: Prodolzheniye', *Solovetskie Ostrova*, No.3, March 1925, pp.62-64.

³²¹ Bell, 'Was the Gulag an Archipelago?', p.139.

³²² V. Larin, 'Prestupnini Bolshogo Goroda', *Solovetskie Ostrova*, February 1925, pp.14-22.

prisoners'. The article itself had actually first appeared outside the camps in the journal *Sud Idet* ('Court is On/in Session'). Citing Gernet's discussion of how the characteristics of the urban atmosphere encouraged criminal activity, the author V. Larin described how big cities had traditionally attracted more crime. Larin proposed that a study of crime in urban centres was of great practical importance to enhance both the understanding crime and 'for interest of a more general nature' (suggesting that readers would be interested in the contents). Reproducing a number of statistics regarding looting and robbery, which showed that Moscow and Leningrad had more crime than the outlying provinces, Larin described groups such as 'Black Mask Gang', 'Nines of Death' and the 'Band of Forest Devil's' who travelled from one city to another while leaving 'a bloody footprint' behind them and discussed the role of women (outnumbered ten-to-one but 'just as dangerous' as their male counterparts).³²³ The biographies of several notorious bandits, including *Mishka Kultyapyy* (Mikhail Osipov), were recalled to show how individuals who struggled to find work in provincial areas had organised themselves into criminal gangs and migrated to major cities. Through these biographies Larin highlighted the direct influence of urban economic conditions, such as hunger and the difficulties faced for anyone with prison experience in gaining employment, in encouraging.³²⁴

Larin compared the activities of bandits, and their theatrical nature, to another enemy of the 'big city'. Murder, he stated, was often more of a mystery and, with a few exceptions, committed face-to-face rather than in the shadows. In the urban environment, where eyes were everywhere, Larin described how the first main concern was where to hide evidence. In this context, Larin cited recent examples such as the Moscow serial Petrov-Komarov (also described in the work of the Moscow Bureau). Petrov-Komarov, in a two year period, reportedly committed 29 murders, picking up most of his victims from the market where he sparked up conversations under the pretence of trading horses. Luring potential victims back to his apartment, it was suggested that Petrov-Komarov using a variety of implements to carry out his crimes before disposing of the bodies in either derelict housing or the

³²³ This was reflected by the penologist B. S. Utevsii's articles on prison census data, published in 1927 and 1928 in which he stated 'even in the case of robbery and banditry, offenses assumed to be without doubt male crimes in which one needs strength and risk, fearless and cruelty, the ability to use weapons and calmly spill a victim's blood, women are ahead of men....Truly, this reflects the capricious play of female psychology, combining extreme gentleness with extreme cruelty and mercilessness': Kowalsky, *Deviant Women*, p.106.

³²⁴ Larin, 'Prestupnini Bolshogo Goroda', p.17.

Volga river. Larin was struck in particular by a number of unique features; one of which saw the bodies of the victims cut into smaller pieces and the other, he noted, was the calmness and rationality the murdered displayed in covering their tracks (which often involved sending body parts to fictitious addresses in crates or baskets). Recalling how the ratio was one female for every male murderer, most of the incidents studied by Larin were not premeditated and caused by feelings such as anger, revenge, fear and hunger which arose out of socio-economic conditions. Premeditated murder, of which there was only one inmate included in the study of Moscow prisons, was notable for the murderers being unremorseful and/or indifferent to their crimes and victims.³²⁵

The article highlighted that the most common crime in big cities was theft, with a study of Leningrad in 1923 showing that 60% of all crimes related to a number of different variations (with the urban environment making it easier to hide stolen goods).³²⁶ According to Larin, the world of thieves was open to anyone from experienced professionals and homeless children, mothers and prostitutes, to those who saw it simply as ‘work’ or who stole solely to feed their addiction to cocaine, morphine and alcohol. Stating that this was driven by the institution of private property, Larin hypothesised that the atmosphere of the city was not only conducive for low-level criminality, but also played the role of ‘factory’ and ‘nursery’ for serious, professional crime.³²⁷ Larin also described how urban children were born into the ‘criminal environment’ and, therefore, more likely to become future recidivists.

Larin recalled the professional identity of a ‘swindler’ (*moshennik*) required some education, citing a study by the Moscow Bureau which stated that thirty six out of one hundred swindlers had higher and secondary education, while only six were illiterate. The importance of this, he outlined, was that they had to understand the psychology of the masses and adapt to the environment in order to build trusted relationships. There was also a special term for someone operating in the street with counterfeit money, *farmazonshiki*, whose victims were usually those who had just arrived in the city. Larin recalled how swindlers forged a variety of goods such as recreational drugs, cheap tobacco

³²⁵ Larin, ‘Prestupnini Bolshogo Goroda’, p.20.

³²⁶ Larin, ‘Prestupnini Bolshogo Goroda’, p.20.

³²⁷ Larin, ‘Prestupnini Bolshogo Goroda’, p.20. The criminal referred to by Larin was Petrov-Komarov. In a two year period he was thought to have committed 29 murders, picking up most of his victims from the market under the guise of a horse-trader and luring them back to his apartment. Petrov-Komarov then was reported to have disposed of the bodies either in the river or derelict homes (see chapter one).

(*papirosy*), substituted gilded silver instead of gold and glass instead of diamonds, and also made paper ‘dolls’ (*kukly*), a stack of bank notes with real currency only on the outside to give the impression that it was a stack of notes. According to Larin, the growing population in major cities created a desire for this ‘unearned money’. The influx of confused and inexperienced new residents added to this ‘supply and demand’, creating more opportunities to prosper from their misfortune.³²⁸ The content Larin’s article repeated the work of the Moscow Bureau almost word for word, replicating the same statistics and notorious figures, such as Petrov-Komarov. Notwithstanding, Larin’s article which associated criminal diversification with the rapid industrialisation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, has not always been reinforced in scholarship of prisoner composition inside the camps which assign any prisoners from this demographic the label of ‘criminal’.³²⁹ Although elements of the familiar common criminal/political prisoner dichotomy remain, this ‘hierarchy of crime’ was further evident in articles which followed Boris Glubokovskii’s description of three main prisoner groups.³³⁰

‘Frayera’ i ‘Svoi’ (‘Outsiders’ and ‘One’s Own People’)

One such example appeared in the August 1925 edition of *Solovetskie Ostrova* under the title *‘Frayera’ i ‘Svoi’* (‘Outsider’ and ‘One’s Own People’).³³¹ The author B. Borisov began the article by recalling how prisoners of the 13th Company looked down into the gardens of the Solovetsky Kremlin, dividing the crowd in half, clarifying that these two groups were *frayera* and *svoi*. Borisov stated that, while these groups were profoundly different, there was one particular feature which kept them apart. Like Glubokovskii, Borisov postulated that *frayera* was anyone who could be stolen from, while *shpana* earned their livelihood by stealing. Although this could be seen in their appearance, Borisov stated that the differences were not just external. Although *shpana* disassociated themselves from

³²⁸ Larin, ‘Prestupniki Bolshogo Goroda’, p.23.

³²⁹ Galeotti, ‘The World of the Lower Depths’, p.102.

³³⁰ Ben Crewe describes how some criminal offenses traditionally carry more esteem than others, stating that both within criminal culture and in most prisons organised crime and certain types of murder are at the apex with petty and sexual crimes at the base: Crewe, *The Prisoner Society*, p.272.

³³¹ B. Borisov, ‘Frayera’ i ‘Svoi’, *Solovetskie Ostrova*, No.8, August 1925, pp.80-82.

their company, Borisov described how *frayera* were not to be seen as an enemy but, on the contrary, provided them with the means of their existence. Expanding on this hypothesis further, Borisov described how the criminal element viewed not only camp life, but the entire world, according to this outlook.

Defining himself as a *frayera*, Borisov described how his group had neither the strict ideology nor structured worldview of *shpana*. The author recalled how composition of *shpana* was varied, and the only thing which connected them was their direct or indirect involvement in crime. At the top of this hierarchy of crime, the aristocracy, were swindlers, followed by a ‘large bourgeois’ of safecrackers and counterfeiters, while the remaining masses comprised of pickpockets (*shirmanshik*), house burglars, and thieves who stole from stores or carts at market stalls (*gorodushnik* or *vozushik*) with the aid of their accomplices (*tirshik*).³³² The ‘have-nots’, pariahs and *shpana* who formed the bottom layer of this hierarchy were driven, according to Borisov, by a ‘narrow bourgeois morality’. The author further suggested that the concept of ‘debts of honour’ (*dolgi chesti*), in reference to *shpana* card games, were driven by the same psychological and sociological impulses. Although Borisov stated that the ‘criminal hierarchy’ was full of hypocritical traditions, in no way could crimes committed once a year (such as ‘safe-cracking’) be compared to the wild, ‘senseless’ crimes of *Khitrovka* (a famous Moscow district of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century afflicted by its association with alcohol, drugs and prostitution). Reinforcing scholarly work on criminal diversification outside the camps, which associated increased specialisation with rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, Borisov’s article showed how the distinct hierarchal structure which existed outside the camps was replicated by prisoners on the archipelago.

³³² Definitions from: Vitaly von Lange, *Prestupnyy Mir Rossii: Moi Vospominaniya ob Odessa i Khar'kove* (Odessa, 1906).

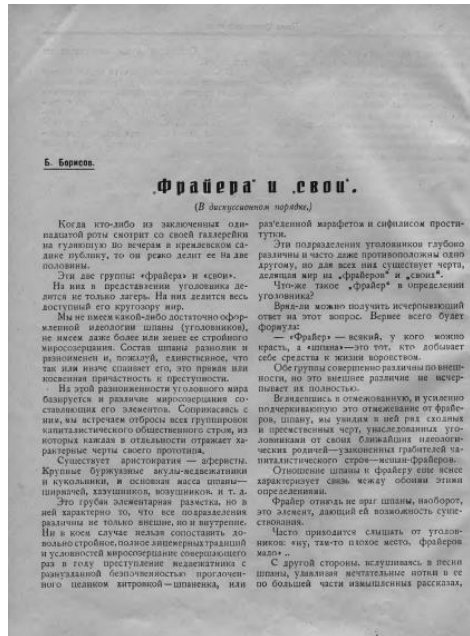


Fig. 7 – ‘Frayera’ i ‘Svoi’ from the August 1925 edition of *Solovetskie Ostrova*.

Differences between *frayera*, *svoi* and *legavyi* were further explored in the June 1925 edition of *Solovetskie Ostrova*.³³³ ‘*Shtrihi na Hodu*’ (‘Passing Notes/’Observations’) began with a scene in which a twenty year old *shpana* claimed under investigation that *frayera* were colluding with camp authorities. The article began by quoting the phrase used, ‘*frayera* are united with *legavyie!*’, with the author, T. A. Boduhin, stating that this was uttered without much deep thought or irritation toward the individual who had reported him. Boduhin found it of significant value that the author was only twenty years old, stating that this was a result of the revolution and subsequent formation of the categories *shpana* and “*svoi*”. Boduhin added to earlier descriptions of the three groups, defining *legavyi* as a detective (*syshik*), political police (*politicheskii*), policeman (*jandarm*), investigator (*sledovatel*) etc. This term, he claimed, applied to anyone specifically involved in persecution and annihilation of *svoi*, specifically the ‘most hated’ of law detectives, the political investigator (*gorohovoe pal'to* ‘pea coat’).³³⁴

³³³ T. A. Boduhin, ‘*Shtrihi na Hodu*’, *Solovetskie Ostrova*, No.6, June 1925, pp.41-45.

³³⁴ Boduhin, ‘*Shtrihi na Hodu*’, *Solovetskie Ostrova*, No.6, June 1925, pp.41-45.

According to Boduhin, *svoi* included thieves, ‘raiders’ (*nalyoty*), murderers and swindlers of all kinds who were united by a fear and hatred of *legavyi*. The author’s own group, *frayera*, reportedly stood between the two, as ordinary people who were both victims of *svoi* and protected by *legavyi*. Boduhin recalled that, although words used by pre-revolutionary criminals contained strict meaning and translated into a common language, in the days of revolutionary storms and upheavals, boundaries between these groups became so blurred that even old criminals could hardly recognise them, stating that ‘*legavyi* became *svoi*, *frayeri* became *legavyi*, and *legavyi* became *svoi*’.³³⁵ Using a prostitute as his central character, Boduhin described how, during War Communism, his ‘heroine’ sensed the differences in this moment of great confusion, merging into the different. During this time her friends from *svoi* were subject to persecution by everyone: Red Guards, Military Police, Checkists, Commissars from the labour exchange, former members of *svoi* and even clerks from the local committee.

All of these groups had become enemies for Boduhin’s heroine, and that understanding of opposition to *legavyi* had been preserved in the minds of young *shpana*. Posing the question: ‘Who met in secret and persecuted cops, who paid for prostitutes all of these years?’ Boduhin suggested that the answer to this was the ‘lucky speculators, resourceful specialists, embezzlers and cocaine addicts, lovers of illicit sex and bourgeois philistines’ who had managed to hide their wealth, and during this period acted like ‘thieves’ and ‘raiders’. In the same dens and brothels, Boduhin’s heroine met these representatives of a dying ideology, intelligent middle-class poets of exotica, drop-outs and artists, young drug-takers who were nostalgic of the ‘beauty of life’ and ‘culture’ dying out.³³⁶ In these circumstances, Boduhin surmised, it was understandable how groups became mixed, because authorities placed in prisons and camps with equal zeal ‘thieves’ (*vory*), and ‘raiders’ alongside ‘less heroic’ currency dealers, murderers, burglars and ‘cowardly’ speculators with businessmen, cocaine addicts and brothel keepers. Every day, at parties, in prison, compulsory street-cleaning, and at ‘work’ in *Khitrovka*, Boduhin’s heroine encountered these different individuals. While they used different

³³⁵ Boduhin, ‘Shtrih na Hodu’, *Solovetskie Ostrova*, No.6, June 1925, pp.41-45.

³³⁶ Boduhin, ‘Shtrih na Hodu’, *Solovetskie Ostrova*, No.6, June 1925, pp.41-45.

methods and their accents and clothes were different, the goal was the same, to irritate *legavyy* and, according to the author, ensure that both they and their sympathizers remained hated.

While the article also reflected the traditional criminal norm of defiance against authority, it was no accident that Boduhin chose a prostitute as his 'heroine'. For early Soviet criminologists prostitution provided the most visible and public link between crime and female sexuality and represented the persistence of the old way of life and an element of bourgeois capitalism which appeared to be thriving under NEP.³³⁷ The only notable references to female criminality found in pages of the camp press were to prostitutes or prostitution. This is equally replicated by memoir accounts which described how groups of more than five hundred female prisoners arrived on Solovki, many taken directly from the street while walking to or from work, or trips to the cinema, under the unofficial charge of 'secret prostitution'.³³⁸ Malsagoff claimed that three quarters of the six hundred female prisoners quartered inside the 'Women's Building' of the main kremlin were wives, mistresses or accomplices of the common criminals and had been transported to Solovki (while some were sent to the Narym region in Kazakhstan) for persistent prostitution.³³⁹ Aside from these extra-legal procedures, the Bolsheviks decided against issuing any new laws to regulate, legalise or outlaw prostitution, instead focussing on brothel keepers, who bore the brunt of legal repression as a capitalist exploiter, enemy of socialism, the cause of continued persistence of old patterns of behaviour and the source of social depravity.³⁴⁰

³³⁷ Sharon Kowalsky describes how the relationship between prostitution and the criminal underworld had been established in Russia and Europe before the 1917 revolution. Kowalsky also discussing criminologists views regarding the connection between female criminality and prostitution in the early years of Soviet rule: Kowalsky, *Deviant Women*, pp.107-114. Pallott and Katz have further suggested that there is often an air of romanticism present in contemporary accounts of prostitution which compares them to Dostoevskii's Sonia Marmeladova: Pallot & Katz, "From Femme Normale to Femme Criminale in Russia", pp.114-5. For further accounts of prostitution during this period: Elizabeth Waters, "Victim or Villain; prostitution in post-revolutionary Russia", *Women and Society in Russia and the Soviet Union*, pp.160-177; Elizabeth Wood, "Prostitution Unbound: Representations of Sexual and Political Anxieties in Postrevolutionary Russia", *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture*, pp.124-138. For brief comments on how prostitution related to early Soviet penal institutions: Veronica Shapovalov, (ed.), *Remembering the Darkness: Women in Soviet Prisons* (Oxford, 2001), p.3.

³³⁸ Robson, *Solovki*, p.219.

³³⁹ Malsagoff also recalled the spread of syphilis and how security personnel had three to five concubines, with all female prisoners divided by the authorities into three informal categories, 'a rouble woman (roublevaya), a half-rouble woman (polinitchnaya) and a fifteenth kopek woman (piatialynnaya)': S. A. Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, pp.132-138.

³⁴⁰ Kowalsky, *Deviant Women*, p.111.

Other than the examples cited, fleeting references to criminal subculture appeared only in the literary sections, in poetry or personal biographies in which the prisoner renounced their former ways. Toward the end of the 1920s, publications were increasingly being controlled by smaller groups of prisoners and camp staff.³⁴¹ This was demonstrated by a complaint which appeared in one 1930 edition of *Novye Solovki* by Alexei Chekmazov, a former Don Cossack who turned to gangsterism during the Civil War.³⁴² Chekmazov opened with an apparent quote from Lenin ('large organisation in life, large life in organisation') and signed his complaint not just from himself but also the 'collective' (*ot kollektiva*). The letter passionately argued that the writings of a small group had resulted in the 'masses' becoming distorted. Chekmazov claimed that in each article a thousand words were written, of which nine hundred and ninety nine were variations of the term *svoi*. According to the author, these articles were all written under aliases and pseudonyms by a group of just five or six literary professionals. Chekmazov concluded his letter by stating 'if you know so much about society....we are not aliens to this, admit us to the pages of the Solovetskii press!'³⁴³

Chekmazov would later be celebrated as a 'reforged' prisoner and a regular contributor to the Belomor camp journal *Perekovka*. His biography shows how the proximity of SLON to the White Sea-Baltic Canal project, alongside the Gulag's use to transport labour to the next construction site, meant that thousands of prisoners were transferred to the administration of the 227 kilometer long canal.³⁴⁴ Effectively the editorial system of Solovki press ceased to exist, merging with the Belomor press and printing its final journal in May 1930. By this time, however, the press had lost its cultural orientation, marking the end of voluntary co-operation by its contributors. During the next stage, *pechat' velikikh stroyek kommunizma* (great construction projects of communism) newspapers and journals became jubilant celebratory publications of socialism in general, and the individual camp or prison in particular. A 1931 contest to find the best prison newspaper showed that 46% of articles were dedicated to the Five Year Plan while articles regarding life and Cultural Revolution took up

³⁴¹ Gorceva, *Pressa Gulaga*, p.35.

³⁴² Gullotta, 'Cultural Village', p.24.

³⁴³ *Novoye Solovki*, No.30, 1930, p.3.

³⁴⁴ Nick Baron suggests that over its full period of construction (twenty one months) the project had an average of 143,000 prisoners and 25,025 deaths: Baron, *Soviet Karelia*, p.133-4. For more detailed accounts of the canal project: Ruder, *Making History for Stalin*; Draskoczy, *Belomor*.

40%. The remaining percentage concerned the international and domestic policy of the USSR, the struggle against class enemies, collectivization and the mobilization of funds for prisoners.³⁴⁵

Newspapers from labour sites such as the White Sea-Baltic and Moscow-Volga Canals now reported the selfless labour of prisoners and their happy lives (alongside sweeping panoramas of the construction project). The camp journal from Belomor, *Perekovka*, contained little trace of criminal subculture in its pages, reducing the same groups of prisoners which had been discussed at length in earlier journals to brief portraits in reforged stories or prisoner poetry.³⁴⁶ This emphasis on labour and construction continued in the main camp journal from BAMlag³⁴⁷, *Stroitel' Bama* ('Builder of the BAM'), which regularly reached a print run of 10,000 copies.³⁴⁸ Prisoners were no longer referred to as inmates, but as 'railroad soldiers' noted for their 'zeal and heroism'. This feature, which culminated in the Stakhanovite movement in the mid to late 1930s³⁴⁹, continued in publications such as the Karlag journal *Putyovka* ('path', similar to the title of Ekk's *Putyovka v Zhizn*) which focused heavily on labour production. Journals now presented large numbers of statistics concerning planned targets, norms and fulfilment at camp, section and brigade level. Information about how work was organised was described at length alongside such diverse subjects as spring sowing during camp *sovkhozy*, investigations into camp library use, information about sluice works, and methods to tend tomato plants in winter.³⁵⁰ Although some newspapers still included complaints from prisoners regarding conditions and references to wrongs in work organisation and personal abuses, the *lagkory* (*lagernye korrespondenty*, camp correspondent) were now writing according to official policy. Journals like *Putyovka* and *Stroitel' Bama* provide typical examples of the third stage, *lagernaya pressa*, which were for an internal audience only.³⁵¹

³⁴⁵ Gorceva, *Pressa Gulaga*, pp.35-36.

³⁴⁶ Based on several issues of *Perekovka: The GULAG Press, 1920-1937*.

³⁴⁷ Part of a series of camps linked to the building of the Moscow-Volga Canal: Bell, "One Day in the Life of Educator Khrushchev", p.296.

³⁴⁸ *Stroitel' Bama* peaked at a print run of 20,000 copies: Bell, 'One Day in the life of Educator Khrushchev', p.297-98.

³⁴⁹ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, pp.207-14; Leonid Borodkin & Simon Ertz, 'Coercion vs Motivation', *Economics of Forced Labour*, p.91.

³⁵⁰ Leo van Rossum, *The GULAG Press, 1920-1937*.

³⁵¹ Steven Barnes notes that every issue of Karlag journal *Putyovka* carried the phrase 'circulation outside of the camp is not allowed' across its front page: Barnes, *Death and Redemption*. p.62.

Although the emergence of *lagernaya pressa* saw an end to the liberal approach of the 1920s, some interesting conclusions can be drawn from the early camp journals. Solovki has often been noted for its exceptionalism, yet dialogue regarding criminality displayed within the pages of its press contains similarities to those expressed outside the archipelago by organisations like the Moscow Bureau.³⁵² These criminological approaches were to be overtaken by police practices of the late 1930s, yet articles from camp journals and newspapers show how features such as ‘hierarchies of crime’ also impacted on life inside the camps. An exchange of information between Solovki and the mainland can also be seen in the reproduction of articles from *Sud Idet* and the circulation of journals and Glubokovskii’s work as far away as Kharkov. Targeting readers outside the camps appears to have given editors further impulse to include articles which might appeal to a wider audience. This can be seen in one example of *Golos Zakliuchenogo* which was available for fifteen kopecks or the ‘price of a single room in Gomel’ (i.e. incarceration). The journal, which includes a number of paid advertisers, features an article on ‘Tyuremnaya Matershchina’ (Prison Bad Language), blaming the problem on *shpana* and other ‘permanent residents’.³⁵³ This was also demonstrated by Utomskii’s article from the Vyatlag journal contains an almost identical discussion of criminal prisoners to those found in the Solovki press. This phenomenon is even more apparent in examples where references to criminal subculture *cannot* be found, which are all directed internally. Another important point to note is that, even in *Solovetsky Ostrova*, where discussion of criminal prisoners was markedly more prominent than in other journals, this changed over time. Aside from the advert publicising Glubokovskii’s book, there is little reference to criminal subculture during the whole of 1926 until the contributions of the criminological department (*Krimkab*) following the rebranding of the press in 1929.³⁵⁴

³⁵² Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Atreil (Chicago, 2005). The view of Solovki as being ‘exceptional’ in regards to its conception and operation, along with its cultural life, is evident in the majority of secondary literature on the camp (Gullota, Robson, Applebaum). Fischer von Weikerstahl demonstrates, however, that although Solovki was not bound to the reformatory penal system it engaged into the discourse regarding re-education through its newspaper organs: Fischer von Weikerstahl ‘The OGPU, Re-education and the Solovki Press’. Similarities in prisoner composition and discussions of criminality from locations such as Vyatlag and Gomel would further support this argument.

³⁵³ *Golos Zaklyuchennogo* (Gomel), April-June, (1925), p.9.

³⁵⁴ Although this period covers just one year, given that the press was suspended at the end of 1927, there were seven editions of *Solovetskie Ostrova* published during this time, none of which contain more than minor references to criminal prisoners.

Moreover, references to criminal subculture in the pages of the press further demonstrate that organisation of daily life for many inmates continued to revolve around adherence to an unwritten code which governed their behavioural norms and customs. Although early camp journals demonstrate some hostility towards *frayera*, reminiscent of the familiar political prisoner/common criminal divide found in Gulag memoirs, it is clear that this was often of secondary importance to the main tenets of the code which stipulated hostility toward institutional structures (*legavyi*) and informants (*stukach*). The early stages of incarceration were important moments for all inmates in terms of *prisonization* (assimilation in the penal environment). Some inmates, however, used the journey through the penal arc to send important signals both to their immediate social group and throughout the rest of prisoner society. As noted by many memoirists, this would often begin during the process of *etap* (transportation).

Unfortunately, I have been unable to locate copies of *Karelo-Murmanskii Krai* which housed the Solovki press during its sabbatical and may provide further insight.

Chapter 3

Etap, Socialisation and the Prisoner Code

The crash of the broken wall deafened the panic-stricken crowd of women at the ladder. Through the newly made gap with jagged metal edges, bare-chested men in dark, wide pants in short boots, with turbans made of dirty towels, rushed into the hold. Their backs glittered with sweat and were covered with tattoos.....³⁵⁵

Elena Glinka, *The Hold*³⁵⁵

This description of prisoner transportation to Kolyma in May 1951 by Elena Glinka remains one of the most harrowing found in the entire canon of Gulag memoirs. Replicated by other former prisoners, including Elinor Lipper, incidents of sexual violence during prisoner transportation became so widespread that slang terms like ‘in chorus’ and ‘on the tram’ gained popular currency in prisoner slang and camp folklore.³⁵⁶ Transportation to remote Gulag sites was built on the propensity to dispatch ‘harmful elements’ to the periphery and largely continued the late Imperial system of exile and *katorga*. Prisoners travelled by wagons, trains, ships, and some even completed their journeys by foot.³⁵⁷ Even memoirists who did not recount incidents of sexual assault almost unanimously described conditions as being particularly brutal, regularly citing problems such as insanitary conditions and over-crowding.³⁵⁸ Although the overall system was mobile, larger labour camps formed part of a more complete network which had a degree of permanence. As Viola has shown, human suffering during *etap* was just as bad, if not worse, during transfer to special settlements, which were often no more than pencil points on a map with ‘little pretension to reality’.³⁵⁹

As in the nineteenth century, prisoner transport fulfilled a number of roles. Alongside its use to indicate the process of prisoner transportation, the word *etap* contains a second meaning as ‘stage

³⁵⁵ Elena Glinka, ‘The Hold’, Veronica Shapovalov (ed.), *Remembering the Darkness: Women in Soviet Prisons*, p.301-310

³⁵⁶ Elena Lipper, ‘The God that Failed in Siberia’, A. Critchlow & D. T. Critchlow (eds.), *Enemies of the State: Personal Stories from the Gulag*, pp.17-41.

³⁵⁷ Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss*, p.17.

³⁵⁸ For similar problems found during in late Imperial era prisoner transportation: Alan Wood (ed.), *The History of Siberia: From Russian Conquest to Revolution*, p.119.

³⁵⁹ Viola, *The Unknown Gulag*, pp.73-88.

or phase'. According to Pallot, Piacentini and Moran, this indicates its secondary use for what Gresham Sykes refers to as a standard degradation routine (including guards, dogs, night-time journeys with little warning, illogical routes etc.).³⁶⁰ As a result of these disciplining sensibilities developed on route, prisoners had little time to construct and sustain individual agency.

Transportation acted, therefore, as an important physical and geographical break with prisoners' former lives, acting as a coercive power by inscribing inmates with historical and culturally specific markers.³⁶¹ This process of *etap* has regularly been treated separately from life in the Gulag, often considered as a distinct stage of its own. This chapter, however, will demonstrate its function as part of the overall process of socialisation (or re-socialisation) which began during arrest and interrogation and continued upon arrival in the camps.

Alongside its use to discipline the mobile subject, the process of transportation is also notable for marking the point at which portraits of recidivist criminals are often introduced by memoirists. These initial accounts are important for demonstrating the most extreme examples of disgust and contempt, yet they are also notable for displaying the beginnings of behavioural norms and rituals which would regulate daily life in the camps. They show how prisoners with experience of incarceration internalised transportation differently, using the lack of surveillance as an opportunity to gain hegemony over other inmates. Although the interpretation of this process for memoirists was radically different, these early meetings were often crucial in helping to expand their survival skills.³⁶² Using the inscribed geography of the penal arc helps demonstrate their introduction into the folkways and customs of camp life. Criminal gangs described in these accounts were often small and ephemeral, regularly occupying the most comfortable places during transportation and their own sections in the *lagpunkt*.³⁶³ This chapter will, therefore, discuss the formation of group structures and look at the process of initiation and socialisation. It will also show how adherence to the prisoner code

³⁶⁰ Pallot, Piacentini w/ Moran, *Gender, Geography and Punishment*, p.146.

³⁶¹ Pallot, Piacentini w/ Moran, *Gender, Geography and Punishment*, pp.139-157.

³⁶²³⁶² Clemmer also notes the importance of the relationships between new prisoners and cell mates: Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, pp.100-107.

³⁶³ 'Criminal gangs', in this context, is understood by Donald Clemmer's definition of 'primary prisoner groups'. Clemmer describes these groups as 'a collectively of prisoners who possess a common body of knowledge and interest sufficient to produce an understanding and solidarity which is characterised by a we-feeling, sentimental attachment, and unanimity, and which, at the same time, allows elements of competition and resistance among members only to the extent that cohesion is not interrupted': Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, p.115.

which regulated daily life in the camp helped to define the relationship between prisoners of all backgrounds.

Etap

Some initial encounters with the criminal underworld began before the lengthy journey to camps and colonies. Shortly after his arrest on the Belarusian front in 1941, Janusz Bardach encountered a group of recidivists at a remand prison near Gomel. Recalling the hot air blasting his face and the smell of sweat and urine stinging his nose, Bardach described a mass of half-naked men sprawling across the floors and bed boards, sleeping, smoking, talking and playing cards. Desperate for information on what was happening at the front, Bardach speculated that they were a bunch of ‘small town hoodlums’ and not hardened thieves as they would have liked everyone to think. Regardless of their apparently lowly status, they were quick to let the new arrivals know who was in charge, with one tattooed figure on the upper bunks eyeing up Bardach’s boots. With space in the cell at a premium, Bardach eventually found a spot to sit near to the latrine barrel where he was soon confronted by a young criminal:

‘Bet you’d like one like this.’ He pulled his penis out of his pants and held it in both hands, pointing it toward me. ‘Take a good look. You’re gonna suck a lot of em’” He jutted his broken front teeth and pointy chin into the air and laughed. His matted black hair fell over his forehead, partially obscuring his large black eyes. I kept my head down and hugged my knees to my chest. He squatted and peered at my face. ‘You look at me when I piss, but don’t open your mouth or I’ll piss in it.’ He let out a high-pitched snort and looked at his friends back on the bed board. I tried to ignore him but was growing tenser by the moment, afraid of what I might do if he hit or touched me.’³⁶⁴

The violent sexually imagery in this message is important in that it demonstrates an example of how verbal techniques used to intimidate prisoners into playing ‘victim roles’ which will be explored in subsequent chapters. As his journey continued, Bardach witnessed gang rape on board a

³⁶⁴ Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man*, pp.93-95.

transport ship to Magadan, recalling how a group of prisoners broke through a hole in the iron grille into the women's hold. After sexually assaulting convicts of both gender, the guards eventually responded by blasting the hold with water. Although several dead and injured female prisoners were removed after the attack, no one received a formal reprimand for the incident.³⁶⁵ Bardach's account confirms reports from the same period yet the traumatic experience of *etap* was recognised as early as the 1920s.³⁶⁶ This is apparent in Glubokovskii's 49 which described how 'no-one could have foreseen how vicious and violent life could throw at you while crossing the waters in the bowels of the *Gleb Bokii* bound for Solovki.'³⁶⁷ The *Gleb Bokii* was most famously used to ferry Maxim Gorkii and the other members of the Writers Brigade to the camp but also provided the main method to transport prisoners from the transit point at Kem'. Another Solovki memoirist, E. I. Solovieff, recalled how, after separating them from male inmates, guards forced female prisoners to drink vodka before sexually assaulting them during the crossing.³⁶⁸

Another article from the February/March 1930 edition of *Solovetskie Ostrova* also revealed an insight into the behaviour of prisoners during *etap*.³⁶⁹ Written by an inmate identifying themselves only as I. K, this was one of a handful of articles which described female prisoners at length (other than as 'prostitutes'). Recalling the excitement of male prisoners catching a glimpse of them at the transfer point. I. K described the problems prisoners protecting their luggage as they crossed, recalling how he moved forward hesitantly with his possessions into the depths of the waiting room, through a crowd of 'curious criminals'. His indecisiveness provoked a lively response from the crowd who responded with fervour, rubbing their hands and forming two rows, passing him through the middle, accompanied by unflattering remarks. The author noted how every prisoner suffered the same fate in passing through this 'gate of *shpana*' ('*vorota shpana*'). Further describing the helplessness of this situation, I. K. suggested that no-one seemed prepared or could understand what was happening,

³⁶⁵ Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man*, pp.191-194.

³⁶⁶ Elena Glinka, 'The Hold', Veronica Shapovalov (ed.), *Remembering the Darkness: Women in Soviet Prisons*, p.301-310; Elena Lipper, 'The God that Failed in Siberia', A. Critchlow & D. T. Critchlow (eds.), *Enemies of the State: Personal Stories from the Gulag*, pp.17-41.

³⁶⁷ Glubokovskii, 49, p.4.

³⁶⁸ Solovieff, *School for Tchekists*, p.12.

³⁶⁹ I.K "Na Etape: Otryvok iz Vospominaniy" *Solovetskie Ostrova*, Nos.2-3, February/March, 1930, pp.13-19.

hastily adjusting their things and speeding up through the crowd which only worsened matters and provoked more attacks.³⁷⁰ In this situation, the author suggested, physically imposing prisoners could be effective in warding off potential attackers, and that spontaneous groups would quickly form to protect possessions and find courage from the more ‘athletic types’ among them. This helped to provide a form of protection as *shpana*, who surrounded them in a semi-circle two feet away, would estimating their power of resistance before stepping aside while continuing to exchange verbal insults with their former targets.³⁷¹



Fig. 8 – ‘Na Etape: Otryvok iz Vospominaniy’ from the Febraury/March 1930 edition of *Solovetskie Ostrova*.

Even when incidents of sexual violence did not take place, it is clear that even the threat presented a persistent problem for authorities. Michael Solomon recalled how, during his journey on board a ship to Magadan in 1949, guards intervened to prevent a group of prisoners pushing through

³⁷⁰ I.K. ‘Na Etape: Otryvok iz Vospominaniy’ *Solovetskie Ostrova*, Nos.2-3, February/March, 1930, pp.13-19.

³⁷¹ I.K., ‘Na Etape: Otryvok iz Vospominaniy’, *Solovetskie Ostrova*, Nos.2-3, February/March, 1930, pp.13-19.

the rust-weakened bulkhead to enter the female hold, killing other inmates in the process.³⁷² Experiences such as these continued to have a huge psychological effect on prisoners even if they were not on board that particular voyage. Ginzburg described her own journey to Magadan in the late 1930s as ‘uneventful’, yet recalled how a fellow prisoner who travelled two weeks later informed her that a fire had broken out and several male prisoners who tried to break loose were hosed down and contained in a corner of the hold. Leaving the hoses on, authorities forgot about the prisoners before the ship was permeated by the smell of burning flesh.³⁷³ Reports confirmed that, on the 30th August 1939, *Dzhurma* entered Nagaev Harbour with the fire still burning, accompanied by the flagship of the NKVD Gulag fleet *Felix Dzerzhinsky*.³⁷⁴

Ginzburg also recalled her first meeting with female recidivists during transportation to Magadan. With seemingly no room left in the hold, through the hatchway poured a ‘mongrel horde’ of a few hundred prisoners whose tattooed, half-naked bodies and grimacing apelike faces demonstrated ‘the dregs of the criminal world: murderers, sadists, and experts at all kind of sexual perversion’.³⁷⁵ Stating that the proper place for them was a psychiatric ward and not a prison or camp, Ginzburg was convinced that she had been abandoned to a crowd of raving lunatics, recalling how the air reverberated to their shrieks, obscenities and howls of laughter:

‘Within five minutes we had a thorough introduction to the law of the jungle. They seized our bits of bread, snatched the last rags out of our bundles, and pushed us out of our places. Some of us sobbed and panicked, others tried to reason with the girls or to call the guards. They might as well have saved their breath. Throughout the voyage we did not see a single representative of authority other than the sailor who brought a cartload of bread to the mouth of the hold and threw our “rations” down to us as one throws food to a cageful of wild beasts.’³⁷⁶

Images of criminal prisoners during *etap* which saw them located symbolically outside of the boundaries of civilisation could also be found in other memoirs. Karlo Stanjer recalled his transfer

³⁷² Solomon, *Magadan*, pp.87-88.

³⁷³ Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, pp.353-356.

³⁷⁴ Bollinger, *Stalin's Slave Ships*, p.61.

³⁷⁵ Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, pp.353-356.

³⁷⁶ Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, pp.353-356.

from Solovki to Dudlinka on board the *Budyonny* in August 1939. Carrying more than 4,000 prisoners, the latrine barrels were not be emptied for over three days and began to overflow leaving an horrific stench until the prisoners were allowed to empty them into the sea. As the ship docked in Murmansk, a new 'plague' descended upon the already overcrowded ship as a further three hundred prisoners boarded. Many of the prisoners were apathetic or too sick to put up a fight, and at a further disadvantage as the newly arrived convicts had fashioned themselves knives. Despite the apathy toward events from the guards outside the hold, growing resistance from other and a lack of goods to steal meant that the attack ceased. It transpired that some experienced burglars amongst the group had discovered a storage room underneath the wooden floor and, after breaking through with iron bars, they climbed down helped themselves to milk, cookies and chocolate for the rest of the journey.³⁷⁷

It is also evident that the hegemony of certain groups continued on other forms of transportation. Solzhenitsyn also introduced criminal recidivists through the experience of *etap* in his chapter 'The Ships of the Archipelago'. Stating how the infamous Stolypin Wagons were 'menagerie(s) capable of housing over twenty prisoners', Solzhenitsyn recalled that the middle bunks and upper baggage shelves were either won by fighting or inhabited by criminals. For Solzhenitsyn, the authorities did not deliberately mix groups of prisoners but the shortage of transportation methods meant that this sometimes happened regardless, comparing the experience to Christ being crucified between thieves.³⁷⁸ Buber-Neumann's recollections of a Peresylny Wagon (a fixed railway carriage without wheels) from the central Butirka prison to the train station during her transfer to Karaganda in 1939 recalled how the air was punctuated with smell of petroleum, tobacco and sweaty bodies as men and women were transported together. During the journey, in which the two sexes unchanged dialogue through the wire, Buber-Neumann was also informed by a fellow prisoner, Nadia, to not introduce herself as a 'political' prisoner but instead as a prostitute or thief. This identity as a prostitute or thief demonstrates both an important distinction between male and female prisoner

³⁷⁷ Stanjer, *Seven Thousand Days in Siberia*, pp.62-65.

³⁷⁸ Solzhenitsyn, *Arhipelag GULaga* Vol.1, p.489-529.

hierarchies, and how prisoners were able to manoeuvre through this by ascribing themselves with different identities.³⁷⁹

Arrival

Alongside the dislocation felt during transportation, prisoners often describe the feeling of being ‘swallowed up’ as they enter their new environment. This feeling and loss of identity has been shown to be especially prevalent among persons who have no previous experience of criminality and have been involved in communities where anonymity does not exist.³⁸⁰ Arrival in the camps meant that inmates were typically subject to a count upon before being washed, shaved and dressed before being assigned their work duties. Descriptions of his dehumanising experience, often rendering prisoners to ‘bare life’, become some of the most powerful images of survivor memoirs.³⁸¹ Reports indicate, however, those with criminal experience were, at times, subject to different treatment upon arrival. This was more prevalent during the period of prisoner-on-prisoner violence known as the ‘Bitches War’ (1948-52), as observed by Dolgun after his cohort of inmates was greeted by a MVD Major shortly after their arrival at the Kuibyshev transit camp in 1949:

‘The major told everyone to stand up and form lines. People helped me up. He then called for silence. When he got it, he called out in a loud voice, ‘All *chestnyagi* step forward!’ From the two hundred people gathered in that dirty yard, perhaps thirty or forty men stepped forward. I do not think that there were any women, but I am not sure. I tried to figure out what the word *chestnyagi* meant. All that I could tell was that one of them had been in my cell, and that I had surmised from his manner and the tattoos on the backs of his arms that he might be a professional criminal and not a ‘fascist’ or political prisoner. Most of the men who had identified themselves as *chestnyagi* looked relatively healthy and their clothes were in good shape. The major nodded to a group of guards and the *chestnyagi* were led away. All right, I assumed professional criminals.’³⁸²

³⁷⁹ Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, p.59. Gustaw Herling’s first experience of criminal prisoners also came during transportation in a ‘Stolypin carriage’, although this will be discussed in a later chapter: Herling, *A World Apart*, pp.17-19.

³⁸⁰ Donald Clemmer’s description of *prisonization* indicates the taking on, in greater or less degree, the folkways, customs and general culture of the prison. Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, p.102, 299.

³⁸¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, 1998).

³⁸² Dolgun, *Alexander Dolgun’s Story*, pp.136-137.

In Dolgun's memoir, these two factions were *chestnyagi* ('unconverted') and *suki* ('bitches').³⁸³ During this period, it was suggested that prisoners could also be separated through identification of their tattoos. Mikhail Dyomin's semi-autobiographical novel recalls how guards in the Kharkov Central Distribution Prison separated prisoners into 'Roosters' (those who had tattoos) and 'Lobsters' (those who did not).³⁸⁴ As indicated by this division, camp authorities were well-aware of the caste system which had a long history in Russian penality.³⁸⁵ In late Imperial Russia, the highest rank was often occupied by *Ivans* and gained through their propensity to endure the often brutal forms of corporate punishment.³⁸⁶ Doroshevich stated that a prisoner could only become an *Ivan* after receiving 2,000 lashes of the three tailed *plet'* and, even then, the retention of this status depended on their ability to torment other prisoners. The journalist's account of Sakhalin identified a further three categories including 'snorters' (*khrapy*), a second tier group who thrived off creating problems for the authorities³⁸⁷ and 'throats' (*gloty*) who would often side with the highest bidder (creating disturbances, card disputes etc.).³⁸⁸ The terms *igrok* and *schuler* were reserved for card players, while prisoner 'merchants' were known as *asmadei* along with 'mothers' and 'fathers' (Tatar and Russian moneylenders).³⁸⁹ Finally, Doroshevich recalled how the term *shpanka* was used to refer to 'the herd' (the majority of inmates) while *zhigany* were inmates who had violated the prisoner code.³⁹⁰ Anton Olenik has added to this by stating that the most diverse group of pre-revolutionary prisoners were thieves (*vory*), who could be divided into more than twenty five sub-categories depending on criminal specialisation.³⁹¹

As the twentieth century progressed, several different criminal factions could be found within the 'coloured' (a term used to describe the overall mass of criminal prisoners).³⁹² Referred to in early

³⁸³ Dolgun, *Alexander Dolgun's Story*, p.147-8.

³⁸⁴ These names were taken from a popular brand of sweets, although the term 'Rooster' remains in use in contemporary Russian prisons to describe one category of 'suits': Dyomin, *The Day is Born of Darkness*, pp.13-14; Olenik, *Organized Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Societies*, p.65

³⁸⁵ Olenik, *Organised Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Societies*, p.64.

³⁸⁶ Andrew Gentes describes how *Ivans* were found among a core group of recidivist criminals known both inside/outside of prison as *brodiagi* (vagabonds). *Ivans* formed an important part of this group, although they were entirely products of the prison environment: Gentes, 'Beat the Devil!', p.215.

³⁸⁷ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.188.

³⁸⁸ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.215.

³⁸⁹ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.211.

³⁹⁰ Olenik, *Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Societies*, p.64.

³⁹¹ Olenik, *Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Societies*, p.64.

³⁹² Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.228.

camp journals as *svoi*, this mass of prisoners became known through survivor memoir as *urki* (although sometimes *vory*, *blatnye* or *chestnyagi*). Within this larger group, each individual gang contained their own hierarchical structure which included a leader (*pakhan*), deputies (*shestyorki*) and a group of more lowly-ranked members hoping for advancement through penal society (*shobla yobla*). Whether referred to as *urki*, *blatnye*, *vory* or *chestnyagi* this group was marked by their hostility toward *stukach* and/or *suki*.³⁹³ These internal hierarchies are demonstrated in the basic model below:

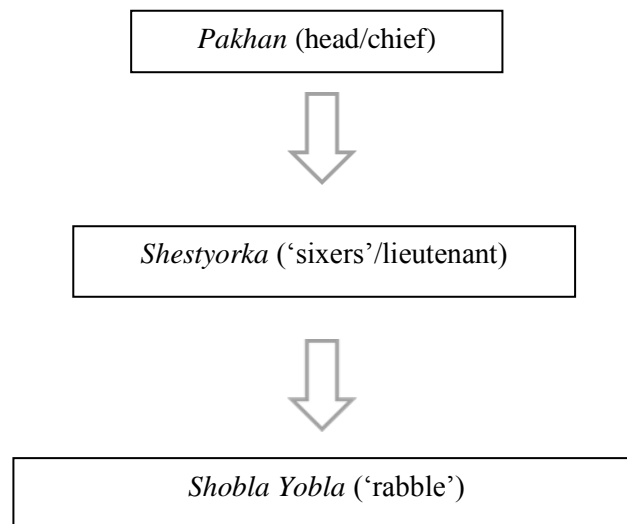


Fig. 9 – Internal hierarchies amongst *urki*.

The near-universal character of these internal hierarchies can be reconstructed using accounts from a number of memoirists, incarcerated in camps as far apart as present-day Kazakhstan and the farthest northern reaches of Siberia. These gangs were often aligned by factors such as pre-prison acquaintance and cultural similarities. Although the main divisions are usually defined as those between *vory* ('thieves') and *suki* ('bitches') there were a number of smaller factions (although some were linked to larger groups). This is confirmed by Solomon, who recalled how each group had its

³⁹³ Other prisoners who were suspected of colluding with authorities were also known as *kozli* (lit. goats): Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.334; Slade, *Reorganizing Crime*, p.14.

own ‘unwritten laws, its rituals, it’s kangaroo courts’³⁹⁴ and Shalamov, who clarified that coveted spots some were taken by gangs of professional criminals who were prominent only ‘at that moment’.³⁹⁵ Names of these groups included, ‘Thieves without Limits’ (*bespredel’nyy vori*), the *Makrovsty*, the *Uprovsty*, ‘Brewers’ (*pivovarovsty*), the ‘Red Cap Gang’ (*krasnaya shapochka*), who were alleged to have first appeared during the revolutionary period, and the ‘Crowbar-Belted’ (*lomom podpoyasannye*).³⁹⁶ These names display similarities to criminal gangs outside the camps, such those recorded in Larin’s article ‘Criminals in the Big City’ (see previous chapter).³⁹⁷

Janusz Bardach managed to get close enough to describe an ‘established hierarchy’ which would stay close to one another, eating together, playing cards and telling jokes. Soon after he arrived in Sverdlovsk transit prison, Bardach was given *paika*, and a spot to sit by the leader of the group, a *pakhan* named Riaboj (Pockmarked).³⁹⁸ Alexander Dolgun also encountered a *pakhan* shortly after arriving in his cell in the Kubyshev transit prison in 1949. Almost immediately, Dolgun was confronted by a number of lowly-ranked prisoners trying to steal his clothes. This impromptu brawl, however, was broken up by a man who spoke with ‘great authority’ from the back of the room. Immediately, the attack ceased, and a prisoner informed the memoirist that ‘the *pakhan* calls you. You better go see him’. Recalling how he was then led to the back of the room, Dolgun gave a brief description of the *pakhan*:

Pakhan is underworld slang for ‘‘the chief’’. In rank and authority, this guy has the status of a robber king. In the mafia he would be like a godfather, but I do not want to use that word because there is a godfather in the labour camps and that is an entirely different thing. Besides a pakhan can arise anywhere and does not have to be linked to a particular family. He is a man widely respected in the underworld for his skill and experience and authority. To meet such a distinguished, high-class urka is a very rare event.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁴ Solomon, *Magadan*, p.137.

³⁹⁵ Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, p.159.

³⁹⁶ Rossi. *The Gulag Handbook*, p.181, 229, 305, 470; Solomon, *Magadan*, p.137.

³⁹⁷ Larin, ‘Prestupnini Bolshogo Goroda’, pp.14-22.

³⁹⁸ Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man*, p.151.

³⁹⁹ Dolgun, *Alexander Dolgun’s Story*, p.140.

Dolgun's reference to the mafia, in particular to a godfather, suggests that he was referring to a leader of a group of *vory-v-zakone* (thieves-in-law). The timing of Dolgun's incarceration, in the late 1940s, would further support this. Although leaders of both groups could carry the same name, this merely identified them as the most senior figure. Therefore, Dolgun's statement confirms clear differences between *vory* and more rudimentary gangs.⁴⁰⁰ Another important observation in his brief assessment is that a *pakhan* 'could arise anywhere' which resonates clearly with both the youth gangs discussed in chapter 1 and Donald Clemmer's discussion of leadership phenomenon.⁴⁰¹ In most cases the *pakhan* was described as being physically imposing, yet they were not always tattooed. In Dolgun's example, the *pakhan* in question was a bank-robber named *Valentin Intelligent* ('Valentine the Intelligent'), with whom Dolgun would become closely acquainted.⁴⁰² Soon after their initial conversation, Dolgun was introduced to Valentin's deputy *Sashka Kozyr* ('Sashka the Trump'). Sashka's role as deputy was to provide confidential reports to Valentin about the movement of people and goods, intelligence about developments in the camp, or disputes regarding the division of spoil for the *pakhan* to pass judgement on. The rank directly below Sashka was another subordinate known as *shestyorka* ('sixers') whose name derived from the lowest card in a standard Russian thirty six card deck. This category is regularly described in prisoner memoirs and dictionaries of camp slang along the lines of a 'lieutenant/lackey'. Like more senior figures, *shestyorka* also refused to work.⁴⁰³ This role was further explained by Victor Herman, after he awoke for the first time in a new cell during his incarceration at a camp near Gorkii:

'Some men slept, some walked around or sat in groups talking or laughing, and one group was playing cards, another feature I was to find typical of criminal prisoners. Cards were also central to their central order, such as it was-not only was it their favourite pastime-a pastime I would see pursued for human stakes-a nose, ears, an arm, a life-but it was also the basis of ranking among them. Based on the Russian deck of thirty-six cards, the sixes, the Shesterki, were the lowest, the servants, and they were graded up to the sevens and the eights, for example, they being the Vosymerki....'⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰⁰ At different times leaders could be referred to as *ataman*, 'chief' and other common words with no specific connotation such as *vozhak* ('leader') or *golova* ('head'): Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, pp. 80, 294.

⁴⁰¹ See Donald Clemmer's discussion of 'leadership phenomena': Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, pp.134-148.

⁴⁰² Despite having similar origins to klichki discussed in chapter one, Valentine's nickname displays a difference from those found amongst mafia groups which forbid boasting: Gambetta, *Codes of the Underworld*, p.230; Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, pp.192-201.

⁴⁰³ Slade, *Reorganizing Crime*, p.14.

⁴⁰⁴ Herman, *Coming Out of the Ice*, p.190.

Although Herman recalled *shestyorka* as the lowest rank, other memoirists, including Dolgun, describe a further group known as *shobla yobla* ('rabble'). This term appears to have similar etymology to *shpana* (indigenous prison population) and describes the flotsam of criminal society who included various specialities such as pickpocketing, alongside other terms such as *shakal* (jackal) for scavengers or *ogni* ('hotheads').⁴⁰⁵ These rankings were by no means fixed, however, and mobility was possible. Dolgun recalled a man in the bed next to him (referred to as 'Baron Laszlo') as 'semi-coloured', clarifying that this was a term given to a political prisoner who had picked up the ways of the *urki* and was treated in this manner by both other prisoners and Gulag authorities.⁴⁰⁶ Similarly, Bardach's brigadier in Kolyma was a former manager and financial officer for a large company arrested for embezzling millions of roubles whose apparent inclination for criminal activity led to a transformation into a respected *urka*, complete with tattoos and 'obscene language'.⁴⁰⁷

Division of camps into separate 'zones' (although not always enforced), means that the construction of female hierarchies requires a much more detailed explanation than provided herein. While late Imperial accounts show there was no equivalent to the origins of the male caste system⁴⁰⁸ it would appear that female prisoner society was also constructed 'informally' with length of sentence and multiple sentences among the main enhancers of status. One main difference between male and female hierarchies appears to be the role of prostitution (discussed in the following chapter). Ginzburg recalled that while there were less 'real criminals' in her ward at the Magadan Camp Infirmary, the atmosphere put them in a sentimental mood and at nights they would tell 'life stories' in a similar the same style to those described by male memoirists. These stories included claims that their father was a judge or general, and tales of romance and crime. Often prisoners from an educated background were called upon 'tell them the story of some book or other' or recite poetry.⁴⁰⁹ Buber-Neumann, who in general drew little distinction between the sexes, described one particular female prisoner in the

⁴⁰⁵ Gustaw Herling describes short-term prisoners as 'bytoviks' who were distinguished from hardened criminals and could only become an *urka* by serving several terms: Herling, *A World Apart*, p11; Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.228-9.

⁴⁰⁶ Dolgun, *Alexander Dolgun's Story*, p.156.

⁴⁰⁷ Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man*, p.203.

⁴⁰⁸ Pallot, Piacentini w/ Moran, *Gender, Geography & Punishment*, pp.206-207.

⁴⁰⁹ Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, pp.36-37.

punishment compound in Karaganda. Recalling the hut as a ‘hubbub of chatter’ with women singing in drunken voices, Buber-Neumann noted that Raiza seemed to be the *prima donna* and her needs were attended to by other prisoners.⁴¹⁰ This suggests how, unlike their male counterparts, female prisoner hierarchy was shaped more by dominant individuals rather than group formations.

Initiation

Initiation rituals have been shown to play an important role in the introduction of adolescents and inexperienced prisoners into penal society.⁴¹¹ In his study of a prison in Poland during late communism, Marek Kaminski describes how ‘games’ involving riddles, jokes, tests and beatings were rationally motivated and designed to acclimatise newcomers to prison society, verify recidivists’ and transferees’ previously attained statuses, and help assign all prisoners to separate castes.⁴¹² In late Imperial penal society camp slang to trick or deceive another prisoner was known as *boroda* (beard) which originated from the popular expression ‘to hang a beard’.⁴¹³ This manifest itself through a variety of tests used to trick new inmates into accumulating debts with more experienced prisoners. This could sometimes result in prison ‘marriages’, complete with elaborate ceremonies, in which new arrivals would ‘switch places’ with convicts sentenced to longer terms and even included the transformation of their physical features.⁴¹⁴

One further initiation ritual involved a ‘manufactured’ altercation over a handkerchief worn by an individual known as ‘Uncle Sarai’ (referred to by Doroshevich as a simple or ‘gullible’ prisoner). As bets were taken to the denomination of a coin hanging on the end of the handkerchief, it was quickly changed from the original one kopeck piece to a twenty. In these games, novices were often aware that they had been tricked, yet other prisoners would threaten or beat the money out of

⁴¹⁰Margarete Buber-Neumann also recalled a sack hung in front of the door and her astonishment at the nonchalance in which male prisoners of the ‘criminal type’ went in and out of the hut, speculating that relations must have been good with the guards. Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, p.122.

⁴¹¹Kaminski, *Games Prisoners Play*, p.38.

⁴¹²Gentes, ‘Beat the Devil!’, p.212.

⁴¹³This is also described by Vlas Doroshevich, who stated that the expression originated from robbing wealthy old believers by sticking their beard to the table with wax: Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.236 In criminal slang other variation of this included *vsuchit’* (‘to con’): Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.63.

⁴¹⁴The practice of ‘switching’ with other prisoners also continues to some extent in the Gulag, albeit with less frequency after the introduction of photo-cards: Bell, ‘Was the Gulag an Archipelago?’, pp.140-141.

them claiming ‘‘you played, you pay....’twas fair’’. One further scenario involved a cross being torn from one of the prisoners during another ‘altercation’. After bets had been taken as to whether the prisoner in question was ‘unbaptised’, with experienced prisoners encouraging new arrivals to wager money on the outcome, it transpired that the first individual had originally worn two crosses. Despite regular protestations, the same outcome would inevitably occur and payment would have to be made to settle the dispute.⁴¹⁵

Just as initiation rituals marked entry into Van’ka Kain’s organisation and youth gangs in the pre-revolutionary period, groups of *vory* also had their own specific induction ceremonies following the Second World War.⁴¹⁶ Despite this, there is no evidence of formal initiations in the wider mass of criminal prisoners can be found in the literary corpus of life in the camps which would corroborate the archival material consulted by Varese. As a result, a number of other theories can be tested to show the importance of these initiation rites. Sociologists have described how fighting can often take on ritualistic significance as a test of membership and group boundaries. This has proven to be especially prevalent in penal institutions, which tend to have unstable populations and high turnover rates with the oldest individuals moving on and, therefore, a guarantee of upward mobility.⁴¹⁷ The other important feature needed is a high ritual density, a strong sense of boundaries and key moral and symbolic differences between insiders/outsideers.⁴¹⁸ These features certainly correspond with prisoner composition in the Gulag and show how, unlike Bourdieu’s ‘symbolic violence’, physical violence has a core referent which can be studied using micro-social observations.

In his study of contemporary Russian penal institutions, Olenik recalls how daily conflicts are often referred to by the popular expression *bespredel* (‘without limits’). The lack of means for managing conflicts in the penal environment forces inmates to either engage in the spiral of violence or ‘close their eyes’ at the cost of potential marginalisation.⁴¹⁹ Situations of *bespredel* highlight the

⁴¹⁵ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.218.

⁴¹⁶ Membership in *Vory-v-Zakone* required elaborate initiation rituals used to ‘crown’ new members: Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, pp.147-150.

⁴¹⁷ Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory*, (Princeton, 2009) p.353.

⁴¹⁸ Collins, *Violence*, p.166-7.

⁴¹⁹ Olenik, *Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Societies*, p.102.

value of physical force between prisoners, virtually unimportant in most social situations. According to Olenik's study, the only rule respected in *bespredel* is 'might means right' and that over 60% of prisoners (taken from 41 interviews between 1996 and 2001⁴²⁰) would fight for their own safety rather than take alternative action.⁴²¹ Moreover, Olenik's study also demonstrates how highly the imperative to 'know how to defend yourself' is ranked in inmate *illicit* norms. This requires an inmate to know how to defend themselves both physically and mentally, and can be observed in the numerous examples of multiple Gulag memoirists upon arrival in new locations.⁴²² Victor Herman gained the respect of a high-ranking prisoner in a camp near Gorkii (Nizhny Novgorod). The criminal authority (described as *atoman*) confused Herman for an *urka*, or 'wolfblood', after watching him fight with several criminals who tried to assault him shortly after he was transferred into a new cell:

'Hey, fighter! I want to talk with you. It is the *Atoman* who wants you, fighter! Come here!

I turned around very slowly.

'You calling me?' I said.

'Yes. Please,' the man in the corner answered, smiling. 'You, fighter. Please!'

I walked over to him – and as I went I could tell the others had stopped what they were doing and were watching me as I went.

I stood under his berth, and he leaned himself around to address me confidently.

'Who are you?' he said. 'Are you a person? Are you an *Urka*?'

'I don't understand,' I said.

'An *Urka*, a person. Please, fighter, are you a *wolfblood*? Are you one of us'

Reminiscent of accounts from the Solovki press, Herman explained how the *atoman* divided the world between *urkas*, *wolf bloods*, 'real persons' and everyone else. Subsequently, Herman began to pick up criminal slang and was invited to join the *atoman* on his bunk, gaining extra food and bedding as he was called upon to protect him from any challenge to his authority.⁴²³ The *atoman* also introduced Herman to a further ritual which demonstrated group boundaries. This involved a clean white towel placed down at the entrance to the cell. This was understood as being for only *urkas* to step on, and used as a test for anyone else entering the cell. Without realising its purpose, Herman had carefully avoided the towel as he was transferred in and did not suffer the physical punishment which

⁴²⁰ Olenik, *Organized Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Societies*, p.41.

⁴²¹ Olenik, *Organized Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Societies*, p.103.

⁴²² Collins, *Violence*, p.24.

⁴²³ Herman, *Coming Out of the Ice*, p.190-3.

was applied to everyone who stepped on the towel unknowingly.⁴²⁴ Further use of physical force was described by Dolgun, who defended himself against three *shobla yobla* almost immediately after he arrived at the Kuibyshev transit prison. This was broken up by the *pakhan*, Valentin Intelligent, who ordered the lower-ranked prisoners to back down, stating ‘That man is a *dukharik!*’ which Dolgun explained was the word for ‘soul’ yet in this context meant the same as the English for ‘having guts’.⁴²⁵ It is important to note that, in these examples, both memoirists are male and a good level of physical fitness, particularly Herman, a former boxer and part of a parachute display team before his arrest. Nevertheless, it shows that the ability to defend themselves physical clearly became an important survival skill for many former prisoners.

While the use of physical force could play a primary role in situations of *bespredel*, it was not the only option available for prisoners. Another demonstration of survival skills can be seen through the use of ‘conversational devices’ of violence. As Stephenson has shown in her work on youth territorial groups (*patsany*), mastery of the skills of verbal manipulation can mean that physical violence is not *always* necessary.⁴²⁶ Ownership of the local territory is maintained by interactions which demonstrate who is in control of the situation, not always displayed by force alone, but measured by success at manoeuvring individuals into playing different roles.⁴²⁷ Memoir accounts demonstrate how mastery of these conversational devices represented an important part of avoiding physical violence. This is shown in Bardach’s altercation with a group of prisoners on board a ship transporting prisoners to Kolyma, in which he adopts criminal slang to convince his would-be assailants that he was not a ‘mama’s boy’.⁴²⁸ This also allowed some prisoners to come to the aid of others, demonstrated when Vladimir Petrov was spared from fighting over the planks he and a fellow prisoner had occupied by a string of obscenities from an unknown prisoner out of the darkness of his transportation to Vladivostok.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (New York, 1966).

⁴²⁵ Dolgun, *Alexander Dolgun's Story*, p.140.

⁴²⁶ Stephenson, Svetlana, ‘Violent Practices of Youth Territorial Groups in Moscow’, *Europe-Asia*, 64:1 (2012). For an extensive list of verbal threats used by criminal prisoners: Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.69.

⁴²⁷ Collins, *Violence*, p.155.

⁴²⁸ Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man*, p.183.

⁴²⁹ Petrov, *It Happens in Russia*, p.97.

Prisoners who used these devices, fought while outnumbered or engaged in conflicts with visibly stronger opponents gained the respect of other prisoners, whilst refusal could see them transformed into a daily victim of violence. The presentation of oneself as explicitly willing to use violence in these cases struck a balance between the *actual* violence intended and simply showing signs of bravado. As Collins shows, there is a strong aspect of staging, in terms of gaining dominance over the situation and gaining situational respect (i.e. not having to fight). Merely displaying pretence to fight could provide a display of an individual's capacity to defend oneself actually designed to *deter* violence.⁴³⁰ In the women's sections of the camps, marginalisation often took on similar forms (although there are fewer examples of physical violence between prisoners). The use of this pretence is demonstrated by American prisoner Margaret Werner after her arrival in a holding cell at the Gorkii city prison. Werner was the only 'political' in her cell, with the remainder of the prisoners (which numbered around twenty) consisting of 'so-called *Blatnoi*' convicted of petty crimes, serious burglaries and murder. Describing their language as abominable, Werner recalled how she decided to adapt to her new surroundings:

'I decided to speak the as they did to establish common ground and mutual rapport. I would adopt their aggressiveness and severity. I had to become one of them – a *Blatnoi*. I had to change my attitude, my habits, the way I walked, my very thought out patterns. I needed a whole new mind-set. This was strictly on-the job training. I had to reinvent myself for the survival of the fittest in a mental as well as physical tough-woman competition. And my new stance of power and clout proved to be an invaluable tactic, because not one of the other women in the cell dared to assault, rob, or otherwise harm me. My act was my suit of armour.'⁴³¹

In an environment where strong communal reputations are present, these violent acts can be perceived not only as instant gratification or instrumental gains but honourable acts, with individuals gaining agency by constructing themselves as elite fighters.⁴³² As in Stephenson's work on gangs, this elevated position was grounded in repetitively enacted performances and specific honour codes,

⁴³⁰ Collins, *Violence*, p.332.

⁴³¹ Karl Tobien, *Dancing under the Red Star: The Extraordinary Story of Margaret Werner, the Only American Women to Survive Stalin's Gulag*, (Colorado, 2006), p.180.

⁴³² Stephenson, 'The Violent Practices of Youth Territorial Groups in Moscow', p.74.

becoming a way of confirming reputation and status within penal hierarchy. This is further displayed when Bardach was sent to the isolator after a prolonged argument and brawl with a prisoner named *Ruchka* ('Little Hand', a pickpocket). Bardach lamented that he should have 'struck back the first few times he hit and pushed me' as this 'was one of the codes of camp life: prisoners fought one on one to settle their own disputes.'⁴³³ Describing that even though Ruchka was physically bigger, and would have beaten him badly, he would have established himself 'among the urkas and gained the respect of the other prisoners.'⁴³⁴ Identity between criminal prisoners in the Gulag was, therefore, enforced through the ability to exercise violence and display toughness, bravery, quick wit and fearlessness. In a society defined, often by the prisoners themselves, as one of honour and respect, fighting often took on a ritualised character and became a key factor in negotiating movement through penal hierarchy.

Socialisation

After gaining the attention and respect of authoritative figures, memoirists were sometimes invited to take part in daily rituals. Bardach became the personal guest of *Riaboj* ('pock-marked') after impressing him with his storytelling abilities. During one of their conversations, Pockmarked revealed that he was also a bank robber whose speciality was safe-cracking. This identity, and the reputation of the *pakhan*, carried a lot of weight in the criminal world as Bardach revealed that using Pockmarked's name was as good as any tool or weapon.⁴³⁵ The respect afforded to notorious criminals amongst prisoners can also be seen in an example from late Imperial katorga where the murderer Pazul'skii wrote a 'letter of recommendation' for journalist Vlas Doroshevich which meant that he could visit prisons in Rykovsk and Onor.⁴³⁶ However, if this status as an authority could not be confirmed, prisoners were often relegated through penal hierarchy. As was the case for a criminal named Boris 'the Careerist', described in the memoir of General Gorbatov. Boris claimed that he was a 'big-time

⁴³³ Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man*, p.215.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man*, p.154.

⁴³⁶ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.xxvi.

criminal' with six murders and five robberies to his name. However, when it transpired that he was only a small-time thief, he was demoted and given his new nickname⁴³⁷

Bardach stated how *urka*'s would not usually 'break bread' with outsiders and that meals were an important *urki* ritual, adding that he had heard that allowing someone to eat from the same bowl, or sharing a piece of *paika*, was a rite of initiation into the group.⁴³⁸ Dolgun reinforces this account by describing his inclusion in mealtime rituals after also agreeing to become a storyteller. In this instance, Dolgun was fed smoked sausage and soup (*balanda*) by the *pakhan*, Valentin Intelligent, while he recovers from a lengthy *etap*. After this, he was included in a small circle of prisoners (excluding *shobla yobla*) in passing around a mug of *chefir* (concentrated tea) before the commencement of his storytelling duties.⁴³⁹ In these instances, Dolgun recalled the plot of *13 Rue Madeline* while Bardach told stories of his youth in Poland and recited plots from books about cowboys and Indians written by Karl May. However, they were not alone as many other memoirists recalled how their performances as orators added to the expansion of their own survival networks.⁴⁴⁰

The above examples indicate how food and drink could play a central role in well-developed rituals used to signify group boundaries.⁴⁴¹ Williams and Fish have shown how 'inmate social rules set up a system of mutual care' which helps strengthened morale and protect inmates.⁴⁴² Moreover, deprivation of food became an important part of punishment rituals, which could sometimes be implemented for stealing from others (see chapter six).⁴⁴³ What this shows is that rudimentary gangs in labour camps clearly had their own notion of reciprocal support. This is a fairly common observation in total institutions, where prisoners often form highly integrated groups where sentiment,

⁴³⁷ A. V. Gorbato, *Years Off My Life: The Memoirs of General of the Soviet Army*, (London, 1964), p.141.

⁴³⁸ Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man*, p.151.

⁴³⁹ Dolgun, *Alexander Dolgun's Story*, p.145.

⁴⁴⁰ The former Spartak Moscow footballer Nikolai Starostin, arrested in 1943 recalled that 'even inveterate recidivists would sit quiet as mice and listen to my football stories' during his imprisonment in in the Soviet Far East: Jim Riordan, 'The Strange Case of Nikolai Starostin, Football and Lavrentii Beria', *Europe-Asia*, 46:4 (1994), p.685. In criminal slang 'storytellers' could be referred to as *botalo* (also trap/mouth) or *romanist*: Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.30.

⁴⁴¹ Pallot, Piacenti w/ Moran, *Gender, Geography & Punishment*, pp.200-201.

⁴⁴² Vergil Williams & Mary Fish, *Convicts, Codes and Contraband: The Prison Life of Men and Women*, (Michigan, 1975) p.24.

⁴⁴³ Stanjer, *Seven Thousand Days in Siberia*, pp.162-3.

morale, and solidarity all co-exist.⁴⁴⁴ In his sociological study of asylums, Goffman described of the existence of small groups of inmates with ‘a tendency to support one another under all circumstances.’⁴⁴⁵ Notions of reciprocal support were further confirmed in POW camps where ‘meals’ eaten together were viewed as true social rite, a simple and profound source of sociability, with Pallot, Piacentini and Moran stating that ‘meals sometimes took on the appearance of closed, small groups, jealously guarding everything they could pull together for their members’⁴⁴⁶

As demonstrated outside penalty by earlier ‘criminal’ formations such as Van’ka Kain’s organisation or the criminal *artel*, communal funds between prisoners incarcerated for political crimes also existed prior to the revolutions of 1917.⁴⁴⁷ Absent from the early prison press, they re-emerged during the 1930s in the form of *kombedy*, a fund in which inmates would transfer 10% of their own food packets and aid contributions from relatives to prisoners who were deprived of outside assistance.⁴⁴⁸ Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, communal funds only existed in centrally-located jails but the term *obschak* appeared toward at the beginning of the 1950s to describe the illicit tax imposed by members of criminal gangs. Reportedly, this fund, suggested to be between a third and two thirds of prisoner salaries, was set up to provide material support, defend common interests and help underprivileged inmates.⁴⁴⁹ Alongside the communal fund, penal slang appropriated the term *kolhoz* to describe prisoners who ate together (although Rossi describes how this could alternately mean gang rape) and carousing in ‘good company’ became known as *guzhovka*.⁴⁵⁰ During the 1960s, *kolhoz* was abandoned in favour of alternatives such as *kentovka* or *kenta*, but the importance of the ritual remained with the prison expression for ‘eating bread with someone’ (*lomat’ vmeste hleb*) holding a meaning close to the verb ‘to trust someone’.⁴⁵¹ Trading or sharing of food, a rare and important

⁴⁴⁴ Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, p.113.

⁴⁴⁵ Goffman, *Asylums*.

⁴⁴⁶ Pallot, Piacenti w/ Moran, *Gender, Geography & Punishment*, p.200.

⁴⁴⁷ Varese, ‘Society of the Vory-v-Zakone’, pp.524-525.

⁴⁴⁸ Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, p.200.

⁴⁴⁹ Olenik, *Organised Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Societies*, p.111.

⁴⁵⁰ Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.90, 168.

⁴⁵¹ Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.187.

commodity in prison, encouraged prisoners to open up each other, particularly in case of *chefir*, a concentrated tea which could be substituted for alcohol.⁴⁵²

The issue of trust between groups of prisoners remains a divisive topic. Several commentators highlight that while trusting relationships can exist, it is difficult to label them as ‘friendships’ in the normal sense.⁴⁵³ Alison Liebling argues that the development of these relationships requires certain degrees of respect, trust and respect in order to function. Liebling’s study highlights that *solidarity* denotes something different from *friendship*, indicating the propensity of prisoners to act collectively or be bonded by common deprivations and the need to resist authority.⁴⁵⁴ Others, such as Anton Olenik, emphasise the role of mistrust, showing how the total institution is hostile to friendly, social relations.⁴⁵⁵ In Russian prisons and camps, lack of trust became a daily experience. For this reason, Shalamov speculated that the inmate’s ‘commandments’, formulated in the 1930s, were three simple imperatives: ‘Don’t believe’, ‘Don’t be afraid’, ‘Don’t ask’.⁴⁵⁶ The absence of the public/private border should, theoretically, facilitate mutual interaction, yet for Olenik the encouragement of denunciation renders the development of trust virtually obsolete.⁴⁵⁷ However, studies of *vor v zakone* members show how they were bonded by notions of loyalty and reciprocal support, united by factors such as being honest and helpful, avoiding conflict, not undermining each other’s authority, sharing everything they had, and not insulting other members.⁴⁵⁸

Division of camp life into zones simultaneously subjected prisoners to both periods of prolonged isolation and life in the collective. This helped to shape Gulag society in specific ways.⁴⁵⁹ While this allowed small social groups, such as criminal gangs, to be formed they remained inherently unstable and ephemeral. Low levels of trust ensured that prisoners remained suspicious of

⁴⁵² Criminal prisoners often used the term *bash na bash* (‘one for one’) and to exchange goods, alongside other terms used to indicate food from outside of normal rations: Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, pp.18, 88.

⁴⁵³ Pallot, Piacentini w/ Moran, *Gender, Geography & Punishment*, p.197.

⁴⁵⁴ Alison Liebling, *Prisons and Their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality, and Prison Life*, (Oxford, 2004), p.258 & 357.

⁴⁵⁵ Olenik, *Organised Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Societies* p.107

⁴⁵⁶ Shalamov, *Sobranie Sochinenii v 4-h tomakh*, p.21.

⁴⁵⁷ Olenik, *Organised Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Societies* p.108.

⁴⁵⁸ Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, p.150.

⁴⁵⁹ For a guide to the history of the “collective” principle in the Soviet Union: Pallot, ‘Russia’s Penal Peripheries’, p.3; Laura Piacentini & Gavin Slade, ‘Architecture and Attachment: Carceral Collectivism and the Problem of Prison Reform in Russia and Georgia’, *Theoretical Criminology*, 19:2 (2015), pp.181-182.

each other, shown by the hostility towards Dolgun by prisoners excluded from the *chefir* ritual. Despite this, an indefinite fragmentation of social life, reflecting the struggle for subsistence in the camps, ensured interaction between prisoners of diverse backgrounds.⁴⁶⁰ Gangs retained much of the same hierarchical structures as outside the zone, with all members subordinate to the *pakhan*. Entry barriers, however, were not solely for those with criminal experience but anyone who could make daily lives more comfortable. In this sense, we should not be surprised to see memoirists taking small roles in group activities, even if this only appears to be a sip of *chefir* in exchange for a story.

The Prisoner Code (Thieves' Law)

It has been well-established amongst criminologists that gangs are often guided by their own particular code which could control the most intricate details of their daily lives. In Russia, this code is most commonly referred to as the 'thieves' law' (*vorovskoi zakon*).⁴⁶¹ Contemporary commentators have often regarded the 'thieves' law' as one of the sources of modern-day criminal quasi-law, although this has never been verified.⁴⁶² During his time in the camps, Solzhenitsyn speculated that the psychology of the *urki* was straightforward and came down to three basic rules: '1) I want to live and enjoy myself; and f--- the rest! 2) Whoever is the strongest is right! 3) If they aren't (beat)ing you, then don't lie down and ask for it. (In other words: As long as they're beating up someone else, don't stick up for the ones being beaten. Wait your own turn.'⁴⁶³ The basic components of these three rules are preserved by other memoirists who, despite little written evidence, describe how norms governing everyday situations, such as how to play cards and behave with other prisoners, were circulated through the camps.

Prisoners and researchers both refer broadly to the same basic code, despite differences in names, with Bowker describing how 'all studies of prisoner subcultures describe the same basic subcultural system, regardless of their location and characteristics of the institution.'⁴⁶⁴ Clemmer's

⁴⁶⁰ Olenik, *Organised Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Societies*, p.124.

⁴⁶¹ Valery Anisimkov, *Tyuremnaya obshchina: 'vekhi' istorii* (Moscow, 1993), p.7

⁴⁶² Olenik, *Organised Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Societies*, p.3.

⁴⁶³ Solzhenitsyn, *Arhipelag GULaga*, Vol.3, p.438.

⁴⁶⁴ Lee Bowker, *Prisoner Subcultures*, (Lexington, 1977) p.77.

1940 study describes how inmates referred to a code which was not written down, but instead learnt by word of mouth, adding that it 'is not particular to our prison, but exists in all prisons as well as in the culture of the underworld.'⁴⁶⁵ Clemmer further explains how the 'fundamental principle of the code may be stated thus: Inmates are to refrain from helping prison or government officials in matters of discipline, and should never give them information of any kind, and especially the kind which may work to harm a fellow prisoner. Supplementary to this, and following from it, is the value of loyalty among prisoners in dealing with each other. This basic idea constitutes the prisoners' code.'⁴⁶⁶ Williams and Fish add to this by showing how the convict code provides 'the legal environment of the *sub rosa* ('secret') system. The code approves any kind of abuse against the prison administrators, who represent the society that rejected and imprisoned them.'⁴⁶⁷

The code which united prisoners in the Gulag is, therefore, best understood as an unwritten code of norms which regulated not only relationships between prisoners, but also between convicts and the outside world. This code was informed by two basic tenants: hostility toward authority, and not informing on fellow prisoners (an extension of hostility toward authorities). This demonstrates how the code was generally characterised by disrespect toward formal institutional structures and a culture of support and trust within internal networks. Evidence of this can be seen in articles from early camp journals, such as T. A. Boduhin's description of a young *shpana* under interrogation who implied 'frayera' were united with the authorities.⁴⁶⁸ The simplicity of these basic tenants made the code easy to understand and circulate amongst prison and criminal society. The first of these fundamental principles often manifested itself through a systematic refusal to work known as *otrisalovka*, which including instances of self-mutilation.⁴⁶⁹ Like the *Krestiki*, radical Christians who refused to obey orders from the Soviet regime, negation of work duties formed an important component of the prisoner code. This would again serve to undermine the efforts of the authorities to fully control their incarcerated population. An example of this refusal to work can be seen in Sergei

⁴⁶⁵ Clemmer, *The Prisoner Community*, p.152.

⁴⁶⁶ Clemmer, *The Prisoner Community*, p.152.

⁴⁶⁷ Williams & Fish, *Convicts, Codes and Contraband*, p.57

⁴⁶⁸ T. A. Boduhin 'Shrhi na Hodu', pp.41-45.

⁴⁶⁹ Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, p.152. Memoir accounts reporting criminal prisoners refusing to perform work duties are numerous but include: Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, p.71; Petrov, *It Happens in Russia*, p.220.

Dovlatov's semi-autobiographical novel *Zona*. Based on Dovlatov's own experience as a guard in the 1960s, the novel describes the recidivist and 'code man' Kuptsov, who refused to work on principle despite being informed by the guard that 'Your Code has outlived its time. All the Code men have cracked'⁴⁷⁰

Shalamov also contended that there would be a universal prohibition against working, and evidence of this can also be found in memoir accounts which described how these prisoners were usually confined to disciplinary barracks.⁴⁷¹ In practice, however, this threat was not always carried out, even by members of *vory-v-zakone*.⁴⁷² A statement from former *vor* A. M. Bulatov confirms that 'under duress' a 'thief in law' could take the position of a brigadier. Survivor literature also suggests that, at times, members of the *urki* played a helpful role in labour production.⁴⁷³ The second fundamental element was shaped around hostility toward informers. Although it can be seen in articles from early camp journals, this tenant would take on greater significance during the period of prisoner-on-prisoner violence known as the 'bitches' war' (1948-52). This will be explored at greater length in chapter 6, but can be seen briefly in Lev Kopelev's description of a prisoner named Karapet the Bomber who stated that 'a thief cannot squeal on another thief to a viper (the term for camp authorities)'⁴⁷⁴

As suggested by the above statement from Bulatov, these basic tenants are also features of the *vory- v- zakone* code of honour known as 'the understanding'.⁴⁷⁵ According to criminal folklore, the '-in law' part of the thieves' name derived from 'the understanding' (*po poniatieum*), which required members to submit to it much like a monastic order.⁴⁷⁶ The first written instance of 'the understanding' appears to be part of the report sent by Bulatov to the Procurator General of the USSR in July 1955.⁴⁷⁷ Development of 'the understanding' applied specifically, however, to *vory-v-zakone*

⁴⁷⁰ Sergei Dovlatov, *The Zone*, p.58.

⁴⁷¹ Stanjer, *Seven Thousand Days in Siberia*, p.90.

⁴⁷² Varese, 'Society of the Vory-v-Zakone', p.518.

⁴⁷³ Kopelev, *To Be Preserved Forever*, (Philadelphia, 1977), p.216.

⁴⁷⁴ Kopelev, *To Be Preserved Forever*, p.222.

⁴⁷⁵ Slade, *Reorganizing Crime*, p.11.

⁴⁷⁶ Slade, *Reorganizing Crime*, p.12.

⁴⁷⁷ Varese, *The Russia Mafia*. p.151.

and their immediate followers.⁴⁷⁸ Despite their reputation, the *vory* did not exceed around 6-7% of criminal prisoners in the 1950s.⁴⁷⁹ In his study of the Georgian mafia, Slade describes how thieves'-in-law assimilated many aspects of *urki* culture, and vice versa.⁴⁸⁰ Therefore, the unwritten prisoner code during this period of this study was a lot more straightforward than the *vory* code of conduct.⁴⁸¹ In this context, it should be viewed alongside various other prison codes which have united prisoners worldwide against the authorities before the first recorded instance of any mafia-style organisations (according to Gambetta in a 'specific context and period' around the time of Italian Unification in 1860).⁴⁸² Given the number of different factions which existed during this period, it remains imperative to stipulate that the main tenants revolved solely around hostility towards institutional structures and informers.

Etap and arrival in the camps were important moments for all prisoners. First contact with inmates from different backgrounds, along with the process of initiation and socialisation, were often vital for memoirists to both expand their survival skills and enhance their reputation amongst other inmates. Similarly, the prisoner code was fundamental in regards to how prisoners acted toward each other by suggesting a range of praiseworthy behaviours.⁴⁸³ This shows how prison codes can actually serve to reduce conflict with other inmates by coordinating prisoners' actions and expectations, thus mitigating the pains of imprisonment. As a general rule, prisoner codes are recognised by all inmates, who often believe that the best way to accomplish their goals in prison is by following suit. Although some prisoners fall short of reaching these norms and faced punishment, observers of the prison are 'largely agreed that the inmate code is outstanding both for the passion with which it is propounded and the

⁴⁷⁸ Slade, *Reorganizing Crime*, p.13.

⁴⁷⁹ Varese, 'Society of the Vory-v-Zakone', p.522.

⁴⁸⁰ Slade, *Reorganizing Crime*, p.12

⁴⁸¹ David Skarbeck, *The Social Order of the Underworld: How Prison Gangs Govern the American Penal System*, (Oxford, 2014), p.26; Ronald Akers, Norman Hayner & Walter Gruninger, 'Prisonization in Five Countries: Types of Prison and Inmate Characteristics', *Criminology*, 14:4 (1977), pp.527-554.

⁴⁸² Diego Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection*, (Harvard, 1996), p.76.

⁴⁸³ Skarbeck, *Social Order of the Underworld*, p.27.

almost universal allegiance verbally accorded it.⁴⁸⁴ Adherence to the code determined ones place in prisoner society, with ‘conformity to, or deviation from, the inmate code is the major basis for classifying the social relations of prisoners.’⁴⁸⁵

Agency in the camps was not always defined by individual agency how the *urki* interacted with other groups. Involved in this complex web of relationships with the *urki* included *pridurki* (soft-job workers) whose work assignments to hospital or various administrative posts saw them separated in their own barracks.⁴⁸⁶ As recalled by a number of memoirists, this often brought them into direct conflict with criminal gangs.⁴⁸⁷ Self-styled ‘politicals’ continued to be viewed as ‘outsiders’ (*frayera*) by recidivists, showing the same class-based division apparent in a number of memoirs. The largest group of prisoners, *muzhiki* (‘peasants’ or ‘workers’) who were arrested for ‘everyday’ crimes (*bytovyi*), were often seen as being easily exploited. These prisoners were often used to perform the work duties allocated to the *urki*.⁴⁸⁸ Underneath this came various lower ranked prisoners, including the well-known expression *dohodyaga* to indicate a ‘goner’ (convicts weak through starvation and unable to reach work quotas to obtain extra food rations).⁴⁸⁹ The lowest rung was reserved for the caste of ‘untouchables’ (‘the degraded ones’, *opuschchenye*). This included paedophiles and homosexuals (*petukhi*, lit.cockerels) who were forbidden from eating from common bowls and ostracised from communal spaces. These prisoners were often seen as sexually available to criminal prisoners whose normality was preserved through the gendered active/ passive hierarchy of the camps.⁴⁹⁰ Following on the same basic principles as the late Imperial era, the prisoner code remained simple enough for all prisoners to understand, regardless of educational background. Alongside this, however, a number of other techniques were developed in order to communicate messages across the growing expanses of the camp system.

⁴⁸⁴ Sykes, G., & Messinger, S.L, ‘The Inmate Social Code and its Functions’, p.94.

⁴⁸⁵ Sykes, G. & Messinger, S.L, ‘The Inmate Social Code and its Functions’, p.94

⁴⁸⁶ Dolgun, *Alexander Dolgun’s Story*, pp.163-164.

⁴⁸⁷ Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man*, p.123.

⁴⁸⁸ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, p.92.

⁴⁸⁹ Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, p.32.

⁴⁹⁰ Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, 230-35. This also displays similarity to Marek Kaminski’s explanation of behavioural rules toward ‘suckers’ or ‘fags’ in Polish prisons: Kaminski, *The Games Prisoners Play*, p.74.

Chapter 4

Visual and Verbal Communication

‘They surrendered their bronze skin to tattooing and in this way gradually satisfied their artistic, their erotic, and even their moral needs: on one another’s chests, stomachs and backs they could admire powerful eagles perched on cliffs or flying through the sky. Or the big hammer, the sun, with its rays shooting out in every direction; or women and men copulating; or the individual organs of their sexual enjoyment; and all of a sudden, next to their hearts were Lenin or Stalin or perhaps both....’

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*.⁴⁹¹

Out of all of the Gulag’s chroniclers it is Solzhenitsyn who creates one of the most vivid descriptions of the practice of tattooing intertwined with daily life in the camps. Compared to a crucifix hung around one’s neck, portraits of Lenin and Stalin provide some of the most iconic images in the collection of Russian criminal tattoos. Referenced in songs by Vladimir Vysotsky, and proudly displayed by prisoner Viktor Tyriakin in the 2001 documentary *The Mark of Cain*, commentators have argued that prisoners had portraits of the two leaders to avoid being executed by prison guards in the same way that European sailors had the image of Christ on a cross tattooed on their backs to avoid floggings (in itself a crime).⁴⁹² The familiarity with these images demonstrates how, since the 1990s, the focus of mainstream media has resulted in the conflation of folklore and historical fact. Seemingly omnipresent in memoir accounts, tattoos are now commonly viewed as a natural component of prison and criminal subculture and, therefore, have not been subject to proper historicisation. The continued use of a single source, former camp employee Danzig Baldaev, has often led to the role of tattooing in the first half of the twentieth century being overlooked.⁴⁹³

Conventional and iconic forms of communication, such as tattooing and slang, were developed often from nineteenth century criminal traditions and played a number of roles in penal

⁴⁹¹ Solzhenitsyn. *Arkipelag GULaga*, Vol.3, pp.415-433.

⁴⁹² Helena Goscilo, ‘Texting the Body: Soviet Criminal Tattoos’, Goldfrank, David & Pavel Lyssakov, *Cultural Cabaret: Russian and American Essays for Richard Stites*, (Washington, 2012), p.216; Dobson, *Khrushchev’s Cold Summer*, p.115; Alix Lambert, *Russian Prison Tattoos: Codes of Authority, Domination and Struggle*, (Atglen, 2003), p.48.

⁴⁹³ Danzig Baldaev (ed.), *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, 3 Vols., (London, 2003-8). For a biography of Danzig Baldaev, including details of his family background and his 33 year career in the MVD see the foreword to volume 1 (pp.17-25).

society. The development of these folkways are comparable to workers learning to ‘speak Bolshevik’ or the multifarious signs and signals displayed by camp authorities.⁴⁹⁴ This famously included brass bands playing upon arrival, and slogans hung over entrance gates which both adopted the language of the Soviet state and helped to reinforce the Gulag’s redemptive mission. These strong visual images extended to camp journals, wall newspapers and explicit displays which indicated that failure to fulfil work norms could lead to starvation and ultimately death.⁴⁹⁵ Prisoners responded to this, however, by developing their own informal methods, some of which were not entirely divorced from official categories. One clear demonstration of how formal and informal images could intersect can be seen by the experience of Thomas Sgovio. Arrested leaving the US embassy in 1938, Sgovio was able to expand his survival network in Kolyma by becoming a ‘barrack artist’ and tattooed fellow inmates with a variety of images from “I love my mother” to a bottle of vodka, the ace of spades and images of naked girls. These talents were noticed by camp authorities who transferred Sgovio and gave him a new role creating propaganda displays.⁴⁹⁶

Another subject of media attention and mass publication in the 1990s, camp slang has mainly been limited to compilations of word lists and dictionaries or brief references to the vulgarity displayed by many memoirists.⁴⁹⁷ Although an understanding of the scale and variety of terms is important in showing how criminal subculture spread across the Gulag and beyond, works investigating other systems of penalty have described how analysis of prison vocabulary can provide a perspective from the point-of-view of its incarcerated population. Other features highlighted include the varying levels of secrecy and its use in stigmatizing and assigning inmates to particular roles. As a result, this chapter will look to provide a more in-depth study of forms of visual and verbal communication during the period 1924-1953. It will show that general interest with these forms of communication was not limited to 1990s by integrating studies undertaken by the Moscow Bureau

⁴⁹⁴ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, p.198.

⁴⁹⁵ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, p.77.

⁴⁹⁶ Tzoulendis, *The Forsaken*, p.182.

⁴⁹⁷ See comments by former prisoners Militsa Stefanskia and Vladimir Petrov: Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, pp.88-90. Some of these dictionaries include: D. Baldaev, *Slovar Blatnogo Vorovskogo Zhargonov v Dvukh Tomakh*, (Moscow, 1997); A. Bronnikov. Yu. Dubyagin, P.Tolkovyi, *Slovar’ugolovnykh zhargonov: An Explanatory Dictionary of Criminal Slang* (Moscow, 1993); Yu, Dubyagin, E. Teplitsky, *Concise English-Russian and Russian-English Dictionary of the Underworld*, (Moscow, 1993) V. Shylakhov & E. Adler, *Russian Slang and Colloquial Expressions*, (New York, 2006); A. Sidorov, *Slovar’ blatnogo i largernogo zhargonov: A Dictionary of Blatnye and Prison Camp Slang*, (Rostov-on-Don, 1992).

along with articles from camp journals. The consideration of these methods as twin ‘carriers of culture’ will demonstrate how they provided important functions in helping to create prisoner hierarchies in the Gulag.⁴⁹⁸

Visual Communication

Although the Baldaev collection is not without problems in its use for the current study, coming from one individual and in terms of dating the drawings accurately, the variety of images helps contest previous historiography which has regarded criminal prisoners as being ‘easily identifiable and easily described’.⁴⁹⁹ While contemporary media and non-academic publications continue to focus on the more violent, perverse images in the Baldaev collection, more sophisticated work has highlighted subtle trends such as anti-Semitism and their relation to official Soviet values.⁵⁰⁰ With inmate populations and composition in constant flux, prisoner tattoos helped to inform power relations by providing a universal set of norms and values which even illiterate convicts could understand.⁵⁰¹ In the same manner as official categories, which distinguished convicts by the particular article they were sentenced under, prisoner tattoos, known as *frak s ordenami* (‘tailcoat with decorations’), conveyed important socio-demographic information regarding an individual’s personal biography.

In a society in which lengthy criminal experience, number of convictions and locations of previous sentences were amongst the main enhancers of status, tattoos became a ‘calling card’ designating a prisoners rank (*chinstvo*) in penal hierarchy. Tattoos further functioned as a way of sharing stereotypes of group behaviour, setting out rules necessary for maintaining order by invoking a sense of collegiality, tradition and willingness to uphold the prisoner code.⁵⁰² Inscribing ‘social

⁴⁹⁸ Gambetta, *Codes of the Underworld*, p.150.

⁴⁹⁹ Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, (London, 2003), p.270.

⁵⁰⁰ Draskoczy, *Belomor*, pp.101-109; Dobson, *Khrushchev’s Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin* (New York, 2009), pp.113-115.

⁵⁰¹ Abby Schrader, ‘Branding the other/Tattooing the Self: Bodily Inscriptions amongst convicts in Russia and the Soviet Union’, Jane Caplan (ed.), *Written on the Body: the Tattoo in European and American History*, (London, 2000), p.190.

⁵⁰² Their function as a distinct means of self-representation in a distinct clan is reinforced by one prisoner: Tattooing for us is like evening wear embellished with (official) ribbons; the more we are tattooed, the greater influence we enjoy among comrades...the one who is not tattooed does not enjoy any influence; he is not considered a proper rogue and the gang doesn’t respect him.’: Schrader, ‘Bodily Inscriptions’, p.189.

reality' upon their own bodies⁵⁰³ could have adverse consequences, as previously unknown individuals were identified through dictionaries circulated amongst security organs.⁵⁰⁴ Illegitimately revising conventional social conduct with their own 'laws' and rituals meant that tattoos therefore become both *cause* and *effect* of an individual's exclusion from mainstream society, often branding themselves as a member of a lower order.⁵⁰⁵

Some of the most prominent images were shaped by major events in the early Soviet era, yet the more widespread practice of tattooing was developed in criminal and penal mores of the nineteenth century. Origins tattooing in the territory of the former Russian empire could be traced all the way back to the Altai Republic in the 5th Century.⁵⁰⁶ These indigenous Scythian tattoos, however, were far removed from the practice which began to develop more extensively several hundred years later. This was aided by the notoriety of famous adventurers such as 'the American', Feodor Tolstoi, reportedly tattooed by a Polynesian artist and natives on the Aleutian Islands of North America.⁵⁰⁷ By the mid nineteenth century, the popularity of tattooing continued to rise in line with a global trend, as images often became conflated with those of Africans, Asians and Native Americans at world fairs and sideshows.⁵⁰⁸

Despite its growing popularity amongst high society, depictions of early nineteenth century tattooing continued to portray the practice as the domain of soldiers, sailors and criminals.⁵⁰⁹ As with other Imperial societies, one of the punitive measures employed by the state was to brand prisoners on the forehead with the letters *KAT*, indicating *Katorzhnik* ('prisoner') or *VOR*, for 'thief', consigning them to exile from the social body.⁵¹⁰ This led to the emergence of a more widely practiced form of tattooing among inmates, who would invert the process of the autocratic state by tattooing their foreheads, eyelids and cheeks (which continues to this day). Schrader has argued that

⁵⁰³ Enid Schildkrout, 'Inscribing the Body', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 33 (2004), p.319.

⁵⁰⁴ Nanci Condee, 'Body Graphics: Tattooing the Fall of Communism', A. M. Barker (ed.), *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex and Society since Gorbachev*, (London, 1999), p.350.

⁵⁰⁵ Nikki Sullivan, *Tattooed Bodies: Subjectivity, Textuality, Ethics and Pleasure*, (Michigan, 2001), p.16; Gosilco, 'Texting the Body', p.210.

⁵⁰⁶ Condee, 'Body Graphics: Tattooing the Fall of Communism', p.340.

⁵⁰⁷ For a longer biography of Fedor Tolstoy (a first cousin once removed of the novelist Leo Tolstoy): Nicholas Thomas, Anna Cole, Bronwen Douglas (eds.), *Tattoo: Bodies, Art and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*, (London, 2005), pp.70-71.

⁵⁰⁸ Schildkrout, 'Inscribing the Body', p.327.

⁵⁰⁹ Helen Rodgers, 'The Way to Jerusalem': Reading, Writing and Reform in an Early Victorian Gaol', *Past and Present*, 205 (2009), p.96.

⁵¹⁰ Schrader, 'Branding the other/Tattooing the Self', p.181.

this allowed individuals to retain a degree of independence over their own bodies and is evidence of the deeper psychological role played by imprisonment.⁵¹¹ Narratives of Tsarist *katorga* and exile, however, continued to be more influenced by a Lombrosian approach which suggested tattooing was a form of atavism that characterised primitive men and link tattoos to naval and religious themes rather than part of a developing culture among inmates.⁵¹² In his dispatches from the colony, Doroshevich referred to tattoos as ‘Sakhalin pictures’⁵¹³ and gave a lengthy description of the prisoner Iorkin who was: ‘tattooed from head to toe. A huge cross is emblazoned on his chest, his arms covered with anchors and crosses, symbols of hope and salvation, and with scriptural quotations.’ Upon seeing Iorkin, Doroshevich remarked that ‘Lombroso would undoubtedly take his photograph and add him to his collection of tattooed criminals.’⁵¹⁴

Criminologists in the early Soviet era denied these atavistic origins, citing French counterparts who claimed that images were either created out of boredom or in order to emulate fellow prisoners.⁵¹⁵ In an article from the 1924 volume *Prestupnyi Mir Moskvyy*, Gernet stated that Russian prisoners were ‘more original’ than other nationalities, believing that that a world record had been set by one prisoner who had a copy of the famous Vasnetsov painting *Bogatyrs* tattooed across his chest (fig. 1). Gernet stated that attention to detail and the richness of colours made them unique, as European convicts rarely had multi-coloured tattoos.⁵¹⁶ The purpose of Gernet’s work was to expand on Lombroso’s collection from over half a century earlier. Explaining how, in the intervening period, only a handful of studies by doctors or former prisoners had been published, therefore opening up the possibility for an in-depth analysis. Fieldwork was conducted by volunteers from Moscow University, who interviewed 198 adult prisoners and 37 juveniles from the Labour House for Minors, with Gernet examining the results and comparing them not only Lombroso’s study but others which had taken place in France and Belgium.

⁵¹¹ Schrader, ‘Branding the other/Tattooing the Self’, p.191.

⁵¹² Cesare Lombroso, *Criminal Man*, (London, 2006), pp.61-62; Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.15.

⁵¹³ Condee, ‘Tattooing the Fall of Communism’, p.341.

⁵¹⁴ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.15.

⁵¹⁵ Mikhail Gernet, *Tatuirovka v mestakh zaklyucheniya g. Moskvyy*, Mikhail Gernet (ed.), *Prestupnyy Mir Moskvyy*, (Moscow, 1924), p.220.

⁵¹⁶ Gernet, *Prestupnyy Mir Moskvyy*, p.244.



Fig. 10 – ‘Bogatyrs’, Mikhail Gernet, ‘Tatuirovka v mestakh zaklyucheniya g. Moskvyy’, Mikhail Gernet (ed.), *Prestupnyy Mir Moskvyy*.

The study highlighted that images displayed on the bodies of Russian prisoners contained many common western themes, such as visual autobiography, devotional tattoos and declarations of love (referred to as ‘men’s ruin’) which could be found on inmates from a number of different countries during the same period.⁵¹⁷ Statistics provided by the Bureau indicated that tattoos were reasonably popular during this period, with around twenty five per cent of prisoners tattooed.⁵¹⁸ Gernet intimated, however, that the spread of tattoos amongst recidivists was ‘beyond doubt’ with the highest percentage of tattoos upon those who had several convictions.⁵¹⁹ In regards where the tattoo had been made, Gernet focused on data from ‘big cities’ (43.5%) and various penal institutions (an average of 22.5%). This argument relating to the role of the urban environment fit into the wider

⁵¹⁷ Condee, ‘Tattooing the Fall of Communism’, p.344.

⁵¹⁸ A. Sidorov, ‘The Russian Criminal Tattoo: Past and Present’, Danzig Baldaev (ed.) *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 1, p.25.

⁵¹⁹ Gernet, *Prestupnyy Mir Moskvyy*, p.221.

thesis of the volume, with Gernet showing a large spread among prisoners from major cities (68%) compared to rural areas. Running alongside this was a parallel argument which emphasised the direct connection between penalty and tattooing, therefore denying the atavistic origins suggested by Lombroso.⁵²⁰ Although only mentioned briefly by Gernet, there were interesting figures amongst prisoners tattooed while serving in the army (military regiments 17.34%, African battalions 7.51, and Disciplinary battalions 5.78%).⁵²¹ The category of ‘disciplinary battalion’ was included by Gernet amongst his list of penal institutions, although by definition is open to interpretation. Tattoos amongst those with military and naval backgrounds were noted later, however, alongside a Brussels project which studied tattoos belonging to various groups of manual labourers. The article confirmed that tattoos were also popular amongst the ‘propertied class’, although this discussion was limited to the story of a London artist named ‘The Outlaw’, whose noble clients included women keen to be tattooed on hands, calves and behind their garters.

The study also showed how, as a general rule, prisoners were tattooed immediately after sentencing or when first incarcerated. Similar observations were also found by a series of interviews conducted in Dopr prison in Ukraine during the same period which stated that 60-70% of tattooed inmates had acquired them while behind bars. Studies of tattooing practices amongst prisoners from the 1940s-1980s have reached similar conclusions.⁵²² Similar to the playing cards fashioned by inmates for gambling, tattoos were also created by using available artefacts in a different manner from their original intention.⁵²³ Gernet described the process in Moscow prisons, stating that in most cases this involved the same method as other European prisoners with three needles being attached to a stick.⁵²⁴ Sgovio further described how an improvised dye could be created by melting burned rubber from the soles of boots, and then mixed with sugar and water. Other variations on this, included sewing or notebook wire with soot, dirt, cigarettes ash or a burnt match head used to replace ink.⁵²⁵

⁵²⁰ Gernet, *Prestupnyy Mir Moskvy*, p.221.

⁵²¹ Gernet, *Prestupnyy Mir Moskvy*, p.222.

⁵²² Schrader, ‘Branding the Self’, p.186.

⁵²³ Erving Goffman describes the prevalence of *make-do*'s, in which artefacts are used in a manner not originally intended, giving an example of ‘pricking’ (tattooing) on board a naval ship: Goffman, *Asylums*, p.187,207.

⁵²⁴ Gernet, *Prestupnyy Mir Moskvy*, p.225.

⁵²⁵ Condee, ‘Tattooing the Fall of Communism’, p.342.

Although urine could be used to stop the spread of disease, many still became infected.⁵²⁶ Some prisoners could not endure the pain of these makeshift procedures while others attempted to forcibly remove them (in particular tattoos applied as a punishment).⁵²⁷

The 1924 study showed that motivations behind acquiring tattoos highlighted that imitation ranked highest (41.32%), closely followed by boredom (39.01%). Other reasons such as vanity and signs of friendship made up marginal percentages. Although Gernet's analysis focused on boredom as the main factor, the aesthetic reasons are also clear. One prisoner in particular, who received interest for a large crucifixion scene on his chest, acquired a new tattoo after the first set of interviews which he then proudly displayed to the university students on their second visit.⁵²⁸ These findings also indicate an overlap between juvenile offenders and adult prisoners by showing that tattoos were prevalent between the age ranges 14-20 (30.92%), although this was surpassed by the figure between 20-25 year olds (39.92%). Prisoners did not often limit themselves to one tattoo, with the highest figure between 2-5 images (21.67%), and one prisoner had over forty different designs. Tattoos covering the entire body were rare with the report indicating that the most common areas were cheeks, chest, forearms and hands. Even a cursory look through the Baldaev collection indicates tattoos would be continued to be displayed on are similar areas of the body, although hip tattoos became more frequent over time.

Each tattoo, and their position on the body, contained a different linguistic context. The upper body area, (head, neck, shoulders and chest) was reserved for tattoos indicating prestige while the feet and legs were often tattooed with jokes, wordplay or humorous images. Elite tattoos on the chest were known as a "talisman" (*oberegi*) and reportedly reserved solely for the *pakhan*. These elite tattoos took a number of forms including tigers, skulls, werewolves, crowns, eagles (a punitive brand employed by Peter the Great in the eighteenth century), scarab beetles and the suits of diamonds and clubs. Talisman tattoos often used several of these images together, and also included religious

⁵²⁶ Lambert, *Russian Prison Tattoos*, p.40.

⁵²⁷ Anotoly Marchenko, *My Testimony*, trans. Michael Scammell (London, 1987), p.208.

⁵²⁸ Gernet, *Prestupnyy Mir Moskvyy*, p.242.

iconography such as Jesus, the Virgin Mary, Orthodox crosses and guardian angels. The image of an Orthodox church represented a distinct category, with the amount of cupolas indicating the number of times a prisoner had been incarcerated.⁵²⁹

Shestyorki ('lieutenants') were tattooed with 'shoulder straps' or military epaulets, denoting previous convictions and their position within penal society. Three small skulls or stars included in the design designated the wearer not to be a 'slave of the camps' indicating their refusal to perform work duties, along with their loyalty to the *pakhan*. Another important role in prisoner hierarchy was that of a 'zone executioner'. These individuals were reportedly trained killers who would assassinate fellow inmates on the orders of the criminal 'court'. Alexander Dolgun describes how an informal prisoners' committee known as the "People's Council of Justice" operated in the early 1950s, stating that the standard practice was for a nominee of the Council to walk up to another prisoner suspected of informing and announce 'The People's Council has sentenced you to death' before executing them. Dolgun adds that professional criminals preferred beheading to stabbing, and that the assigned executioner would occasionally take the head of the victim to the nearest guard and pronounce "He's one of yours".⁵³⁰ These beheadings helped to send a powerful, symbolic message to both prisoners and camp authorities during the period of the 'Bitches' War' (see chapter 6).

Executioners could often be identified by a 'warrior's grin' (Fig. 11), which frequently included the image of a tiger (a symbol of strength and savagery and the warrior caste).⁵³¹ The image below displays the acronym "MIR", spelling out the Russian word for "peace" but in prison argot representing "Shooting will reform me" and indicating animosity towards *suki* ("bitches"). Often acting on instructions from the *pakhan*, 'zone executioners' were forced to accept punishment from the authorities as the prisoner code bound them to remain silent regarding the involvement of more senior figures. The fear perpetuated amongst fellow inmates is captured by Shalamov in his sketch A

⁵²⁹ Schrader, "Tattooing the Self", p.190.

⁵³⁰ Dolgun, *Alexander Dolgun's Story*, p210-211.

⁵³¹ Jean Chevalier & Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. John Buchanan-Brown (London, 1996), p.1007.

Piece of Meat, in which he describes the realisation that the tattooed executioner Kononenko was hiding in a hospital bed disguised as a prisoner named Kazakov.⁵³²



Fig. 11 – ‘Take out all bitches, stool pigeons and traitors!’ *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, vol. 1. Danzig Baldaev.

Tattoos were not just reserved for the upper echelons of criminal society, however, but could be displayed by prisoners of all ranks. Intricate designs on exposed areas of the body, such as the feet and hands, carried varied information regarding a prisoner’s identity. This included ten letters spread across the toes spelling a particular location where the criminal had served time, or rings around the fingers indicating criminal specialisation. Tattoos of this type were worn by recidivists of all ranks and demonstrate the increased diversification in criminal society. The multiple images displayed below (fig. 12) include a ring on the forefinger to indicate a ‘Leninist’ bandit (expropriating private property) and single dot ring on the third finger which signifies an orphan. The image of five dots, representing four guard towers and a convict, indicates imprisonment, and can be seen in the top left-hand corner along with crosses on the knuckles which recorded the number of incarcerations. The nickname *Pega* (“peg”) can be seen alongside a girlfriend’s name (“Lara”) and the image of a cat, a popular symbol representing ability and luck which often formed part of an abstract family of

⁵³² Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, p.113.

thieves. Words tattooed across the hand, echoing acronymic brands used in the pre-revolutionary era, contained a number of concealed meanings. These were often sarcastic and ironic twists on official slogans and were widely practised across the penal system. As shown below, this included *MIR* (“peace”) which carried the alternate meaning “shooting will reform me”, *ZLO* (“evil”) standing for “I will avenge all that is legal” (*za vse legal’nym otomshu*) and *BOG* (“god”), translating as “I’ve been sentenced by the state” (*byl osuzhden narkomanov*). The acronym for state security services (*NKVD*) was often used to express the sentiment “*net krepche vorovskoi druzhby*” (There’s no friendship stronger than that of criminals).⁵³³ The palm area of the hand was used to convey different information, with a short sentence written across as a quick insult toward other inmates or camp authorities.



Fig. 12 – *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, vol. 1. Danzig Baldaev. Published by FUEL © 2003

While the Baldaev collection suggest a more detailed system of codification, results from the Moscow Bureau’s survey claimed that only 2.02% of tattoos were used as a sign. Statistics amongst various offenders revealed the greatest number of tattoos among swindlers (17% of all convicted under the relevant article) and robbers (16%), closely followed by bandits and murderers (both 14%).

⁵³³ Alexi Plutser-Sarno, ‘All Power to the Godfathers!’, Danzig Baldaev (ed.), *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, Vol.2, p.7.

Gernet, however, highlighted the high percentage rate amongst those considered ‘socially dangerous’ who had all been tattooed while incarcerated. According to his commentary, in most cases this represented persons with multiple convictions with no right of residence in the capital. Although not stated explicitly, he was referring to prisoners convicted under Article 49 and regularly referred to as *shpana* in camp journals and memoirs from the same period.

Unlike images used to indicate prestige or status, a number of tattoos symbolised a downward trajectory through penal society. Solzhenitsyn is undoubtedly correct in his assertion that erotic images could often satisfied individual needs, yet the same images could also be forcibly applied as a punishment. Humiliating or erotic tattoos (along with the suits of hearts or diamonds) were often applied to the loser of cards games and other transgressions of the prisoner code. Indicating them to be a member of the ‘untouchables’, inmates who received these tattoos were deprived of status and faced sexual violence from other prisoners.⁵³⁴ Although the Moscow study did not refer to any punitive dimension, it did state that (although they represented a relatively low-number) genitals and buttocks were reserved for ‘shameless content’. Gernet claimed that this was supported by other commentators who agreed that tattoos on this area were reserved for ‘passive pederasts’. Further studies, such as those undertaken in France, showed that photos depicting female heads (often well executed) on the backs of homosexual prisoners indicated a ‘feminised’ role. Gernet acknowledged that, after leaving prison, many denounced this ‘vice’ with the tattoo giving them the opportunity of self-deception.⁵³⁵ Gernet referred to the same subject again in his conclusion, stating that the spread of ‘unnaturalness’ and ‘forced entertainment’ in the prison regime turned healthy prisoners into homosexuals.⁵³⁶

Although they appear less frequently in memoir accounts, female tattoos contained similar themes to their male counterparts. Podogin’s *Aristokraty* contains a character named ‘‘tattooed woman’’ (*Tatuirovannaia*)⁵³⁷ while, in his short story *Women from the Criminal World*, Shalamov

⁵³⁴ Daniel Healey, ‘Forging Gulag Sexualities: Penal homosexuality and the reform of the Gulag after Stalin’, BASEES Annual Conference, (Cambridge, 2014). Used with kind permission of the author.

⁵³⁵ Gernet, *Prestupnyi Mir Moskvy*, p.233.

⁵³⁶ Gernet, *Prestupnyi Mir Moskvy*, p.245.

⁵³⁷ Draskoczy, *Belomor*, p.102.

describes the thief Sima Sosnovskaya as being tattooed from her head to her feet in ‘sexual scenes of the most unusual sort.’⁵³⁸ In his article, Gernet claimed that tattoos among women were rare and confined to prostitutes and performers⁵³⁹ and suggested that inscribing this identity was equivalent to taking a ‘lifetime’ oath. The volume included drawings of prostitute tattoos from the French collection along with a photograph of a female performer from a World Fair. Gernet also described a ‘tattooed man’ available for view in one of the Moscow prisons, which he, once again, attributed to boredom.

Examination of the Baldaev collection shows that female tattoos were not always reserved for prostitutes and the lower classes and were, in general, more devotional or ornamental than male tattoos. Common images included flowers, birds, hearts, angels and wreaths. Unlike male prison tattoos, which were often displayed on visible areas of the body, women’s tattoos were frequently hidden from view (and associated with criminal power in the same way). They were also often autobiographical, recalling experiences such as losing their virginity both to a man or woman, marriage, birth or death of a close friend/family member. Lesbian relations could be signalled by musical instruments, such as a guitar or violin played by female figures. Homosexual tattoos amongst women appear to lack the same punitive dimension as men, although the active/passive hierarchy continues to be displayed by the image of tattoo of a pair of eyes on the buttocks which acted as a marker of active lesbian sexuality.⁵⁴⁰ Female tattoos to designate a prostitute also indicated that their owner could not be forced to perform work duties (again in breach of camp regimen) and reflected differing power relations between the two sexes.⁵⁴¹



⁵³⁸ Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, p.426.

⁵³⁹ Tattoos featuring images of prostitutes could be viewed on some male prisoners: Gernet, *Prestupnyi Mir Moskvy*, p.233.

⁵⁴⁰ Condee, ‘Tattooing the Fall of Communism’, pp.347-348.

⁵⁴¹ Slang words for prostitutes also used gained popular currency outside of the camps. Although *blyad’* was the most common, Jacques Rossi includes an extensive list of synonyms and words with similar meanings: Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.26.

Fig. 13 – ‘I am a Son of the World of Thieves’ Russian Criminal Tattoo
Encyclopaedia, vol. 1. Danzig Baldaev.

Further images represented initiation into penal society. These tattoos often reflected growing societal problems outside of the camps, particularly homeless youths caught up in the devastation of revolutionary and Civil War era⁵⁴² and the hardening penal practice against juveniles leading up to 1941.⁵⁴³ Initiation tattoos could display a rose or tulip wrapped in barbed wire and were often tattooed on prisoner’s 16th or 18th birthday to represent them being symbolically ‘born’ into criminal society and the abandonment of their youth (Fig. 13). As discussed in previous chapters, many young prisoners were subjected to initiation rituals as they worked their way up through the criminal ranks, ending with their ‘social death’ and this tattoo which confirmed their place in criminal hierarchy. Images such as the one displayed, were different from tattoos applied to inmates born in camp orphanages, which were attributed a higher status in penal society.

Tattoos among juveniles were not solely confined to imprisonment, however. The Moscow Bureau confirmed that, out of their interviewees, 16 received their first tattoo during previous convictions and 15 at home, the street or in another location unrelated to penalty (on board a ship etc.). Gernet pointed to the high percentage of juveniles (32.4%) who received their first tattoo between the ages of 9-13, yet the statistics reveal that the ages of 14 and 15 proved more popular (43.2%). Out of the 37 interviewees, 14 stated that the reason for their tattoo was imitation (37.8%), 6 out of boredom (16.2%) and 4 for reasons of memory (10.8%). Gernet suggested that many regretted or were indifferent to their tattoos, strengthening his case for boredom even further. This indifference was demonstrated by one 16 year old completing his fourth term for theft. The unnamed juvenile had 10 tattoos (his first was at ten years old). These were all made ‘for fun’ by other minors in rooming houses, orphanages and juvenile detention centres. The images included several on his right arm, such as a butterfly, naked woman with flower, skull, ship and an image referred to as a ‘Korean stamp’, a

⁵⁴² A. Gleason, P. Kenez, & R. Stites (eds.), *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution*, (Bloomington, 1985), p274.

⁵⁴³ Getty, Rippensporn & Zomskov, ‘Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-War Years; A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence’.

heart pierced with an arrow on his chest, a dolphin and sailor on his left arm, along with the date '1916' on his wrist. Statistics showed that ,while this case was indeed an exception and one tattoo was most common among juveniles (14 out of 37), followed by two (10) and three (7), the location on the body displayed no difference to adults with the most on hands (23) followed by arms and chest (9).

Numerous other tattoos could display a multitude of images and references to death. 'Autograph' tattoos (the prisoners name or nickname) were regarded as a signature under one's own life⁵⁴⁴ and this gravitation toward death was further underlined by three main assertions: the absence of any fear of death, the constant closeness to death, and a primordial relationship with death.⁵⁴⁵ This was often demonstrated through a dark, sardonic humour similar to that of ordinary people who joked about living through the Great Terror.⁵⁴⁶ Some of these elements can be found on the tattoo below of a prisoner who had served at five different labour colonies before their release in 1963 (Fig. 14).⁵⁴⁷



Fig. 14 – 'Greetings from the Vorkuta Camps! 1947-1963. In the USSR Labour is a matter of honour, prowess and glory! Shelyabozh, Eletsy, Izhma, Kozhma, Khalmer-South', Danzig Baldaev (ed.), *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, vol. 1.

⁵⁴⁴ Baldaev, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, vol. 2, p45.

⁵⁴⁵ The Moscow Bureau study also reported how one prisoner displayed a defiant tattoo reading 'I am not afraid of death': Gernet, *Prestupnyi Mir Moskvy*, p.224.

⁵⁴⁶ Jonathan Waterlow, 'Popular Humour in Stalin's 1930s: A Study of Popular Opinion and Adaptation', PhD Thesis (Oxford, 2012), p.139.

⁵⁴⁷ Baldaev, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, vol.1, p.125.

As with examples of ‘men’s ruin’ tattoos, which regularly blamed women or love for their crimes or arrest, there was often a sentimental nature to these images. One prisoner was tattooed with a quote from Yesenin (according to Shalamov the only poet the “criminal world” recognised)⁵⁴⁸ while some continued the same themes as prisoner songs, such as the lack of freedom and helplessness of the penal environment. Tattoos which projected an image of a prisoners ‘mother’ were common, but could also represent an abstract idea of an older female. This was often a madam of a brothel or ‘thieves den’ (*malina*) who helped criminals to hide their loot. Like images of male and female cats, who indicated agility and luck, this ritual character also became the subject of numerous poetry and songs.⁵⁴⁹

Tattoos could also contain more overtly political connotations. Common images of Lenin and Stalin, such as those described by Solzhenitsyn, are not as straightforward as first appearances suggest. Images of Lenin could also contain the acronym ‘VOR’ (‘thief’), constructed using the initials from ‘leader of the October Revolution’ (*Vozhd Oktiabr'skoi Revolutsii*). The former leader’s familiar lisp was also regularly included typographically⁵⁵⁰ and Stalin was frequently portrayed as the devil, vampire or a ghoul, appearing either alone or alongside other figures including Lenin, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Surrounded by ‘visual propaganda’ from the authorities, prisoners appropriated state discourse to create their own anti-slogans, known as a ‘grin’ (*oskal*).⁵⁵¹ Janusz Bardach’s description of homosexual rape in a bath house at the prison camp Burepolom included a prisoner tattooed with the popular slogan ‘Work is an act of honour, courage and heroism’ which hung over the gates of a number of corrective labour camps.⁵⁵²

⁵⁴⁸ Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, p.7. Lyrics from a Yesenin poem were also found tattooed on the feet of a prisoner from a camp in Siberia in the 1950s: Baldaev, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, vol.3, p.317.

⁵⁴⁹ Draskoczy, *Belomor*, p.106.

⁵⁵⁰ Baldaev, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, vol. 3, p.128.

⁵⁵¹ Plutser-Sarno, ‘All Power to the Godfathers!’, p.43.

⁵⁵² Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man*, p.125.



Fig. 15 –‘You little Soviet Shit, you are still ass-licking and flogging away for the CPSU and being paid zero point fuck-all and do you want to be a cripple? Think about it!’, Danzig Baldaev (ed.) *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, vol. 1.

One of the most vivid expressions of what Condee describes as ‘propaganda warfare with the authorities’⁵⁵³ can be seen in an imitation of Dmitrii Moor’s famous Civil War enlistment poster ‘Have you Volunteered?’ (Fig. 15). Miriam Dobson has argued that this tattoo showed how prisoners appropriated Soviet discourse and used it as a template for their own expressions. Dobson notes that while the Gulag is often seen as the mirror of Soviet society it also enabled prisoners to reverse official values.⁵⁵⁴ Gernet’s 1924 article, however, demonstrated that this propensity for satire began earlier and claimed that Muscovites had broken the record for ‘political content’. One tattoo of the tattoos he was referring to demonstrated a ‘triple alliance’ by depicting the Russian Emperor and the President of the French Republic alongside a naked woman. Alongside this, one Moscow University student discovered an individual tattooed with a gallery of the entire House of Romanov’s across their chest during an examination into suicide attempts at a hostel in Khitrovka.⁵⁵⁵ This shows that the satirical nature and reversal of values was not just aimed toward at the Soviet regime but had existed beforehand. This sits amongst the revelation that prisoners were tattooed for multiple reasons, with experience of the military often almost as important as incarceration, as one of the main discoveries from the study. Furthermore, both Gernet’s commentary and the statistics sheds serious doubt over the

⁵⁵³ Baldaev, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, vol. 2, p.37.

⁵⁵⁴ Dobson, *Khrushchev’s Cold Summer*, p.117.

⁵⁵⁵ Gernet, *Prestupnyi Mir Moskvy*, p.244.

detailed codification often associated with the growth of the Gulag, suggesting that is most likely to coincide with the changes which took place during the ‘bitches’ war’ from 1948-52.

Verbal Communication

Alongside using their tattooed bodies as a linguistic object, prisoners used a second, more conventional, method of communication commonly referred to as *blatnaia muzika* (‘convict music’).⁵⁵⁶ Although the use of a particular vernacular between criminals in Europe can be traced back to the fourteenth century, the origins of prison slang in Russia are believed to have derived from an eighteenth century beggars’ cant named *fenya* (sometimes *ofenya*). Extra syllables, usually ‘fe’ and ‘nya’, were inserted amongst syllables of regular words, therefore giving its name.⁵⁵⁷ Distinguishing between various external influences, which also includes slang used by sailors and criminals outside of prison, has often proved difficult for scholars with Victor Chalidze noting ‘a great deal of overlapping between prison speech and thieves’ slang.’⁵⁵⁸ Like other forms of argot, the original form of *fenya* was comprised of a collection of foreign vocabularies and Russian words given new meanings. For example, the word for police, *musor*, was believed to have derived from the Yiddish for informant, *moser* and the Russian word for lynx, *rys*, was appropriated to indicate an individual who had acquired expert knowledge of prison life. Increasing criminal diversification was demonstrated by transforming the German for good morning (*Guten Morgen*) to describe a theft carried out during the early hours (of which *Son’ka* was reported to be a specialist). Words such as *fraera* (‘outsider’) and *shmon* (‘search’) show Yiddish or Romany origins and have often been cited as an acknowledgement of the role played by the city of Odessa in the development of criminal mores.⁵⁵⁹ Odessans were regularly acknowledged as having a particular skill as linguists, thwarting conventions of grammar

⁵⁵⁶ Baldaev, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, vol. 1, p.27.

⁵⁵⁷ For example, the Russian word for prison, *tyur'ma* became *tyur'femanya*: Galleotti, ‘The World of the Lower Depths: Crime and Punishment in Russian History’, p.103.

⁵⁵⁸ Valery Chalidze, *Criminal Russia: A Study of Crime in the Soviet Union*, (New York, 1977) p.57.

⁵⁵⁹ Guberman, I. *Shtrikhi i Portrety*, (Moscow, 1994), pp.72-3.

and syntax to create an argot described by Doroshevich as ‘not even a language, but a language salad.’⁵⁶⁰

Widespread use of *fenya* is thought to have all but ended by the mid-nineteenth century yet its name continued to be associated with criminal slang. Publication of guides to *fenya* often mixed its terms with criminal and prison argot, all part of the same genus but which form three discretely different tongues.⁵⁶¹ Some of the earliest Russian collections of criminal argot continued to confuse these variations. This includes the appendix to the first edition of Komarov’s *Van’ka Kain*, P. S. Pallas’ comparative dictionary (1786) and Andrej Mejer’s manuscript of an allegedly secret Belorussian dialect (1786).⁵⁶² All of these early compilations took the form of word lists with little explanation to the origins and use of the terms. Nineteenth century narratives of imprisonment, however, help to provide a closer analysis of language used between prisoners. Dostoevskii famously recorded a number terms in his *Siberian Notebook* while Vlas Doroshevich was criticised for the use of *katorga* slang. More significantly, Sergei Maksimov’s 1871 study *Sibir i Katorga* deduced subtle differences between *ofenya*, *muzika* (described as a language used by pickpockets) and other forms of argot, including horse thieves and profiteers. Maksimov listed a number of other items specific to the penal environment such as alternate names for money (*sari i korincha*), soup (*shoori-moori*), bread (*chistyak*) and punishment methods such as the knout and plet’ (*liko i adamogo liko*).⁵⁶³

Publications of various forms of argot in the early twentieth century continued to follow the general trend of word lists and dictionaries. Despite this, some of these remain impressive with V. F. Traktenberg’s dictionary *Blatnaia Muzika*, collecting over 700 entries from prisons in Warsaw, Vilna, St. Petersburg, Moscow and Odessa. Accenting the words, suggesting clearly defined origins and giving examples of the particular circumstances in which they would be used, Trakhtenberg’s appendix also contained 96 proverbs and sayings, along with expressions of criminal origins found in other sources (reportedly added by its editor Baudouin de Courtney).

⁵⁶⁰ Sylevester, *Tales of Old Odessa*, p.4

⁵⁶¹ Chalidze, *Criminal Russia*, p.57.

⁵⁶² Galler & Marquees, *Soviet Prison Camp Speech*, p.41.

⁵⁶³ Maksimov, *Sibir’ i Katorga*, p.185.

Following the publication of Trakhtenberg's dictionary in 1908, the upheaval of revolution and civil war saw a brief hiatus in publications of penal argot. This appears to have lasted until the early period of the New Economic Policy and P. Fabrichnyi's 'The Language of the Penal Camp' (1923) which, according to its author, was arranged 'logically' rather than alphabetically and included around 179 terms. Renewed interest thereafter was reinforced by a number of studies such as Vjaceslav Tonkov's 'An Essay in the Study of Criminal Argot' and its accompanying dictionary (1930), E. D. Polivanov's 'Thieves' Cant of Schoolboys and the 'Slavonic Language' of the Revolution' (1931), and several works which placed additional emphasis on the influence of words of Western European, Gypsy, Turkish, Jewish and Hebrew origin on slang found in various urban centres.⁵⁶⁴

This shifting focus of scholarly attention can be viewed in the mountainous bibliography compiled by Dmitrii Likhachev. Later to become a prominent medieval historian and leading intellectual of the *glasnost* era, Likhachev was arrested in 1928, along with other members of his student circle the 'Cosmic Academy', and sentenced to five years hard labour which he served at Solovki and Belomor until his release in 1931. Likhachev began his experience of camp life by moving between several different work companies landing a position in the camp criminological department through his friendship with Father Nikolay Pisanovski and a priest named Viktor Ostrovidov. Founded in May 1925, *Krimkab* (*Kriminologicheskii kabinet*) specialised mainly in the re-education of teenage inmates. During his time in the department, Likhachev was accompanied by a large group of intellectuals including philosopher Aleksandr Meier, Yuliya Danzas, Gavril Gordon, Pavel Smotritski, Vladimir Razdolski, Vladimir Sveshnikov, Aleksandr Peshkovski, Aleksandr Bedryaga, Mikhail Khachaturov, Lidiya Mogilyanskaya, Aleksandr Sukhov, Yuri Kazamovski and Vladimir Kololenko (a cousin of the writer V.G. Korolenko).⁵⁶⁵ Housed on the 3rd floor of a former guest house beside the landing platform, *Krimkab* spared Likhachev some of the worst excesses of camp life, although he later also acknowledged the importance of his friendship with two criminal

⁵⁶⁴ Galler & Marquees, *Soviet Prison Camp Speech*, p.47.

⁵⁶⁵ Likhachev, *Reflections on the Russian Soul*, pp.132-175.

authorities.⁵⁶⁶ Through the criminological department Likhachev was able to make scholarly assessments of prisoner society, recalling how he and other members collected letters, drawings and verses by in order to ‘understand the psychology of the people of *The House of the Dead*.’⁵⁶⁷ Comparing the work of the department to how Dostoevskii recorded penal slang in his *Siberian Notebook*, Likhachev described how ‘questions of language and linguistic culture became one of the most important topics of our conversation’.⁵⁶⁸ Despite the large number of prisoners broadly linked to the department, they were far from prolific in terms of published material. Just two articles appeared in *Solovetskie Ostrova*, the first written by Likhachev on card playing (discussed in the following chapter) and the second, an article by Aleksandr Sukhov on ‘suggestibility’ amongst teenagers in the camp in which he associated it with a ‘flock’ or ‘herd’ mentality.⁵⁶⁹

Following his release from the camps, Likhachev’s interest in criminal subculture continued, publishing two socio-linguistic articles in academic journals.⁵⁷⁰ Accompanying his 1933 article ‘Cherty pervobytnogo primitivizma vorovskoi rechi’ (*Traits of Primordial Primitivism in the Speech of Thieves*) was a meticulous compilation of works of argot beginning in the nineteenth century and including works of literature such as Vsevolod Krestovskii’s *The Slums of St. Petersburg*. Moving on to general studies of slang and jargon attached to a specific location, Likhachev’s extensive bibliography culminated in studies of argot used by various professions (listing criminals alongside beggars, lyrists, cattle merchants and tailors) which were all incorporated into his main thesis which argued that these forms of argot were in the process of disappearing. Likhachev’s article displayed similarity to V. V. Straten’s *Argo i Argotismi* (*Argot and Argotisms*, 1931) which suggesting that criminal argot originated in medieval artisan and trade vocabulary and in the language of beggars, thieves and *brodiagi* (vagabonds). Straten claimed that the demise of these groups was due to

⁵⁶⁶ Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, p.32.

⁵⁶⁷ Likhachev, *Reflections on the Russian Soul*, p.346.

⁵⁶⁸ Likhachev, *Reflections on the Russian Soul*, p.139.

⁵⁶⁹ Aleksandr Sukhov, “Vnushayemost’. K kharakteristike molodykh vozrastov (iz rabot kriminologicheskogo kabineta)”, *Solovetskie Ostrova*, No.3-4, Feb-March 1930, pp.43-47.

⁵⁷⁰ D. S. Likhachev, ‘Cherty pervobytnogo primitivizma vorovskoi rechi’, *Iazyk I myshlenie*, vols. 3-4 (Moscow, 1935) pp.47-100; D. S. Likhachev ‘Argoticheskie slova professional’noi rechi’, *Razvitie grammatiki I leksiki sovremennogo ruskogo iazyka*, (Moscow, 1964), 311-359. Likhachev’s second essay ‘Argoticheskie slova professional’noi rechi’ (*Argotic Words in Professional Speech*) was written in 1938 but did not published until 1964. *Argotic Words in Professional Speech* focused more on the use of jargon in professional and technical speak, containing limited discussion of criminal argot.

changing socio-economic conditions such as rapid industrialisation and urbanisation.⁵⁷¹ This line of analysis continued in Likhachev's second essay 'Argoticheskie slova professional'noi rechi' (*Argotic Words in Professional Speech*), which was written in 1938 but not published until almost thirty years later. During which time Likhachev worked as a proof-reader and survived the Leningrad blockade during the Second World War.⁵⁷² Finally published in 1964, *Argotic Words in Professional Speech* focused more on the use of jargon in professional and technical language and contained limited references to criminal/prison slang.

The first of Likhachev's articles argued that slang demonstrated a reversion to primitive speech, refuting the commonly held notion that secrecy was vital to criminal argot. Carefully distancing himself from the work of Lombroso, the article emphasised the primitive origins of thieves' argot.⁵⁷³ A revival of a number of magic elements, he argued, meant that argot actually made the thieves *more visible*, a practice which evoked an image of the medieval shaman. Likhachev's avocation of these primitive origins conflicted with Mikhail Gernet's argument that prisoners hiding tattoos on various parts of their anatomy criminals could be contrasted with savages, who proudly displayed theirs out of pride or custom.⁵⁷⁴ Although they disagreed in this regard, Gernet and Likhachev reached similar conclusions in their assessment of Lombroso. For Gernet, the 'unnatural' prison regime was the root cause of inmates developing the tastes and habits of their distant ancestors rather than the primitive form of atavism as suggested by Lombroso.⁵⁷⁵ Likhachev stated that, despite its dubious and outdated biological and psychological aspects, Lombroso had been correct in defining 'degenerative' characteristics of the offender but pointed out that these could be overcome by making a change to the socio-economic environment.⁵⁷⁶

Confining his analysis to argot practised solely by thieves' (some of whom he stated did not use slang) and separating it from the more widespread use of *blatnaia muzika*, Likhachev showed how

⁵⁷¹ Galler & Marqueses, *Soviet Prison Camp Speech*, p.43.

⁵⁷² For a further biography during this period: Likhachev, *Reflections on the Russian Soul*; Anna Reid, *Leningrad: Tragedy of a City under Siege, 1941-44* (London, 2011), pp.36-7.

⁵⁷³ Likhachev. 'Cherty pervobytnogo primitivizma vorovskoi rechi', p.56.

⁵⁷⁴ Gernet. *Prestupnyi Mir Moskvy*, p.229.

⁵⁷⁵ Gernet, *Prestupnyi Mir Moskvy*, p.229.

⁵⁷⁶ Likhachev. 'Cherty pervobytnogo primitivizma vorovskoi rechi', p.56.

argot consisted of multiple layers and varying levels of secrecy.⁵⁷⁷ In this sense, Likhachev's work corresponds with observations from both Donald Clemmer and Marek Kaminski who describe slang as a complex phenomenon which all inmates and lower prisoner personnel could use. In dictionaries of camp slang from the Gulag this is reflected in institutional terms and camp topography such as commonly used names for brigades (*brigade*), disciplinary barracks (*barak usilennogo rezhima* or *BUR*) 'meeting houses' (*dom svidanni*) punishment cells (*isolator* or *SHIZO*) and *detkoloniya* (children's colony). These institutional terms also included other camp sub-sections such as kitchens, infirmary and storage areas (*ochastok*) and locations within individual barracks, for example the upper bed-boards usually occupied by criminals (*vehotura*). These names were known by all prisoners, camp personnel and often recognised outside the camps.⁵⁷⁸

Although the slang terms found in memoirs can help provide some insight, dictionaries compiled by former prisoners provide a better reflection of their overall structure and scale. Meyer Galler and Harlan Marquess's 1972 dictionary *Soviet Prison Camp Speech*, based on Galler's ten year sentence in various sections of Karlag, contains over six hundred entries. The authors subsequently divide this total into five categories: *proverbs and sayings, abbreviations, criminal argot, obscenities* and *residue* which did not fit into the previous categories (of which the most frequent are names for fellow prisoners and derisive terms).⁵⁷⁹ Distinguishing criminal argot from prison camp speech as a general rule, the authors suggest, however, that the entomology of over one hundred terms could be derived from the 'special vocabulary' used by criminals. A similar method is employed in former prisoner Jacques Rossi's extensive *Gulag Handbook*. Rossi's collection was compiled from over 3000 card files collected by the author between 1937-1961, following 'interviews' with thousands of fellow inmates. These took place in locations such as Lubianka, Butyrki, several dozen transit prisons, Noril'sk labour camp, Aleksandrova and Vladimir central prisons and included prisoners who had experience of both pre-revolutionary imprisonment and early Soviet institutions. Like Galler and Marquess, Rossi separated his study into a number of categories including popular (in use within and

⁵⁷⁷ Likhachev. 'Cherty pervobytnogo primitivizma vorovskoi rechi', p.55. For a further description of how penal argot contains varying levels of secrecy: Kaminski, *The Games Prisoners Play*, p.82.

⁵⁷⁸ Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.30, 37.

⁵⁷⁹ Galler & Marquess, *Soviet Prison Camp Speech*, p.36

outside the camps), military, official or institutional, common camp slang, slang used by guards and officers and slang used by criminals.⁵⁸⁰ Alongside these categories, a voluminous collection of swearing is also included in both collections. This is reflected by many memoir accounts which describe widespread use of swearing and other ‘vulgarity’ (especially when used by female prisoners). Indirect or direct blasphemy performed multiple a numbers of functions and could provoke/quell conflict between inmates as one of the ‘conversational devices’ of violence (see previous chapter). However, Steve Smith shows wide and varied use of *mat* (a word closely related to ‘mother’ but has come to denote all taboo words which relate to genitalia and other sexual or bodily functions) also existed between workers during the late Imperial and early Soviet period.⁵⁸¹ Clemmer further describes how prison slang is much the same as amongst prisoners as it is the corresponding class of free men (although he does point out prisoners can come from all social strata).⁵⁸² Regardless of this, scholarship on the camps continues to highlight and largely replicate instances of vulgarity as discussed by memoirists and overlook its multiple layers and usage to assign inmates to different roles.⁵⁸³

Likhachev’s article proposed that, unlike various ‘secret languages’ used by illegal or stigmatised groups, thieves’ argot was easily identifiable and only used by a small group of prisoners.⁵⁸⁴ Linking slang to the thieves’ code of behaviour, Likhachev stated that the majority of words had accidental or anecdotal origins and rarely lasted more than a couple of months.⁵⁸⁵ Cross-referencing several words with their usage in penal argot from different countries, Likhachev stated that terms such as ‘academy’ or ‘school’ (to refer to prison) resulted in an ‘illusion of translation’ as they were merely universal metaphors. Alongside their short life expectancy, words or phrases could be confined solely to one particular gang, and in some cases just the leader, or until they were

⁵⁸⁰ Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*.

⁵⁸¹ Steve Smith, ‘The Social Meanings of Swearing: Workers and Bad Language in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia’, *Past & Present*, no.160 (1998), p.167-202.

⁵⁸² Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, p.88.

⁵⁸³ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, p.90.

⁵⁸⁴ Gambetta, *Codes of the Underworld*, p.157. Also Daniel Healey’s chapter ‘Depravity’s Artel’ which describes how a homosexual subculture including its own sexualised geography, rituals of contact and socialisation, signals and gestures, and fraternal language emerged across the revolutionary divide of 1917: Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, pp.29-49.

⁵⁸⁵ Likhachev. ‘Cherty pervobytnogo primitivizma vorovskoi rechi’, p.57.

discovered by detectives.⁵⁸⁶ Likhachev suggested that argot defined not only roles in the immediate hierarchical structure between thieves but viewed also to label those viewed contemptuously.⁵⁸⁷

This second layer of secrecy indicates how a degree of familiarity with penal argot could provide an insight into a prisoner's social role, intelligence, previous experience and current sentence. For some memoirists and young inmates, penal slang (like tattooing) formed a key part of their induction into camp life and the development of their linguistic skills presented opportunities for upward mobility.⁵⁸⁸ For others, however, it could see relegation through penal hierarchy. Aided by the circulation of gossip and rumour, Skarbeck suggests that the development of precise meanings helps to define relationships between different sets of prisoners.⁵⁸⁹ Verbal intimidation, therefore, not only provides a marker of dominant status for individuals (see previous chapter) but clear definitions demonstrate attempts to assign inmates to a particular role with some terms carrying stronger connotations because they label prisoners as the most despised class of inmates.⁵⁹⁰

As noted by Sykes, labelling prisoners with stereotypes plays a critical role in enforcing hierarchies of power. By characterising certain types of behaviour inmates provide themselves with shorthand which compresses a range of experiences into a manageable framework. This was demonstrated in the Gulag by a number of roles not only amongst higher echelons of penal society but also various subordinate groups.⁵⁹¹ For example, a number of derogatory names were attached to 'outsiders' (*fraera*). This included *asfal't traturovich* (engineer), *baklazhan pomidorovich* (a prisoner originally from the Caucasus), *sidor polikarpovich* (Slav or someone storing food reserves), *uksus pomidorovich* (member of the intelligentsia or someone who was meticulous in their behaviour) and *fan fanych* (a prisoner considered arrogant).⁵⁹² For the group of 'untouchables' (*opushchennye*), terms included *glavpetuh* ('head cockerel') for an unofficial leader, *mokhnoryly upyr* ('shaggy-faced ghoul') indicating rapists or paedophiles and *buketniki* (bouquet holders), which represented men or

⁵⁸⁶ Likhachev, 'Cherty pervobytnogo primitivizma vorovskoi rechi', p.72.

⁵⁸⁷ Likhachev, 'Cherty pervobytnogo primitivizma vorovskoi rechi', p.65.

⁵⁸⁸ A prisoner's ability to speak argot was often referred to in camp slang as *botat'*: Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.30.

⁵⁸⁹ Skarbeck, *The Social Order of the Underworld*, p.29.

⁵⁹⁰ Skarbeck, *The Social Order of the Underworld*, p.30.

⁵⁹¹ Danzig Baldaev, *Slovar Blatnogo Vorovskogo Zhargona*, (Moscow, 1997).

⁵⁹² Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.10.

women with venereal disease.⁵⁹³ This shows how stereotyping was motivated by sexual and material deprivation along with attitudes toward other prisoners. Kaminiski's study of a prison in communist Poland also notes the connection between slang and hierarchy, listing words and behavioural rules associated with touching various cell objects or parts of other prisoner's anatomy and the clean/unclean division of prison life.⁵⁹⁴ Furthermore, his description shows how the all-encompassing *grypsmen* subculture was more malleable than the rigid categories described by Clemmer.⁵⁹⁵ The same flexibility could be said of *urki*, who took on several roles, while dividing camp life clearly between insides/outsideers.

Likhachev's article stated that the large number of synonyms decreased the value of argot compared to more traditional languages. An example of this could be seen the thirty variations of 'thieves' (each indicating slightly different professional specialities) which all produced their own corresponding verb.⁵⁹⁶ Emphasising the signalling function of argot, Likhachev noted that words were often 'infantile' and did not allow participants to ask any corresponding questions. Although declining to give any examples, for Likhachev the key to slang lay in its 'emotional expressivity' which often revealed itself through swearing.⁵⁹⁷ The use of only two main emotions, positive and negative, helped reveals its primitive origins.⁵⁹⁸ This led to Likhachev concluding that thieves' argot would soon erode alongside various other social groups and professions which created it. This process had been apparent in the disappearance at the turn of the century of a number of trade jargons and Likhachev believed that the remaining examples (such as criminal argot) were now also in the process of disappearing.⁵⁹⁹

Likhachev's scientific approach can be contrasted with an article from the February 1925 edition of *Solovetski Ostrova*. The author of *Blatnye Slovo* ('Criminal Slang'), A. Akarverich described his topic as an 'extremely interesting' and remarkably deep area of linguistics, replete with

⁵⁹³ Danzig Baldaev, *Drawings from the Gulag*, (London, 2010), pp.217-221. For further examples of names given to camp pariahs, such as *govnoed* ('shiteater'): Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.80.

⁵⁹⁴ Kaminski, *The Games Prisoners Play*, p.62.

⁵⁹⁵ Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, pp.111-133.

⁵⁹⁶ Likhachev, 'Cherty pervobytnogo primitivizma vorovskoi rechi', p.78.

⁵⁹⁷ Likhachev, 'Cherty pervobytnogo primitivizma vorovskoi rechi', p.62.

⁵⁹⁸ Likhachev, 'Cherty pervobytnogo primitivizma vorovskoi rechi', p.71.

⁵⁹⁹ Likhachev, 'Cherty pervobytnogo primitivizma vorovskoi rechi', p.94.

well-aimed words and characteristic definitions.⁶⁰⁰ Although these expressions would stretch beyond them, Akarverich suggested that it was inside prison walls that a novice would learn his first words. Stating that some words and influences would be external but the most conspicuous would derive from the experience of prison life, Akarverich claimed that this would change at a much faster rate than language used by the broad public masses in Odessa, Moscow, Rostov, Irkutsk, and throughout the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (SSSR).

According to Akaverich, slang was constructed by the living conditions found in prison. Although he disagreed with Likhachev by stating that the profession of most residents determined a need for secrecy, the formation of language through everyday objects could be seen in alternate words horse (*skameyka*), paper (*ksiva*), trousers (*shkery*) and ‘to run’ (*ukhryat’* or *splitovat’*). This would also extend to specific tools such as the crowbar (*lomik*) which, as an ‘inseparable companion’, was given a gentler, softer name (*fomky*).⁶⁰¹ Akaverich’s article highlighted how dictionaries of prison slang demonstrate that, by including hundreds of items specific to the penal environment, it acts as a complete language capable of describing the world from the prisoners perspective.⁶⁰² Kaminski also shows that, by largely disregarding objects from ‘freedom’, slang can provide a magnifying glass to important components of prison life.⁶⁰³ In the Gulag, this was seen through commonly used terms for tobacco (*makohora*) and bread rations (*paika*).⁶⁰⁴ In later dictionaries, this is further highlighted through the subject of tattooing, where artists became known as *kol'shciki* ('zone prickers') and the needle as *peshnya* (ice pick), *pchyolka* (bee), *shpora* (spur) or *zhalo* (sting). The argot names for the electronic or mechanical device is *mashinka* (typewriter), *bormashina* (dentist’s drill) or *shevinaya*

⁶⁰⁰ A. Akarevich, ‘Blatnye Slova’, *Solovetski Ostrova*, no.2. (February 1925), pp.99-102.

⁶⁰¹ Other tools specific to the criminal environment included a rifle, which would be referred to by using the word for ‘screw’ (*vin*): Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.46

⁶⁰² Some of these include: Danzig Baldaev, *Slovar Blatnogo Vorovskogo Zhargonov v Dvukh Tomakh* (Moscow, 1997); A. Bronnikov & Yu. Dubyagin, *Tolkovyi slovar' ugovolnykh zhargonov: An Explanatory Dictionary of Criminal Slang*, (Moscow, 1993); Yu. Dubyagin, & E. Teplitsky, *Concise English-Russian and Russian-English Dictionary of the Underworld*, (Moscow, 1993); V. Shylakhov, & E. Adler, *Russian Slang and Colloquial Expressions*, (New York, 2006); A. Sidorov, *Slovar' blatnogo i largernogo zhargonov: A Dictionary of Blatnye and Prison Camp Slang*, (Rostov-on-Don, 1992).

⁶⁰³ Kaminski, *The Games Prisoners Play*, p.83.

⁶⁰⁴ Galler & Marquees, *Soviet Prison Camp Speech*, p.76, 91, 105, 105.

maschina (sewing machine), while ink is referred to as *mazut* (fuel oil) or *gryaz'* (dirt).⁶⁰⁵ The tattoo itself is known as *reklama* (advert), *regalka* (regalia) or *kleimo* (brand).⁶⁰⁶

Akarevich also discussed how slang related to gender, highlighting that the conditions of prison life often forced erotic language. This, he stated, led to a half-cynical, half-sentimental attitude toward women which could also be seen in prison songs.⁶⁰⁷ The strange contrast of half-affectionate, half-contemptuous titles toward women could be seen through terms such as *shmara*, *shmarenka*, and *shkitsa* (all derived from *shket*, a young, inexperienced robber). Like Likhachev, Akaverich declined to discuss a number of other terms. Akaverich noted the playful nature of some words, such as '*radio parasha*' (the latrine barrel, known by prisoners as a gossip exchange centre), *menti* ('cops'), *balanda* ('gruel') and *svyatsi* (religious calendar but also a deck of cards). As noted by a number of memoirists, the latrine barrel came with a set of behavioural rules of its own, displaying similarity to Kaminski's description of the Polish equivalent the *Jaruzel'* (named after the chairman of the Polish Communist Party, General Jaruzel).⁶⁰⁸ Akaverich contrasted this humour with prison songs, in which he stated this was almost entirely absent. Prison songs, Akaverich noted, almost always 'borrowed' the tunes of earlier music and fit into pre-existing frameworks usually comprised of melodramatic themes such as an unfair trial, betrayal of a friend or lover and loneliness. These frameworks did not fit into real-life experiences, as they often suppressed and distorted the truth. Therefore, Akaverich concluded that, while songs provided 'rich material' a much clearer reflection of daily life could be found by studying argot.⁶⁰⁹

Akarevich's article also highlighted how the verb for 'knocking' (*stuchat*), was often substituted for 'speaking' (*govorit*). This reinforced the use of other forms of communication, as in the well-known case of 'wall language'. This tradition has been noted by numerous memoirists who describe how information is disseminated through a series of taps corresponding to a given letter

⁶⁰⁵ *Mazut* is also used to describe the most valuable food products such as sugar, sausage, tea, fats and jam. This therefore equates tattoo ink with the highest material values: Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.17.

⁶⁰⁶ Plutser-Sarno, 'The Language of the Body and Politics: The Symbolism of Thieves' Tattoos', p.31.

⁶⁰⁷ Akarevich, 'Blatnye Slova', p.99.

⁶⁰⁸ Kaminski, *The Games Prisoners Play*, p.62

⁶⁰⁹ Akarevich, 'Blatnye Slova' p.

(referred to using the slang term *probit'*, to knock).⁶¹⁰ The initial phase of imprisonment in individual cells, or later within the camps punishment cells, necessitated alternate methods of communication between prisoners. Maksimov recalled the prevalence of wall tapping in late Imperial penalty, referring to how the Decembrists developed an effective system during their imprisonment.⁶¹¹ Ginzburg also referred to the same process, stating how she learned of this method by reading the memoirs of Vera Figner.⁶¹²

Criminal prisoners have been most regularly associated with the circulation of *ksiva* (notes) passed between inmates often during transportation.⁶¹³ Although Likhachev suggested that hand gestures provided a code similar to maritime or sign language, many other methods were created from items familiar to the prison environment.⁶¹⁴ For example, a 1939 report from Krasnoyarsk described how, in the common prison, there was ‘‘practically no cell isolation.....by use of threads, cords, ropes and even planks prisoners systematically pass correspondence, objects and products from one cell to another. Meetings between prisoners from different cells during transfers became common practice.’’⁶¹⁵ This shows that while knowledge of methods of communication, such as wall tapping, was utilised by inmates familiar with the canon of Russian prison writing, there were other techniques which could also be copied and used by prisoners of all backgrounds.⁶¹⁶

Visual and verbal methods of communication are common features of Gulag historiography yet little consideration has been made to their role as twin carriers of culture. This is highlighted by how widespread publication of memoirs aided the dissemination of penal slang. Although certain words

⁶¹⁰ Olenik, *Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Society*, p.61

⁶¹¹ Maksimov, *Sibir' I Katorga*, pp.159-160.

⁶¹² Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, p.71.

⁶¹³ Olenik, *Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Society*, p.60; Slade, *Reorganizing Crime*, p.120

⁶¹⁴ Likhachev, 'Cherty pervobytnogo primitivizma vorovskoi rechi', p.87.

⁶¹⁵ Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, p.239. Donald Clemmer also discusses other forms of communication such as the 'grapevine', the language, the 'kites' and letters: Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, p.88.

⁶¹⁶ Judith Scheffler, (ed.), *Wall Tappings: An International Anthology of Women's Prison Writings 200 to the Present*, (New York, 2002), p.xxxiv.

and phrases were undoubtedly known and circulated beforehand, this is often attributed to the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* 1962. Miriam Dobson has shown how reader responses became fixated on the question of criminal lexicon. Although many initial reviews were generally positive, one literary critic, Fedor Chapchakhov, raised a discerning voice regarding Solzhenitsyn's use of *blatnaia muzyka*. This was surpassed, however, by the responses of ordinary readers who found Solzhenitsyn's form, which one reader declared was composed in the jargon of the 'thief, the recidivist and the bandit'⁶¹⁷ shameful and disgusting. This reaction, which anticipated a cult forming around thieves jargon, played into wider societal concerns regarding gulag returnees, rising levels of crime and the effect that bad language might have on Soviet *kul'turnost'*.⁶¹⁸ Nevertheless, Solzhenitsyn continued to use *blatnaia muzyka* in *The Oak and the Calf*⁶¹⁹ as did Andrey Sinyavsky in *A Voice from The Chorus*. Sinyavsky was particularly fascinated by criminal subculture, taking his literary pseudonym, Abram Tertz, from a prison song about a legendary Jewish thief.⁶²⁰ Widespread publication of dictionaries in the 1990s aided this even further. Although he showed a tremendous amount of insight elsewhere, Likhachev was incorrect in his assertion that slang would disappear, with one third of the terms of slang during this period now used in contemporary linguistic constructions.⁶²¹ As with criminal tattoos, widespread publication and conflation of folklore and historical fact has meant that the prominent function of highlighting what is important in camp life and assigning inmates to different roles has been underrepresented in pre-existing scholarship. The importance of transmitting strong messages and the role it played in constructing penal hierarchies, can be observed again through card playing, another prominent feature of memoir accounts.

⁶¹⁷ Miriam Dobson, 'Contesting the Paradigms of De-Stalinization: Readers' Responses to 'One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich'', *Slavic Review*, 64:3 (2005), p.590.

⁶¹⁸ Dobson, 'Contesting the Paradigms of De-Stalinization', p.590.

⁶¹⁹ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf*, trans. Harry Willets (New York, 1980).

⁶²⁰ Abraham Tertz, *Voice from the Chorus*, trans. Kiril FitzLyon & Max Howard (Yale, 1995).

⁶²¹ Olenik, Crime, *Prison and Post-Soviet Society*, p.4.

Chapter 5

Card Playing and Structuring of Penal Hierarchies

‘They were playing cards on Naumov’s berth in the barracks for the mine’s horse drivers. The overseer on duty never looked into that barracks, since he considered his main duty was to keep an eye on prisoners convicted according to Article 58 of the Criminal Code – political prisoners. In a word, the horse-drivers barracks was the safest place to be, and every night the criminal element in the camp gathered there to play cards.’

Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*⁶²²

The above excerpt, from Varlam Shalamov’s short story ‘On Tick’, demonstrates the ubiquitous nature of card playing in the notorious penal region of Kolyma and raises interesting questions as to the location of the games, in this case the horse-drivers barracks. Shalamov described how a ‘home-made’ deck of cards was created from paper, bread, an indelible pencil stub, a knife and pages cut from a book by Victor Hugo, detailing one of the main participants as Seva, ran expert on classic card games such as *bura*, *stoss* and *terz*, and his opponent, Naumov, a railroad thief from the Kuban region. After losing his pants, jacket, pillow, blanket, a Ukrainian towel embroidered with roosters and, finally, a cigarette case adorned with a profile of Gogol, Naumov was permitted by Seva to continue playing ‘on tick’ (an agreement between both players for one of them to pay later) despite Shalamov narrating how this was against the unwritten ‘rules’ of prisoner society.

Following this temporary reprieve, Naumov was able to momentarily recoup his losses, winning back his blanket, pillow and pants from Seva before subsequently losing them again, at which point his opponent demanded further payment, resulting in Naumov searching through the onlookers in the dimly lit barracks for items to make up the remainder of his debt. Demanding a coat from Shalamov’s narrator, who offered little resistance, Naumov then decided upon two items of clothing worn by the textile engineer Garkunov, whose refusal to hand over a wool sweater given to him by his wife upon his departure to Siberia meant that he was pinned down and beaten by

⁶²² Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, pp.18-24.

Naumov's companions before being stabbed to death by his orderly, Sasha. The story ended with the bloodied garment being handed over to Seva, who placed it in his suitcase and declared that the debt had been cleared and the game was over, leaving Shalamov's narrator to reflect on his need to find a new wood cutting partner.⁶²³

Shalamov's melancholic account suggests that, despite being officially prohibited, the proclivity of gambling was well-known by camp employees, many of whom, like Naumov, were prisoners themselves. Although archival evidence refers to gambling as a disciplinary issue for both prisoners and guards, they explicitly avoid linking the two groups, therefore contradicting memoir accounts which describe the two groups often occupying the same social sphere. Alongside this, recent work by Wilson Bell on 'de-convoyed' (*raskonvoirovannye*, unescorted or unguarded) prisoners, who were allowed restricted movement outside of the camps, and the transitional community of "free workers" suggests that we may need to broaden our definitions of who constitutes a prisoner and who is an employee (an extension of Primo Levi's 'grey zone'). Bell's study demonstrates that the negotiation of camp borders often had an impact on the relationship between low-level staff and prisoners, describing how, alongside the centralised Gulag supply-network, there was a steady flow of black market trade between the camps and surrounding areas.⁶²⁴ Suggesting a number of fissures, both vertical and horizontal, between different departments and camps in the larger Gulag apparatus, Bell's work highlights the importance of personal connections (*blat*) at ground-level.⁶²⁵

As with prisoner songs, tattooing and slang, previous scholarship has often regarded activities such as card playing as a natural component of penal societies, as prisoners attempt to reclaim time for their own activities as a result of the strictly-disciplined routine and monotony associated with their daily lives. In the Russian case, however, gambling motifs have a larger association with criminal subculture. The most explicit example of this being the role of the *shestyorka*, literally

⁶²³ Shalamov. *Kolyma Takes*, pp.3-14.

⁶²⁴ Bell, 'Was the Gulag an Archipelago?'

⁶²⁵ See work of Shelia Fitzpatrick and Alena Ledeneva regarding the importance of informal networks in Soviet society: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York, 1999); Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours*.

translated as ‘sixer’, whose name derived from the lowest card in a standard Russian thirty six card deck.⁶²⁶ The special place occupied by card playing is also expressed by Anisimkov who recalls that the phrase ‘sentenced to hard labour without time’ was often changed to ‘condemned to a perpetual card game.’⁶²⁷ This unity is further demonstrated by the slang phrase *derzhat’ mast’* (‘to hold the suit’) meaning to have power and authority over other prisoners.⁶²⁸ In this example *mast’*, which can also refer to a particular ‘suit’ of cards, plays an important role in prisoner hierarchy, embracing multiple collective values such as an entire class of inmates, a small group or community with a particular speciality, that speciality itself, or an individual’s own fate, happiness or luck.⁶²⁹ In his study of Russian prison society in the 1990s, Oleinik described a caste system which divided male prisoners into *blatnye* and ‘real men’ (*mujiki*) at the top and ‘suits’ (*masti, sherst’, neputevye*) marginal individuals with no rights at the bottom.⁶³⁰ Furthermore, Pallot, Piacenti and Moran show that, while penal authorities in contemporary Russia are faced with different problems controlling inmate organisation than in the period of this study, some men’s correctional colonies authorities can only maintain order with the co-operation of criminal gangs. In prison slang these colonies are referred to as *chernaya zona* (‘black zone’ as opposed to ‘red zones’ controlled by prison administrators) or simply *mast’*.⁶³¹ Despite the persistence of this gambling motif throughout camp folklore, it remains imperative to note the changes which took place in regards to prisoner demographic and the shifting nature of the institutions. For Shalamov, gambling represented a clear link between criminal subculture of Tsarist penalty and his own experiences in Kolyma (1937-1951) yet there are some important differences to highlight between card playing activities in the Gulag and those which took place during late Imperial *katorga*.

⁶²⁶ Rossi lists *shestyorka* as ‘lackey’/‘flunkey’ (*kholuy*), noting that this term could apply to many criminals: Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.322.

⁶²⁷ Anisimkov, *Tyuremnaya obshchina*, p.18.

⁶²⁸ Condee, ‘Body Graphics: Tattooing the Fall of Communism’, p.350.

⁶²⁹ Sidorov, ‘The Russian Criminal Tattoo: Past and Present’, p.25. Alexi Plutser-Sarner lists *mast’ muzhikov* (the suit of ‘real’ men), *mast’ blatnykh* (the suit of ‘thieves’) and *mast’ kozlov* (‘goats’, a derogatory term for homosexual), showing that the ‘suit’ concept covered not only the higher ranks of penal society, but any section united by particular traits: Baldaev (ed.), *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia Vol.1*, p.43.

⁶³⁰ Oleinik, *Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Societies* p.65

⁶³¹ Pallot, Piacentini & Moran, ‘Patriotic Discourses in Russia’s Penal Peripheries: Remembering the Mordovan Gulag’, p.13.

Kartzhnaya Igra ('The Card Game')

Descriptions of the ubiquitous nature of gambling appear in numerous accounts of late Imperial penalty. These observations were posited by Dostoevskii, who noted in his fictionalised memoir that when the prison room at Omsk Fortress was shut at night it developed a 'special aspect' in which the foul atmosphere of the room grew worse from hour to hour, with gambling taking place all through the night and sometimes until daybreak when the door was finally opened.⁶³² After visiting Sakhalin, Anton Chekhov described card playing as 'an evil which spread its influence far beyond the limits of the prison' and the gambling-house as a 'little Monte Carlo, developing in the prisoner an infectious passion for *shtoss* and games of chance.'⁶³³ Charles Hawes investigation of the natives and convicts of Sakhalin also reported that, in the islands Aleksandrovsk 'chains prison' (*kandal'naia tiurma*), which housed the more dangerous prisoners, prisoners gambled surreptitiously to relieve their 'idleness and *ennui*', stating that if a prisoner had no money or secret store of food then there were extra-ordinary 'underground ways' to continue playing, such as staking tools, clothes or rations for the month ahead, the last of which was regarded as a 'debt of honour'.

Using the same comparison to Monte Carlo as Chekhov, Hawes described how prisoners who had gambled everything away were subsequently 'put into a cell, and with his own consent starved for every two days and fed on the third, thus accumulating rations to his credit, which are taken in payment of his debt.'⁶³⁴ Vlas Doroshevich's accounts of gambling further illuminated penal society, describing how terms such as *Bardadym!* (King), *Zamorskaia figura!* ('Foreign figurine', two) *Bratskoe okoshko!* ('Brothers little window', four), and *Atanda!* ('Wait!'), could be heard during dinner hour, in the evening and through night until early morning, stating how gambling represented a mass illness which altered 'the entire structure, the whole life, of the prison, and turns all relationships head over heels.'⁶³⁵

⁶³² Dostoevskii, *The House of the Dead*, p.47. Dostoevskii was no stranger to gambling, displayed in his short novel *Igrok* ('The Gambler') which describes his own addiction to roulette and was allegedly written under a strict deadline to pay off gambling debts.

⁶³³ Chekhov, *Journey to Sakhalin*, p.117.

⁶³⁴ Hawes, C. *In the Uttermost East*, p.150-151.

⁶³⁵ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.232.

While a stricter penal regime existed elsewhere, archival documents reveal problems faced by authorities in controlling various inmate activities which included gambling.⁶³⁶ This includes a 1910 report from the Main Prison administration which stated that the ‘weakening of the prison regime has resulted in drunkenness, depravity, card-playing and frequent escapes and crimes’⁶³⁷ To avoid detection, games would often take place in the infirmary or the chains prison, with a makeshift guard (*strema* or *stremshchik*) used to alert participants to any danger of the game being interrupted. According to Doroshevich, this was done by calling out ‘Spook!’ for a guard, ‘Six!’ for someone more senior or ‘Water!’ for other potential interruptions.⁶³⁸ The omnipresence of these activities meant that some prisoners could derive income from selling or loaning handmade playing cards. These were sometimes referred to as *chaldonki* (from *chaldon*, a native pun for fugitive or convict and also a Siberian-born prison official) with cards illustrated with human blood regarded as particularly valuable.⁶³⁹ Doroshevich described that, while a preference remained to use ‘good packs’ of handmade cards, real cards were also available from the *maidan*. Although regularly referenced in first-hand sources, the *maidan* is largely absent from official documentation. A 1876 memorandum from Nerchinsk Prison in East Siberia warned that ‘only wardens, and in certain cases *starosty* (‘prisoner-bosses’) could receive deliveries of food and other items’, obliquely in response to the proclivity of the *maidan*, while a report from an official in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Main Administration of Eastern Siberia highlighted the damaging effects of *maidany*, contraband vodka and corrupt guards in the prisons of Kara Valley.⁶⁴⁰ Regardless of the official prohibition, George Kennan suggested that, due to a lack of personnel, prison wardens welcomed the *maidan* and other self-regulating mechanisms which were supervised by the prison *artel*.⁶⁴¹

Dostoevskii also recalled how, during his incarceration, in almost every prison room there was a convict who kept a threadbare rug a yard wide, a candle, and a ‘greasy pack of cards’, all of

⁶³⁶ Bruce Adams, *The Politics of Punishment: Prison Reform in Russia, 1863-1917*, (Illinois, 1996).

⁶³⁷ Gentes, ‘*Beat the Devil!*’, p.206.

⁶³⁸ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.204.

⁶³⁹ Maksimov, *Sibir i Katorga*, pp.121-22.

⁶⁴⁰ Gentes, ‘*Beat the Devil!*’, p.206.

⁶⁴¹ George Kennan described the *artel* as ‘a small but durable group which enforced solidarity and punished disloyalty and disobedience through often violent punishments which were rationalised as protecting the solidarity of the collective’: Kennan, G. *Siberia and the Exile System*, Vol. 1

which was collectively known as the *maiden*.⁶⁴² In Doroshevich's words, the *maidan* was 'the prisons snack bar, tavern, tobacco shop, gambling casino and pawnshop' and comprised of a small locker containing milk, eggs, meat and bread alongside sugar and cigarettes, with prohibited items such as vodka and playing cards hidden from view.⁶⁴³ This was reinforced by Chekhov, who noted that, on the plank bed of the proprietor of the *maiden* (the *maidanshchik*), stood a green or brown chest of around one and a half arshins (Russian unit of measurement equal to 28 inches) surrounded by pieces of sugar and small white bread rolls along with cigarettes, bottles of milk and other goods wrapped in bits of paper and grubby rags.⁶⁴⁴

Doroshevich suggested that the *maiden* was traditionally run by *brodyaga* (vagabonds), before economic primacy shifted to group of Tatar moneylenders known as 'mothers' (as opposed to Russian 'fathers') who conducted their business under license from prison authorities. According to Chekhov, *maidanshchik* did not relinquish their 'lucrative occupations' even after release into the surrounding colony.⁶⁴⁵ As well as benefitting from inflated prices from loaning money to gamblers who wanted to keep playing despite losing all of their possessions, the *maidanshchik* paid fifteen kopecks to any inmate prepared to play 'prisoners preference' (*arestanskii preferans*), or twenty kopecks to take part in the games *shtos* or 'to-the-death' (*v konchinku*).⁶⁴⁶ Once the games were over, usually in the morning, other fees also had to be paid. According to Doroshevich, the winning players would hand over five to ten percent of his winnings to the *maidanshchik*, who then gave five percent of this to the croupier (although they sometimes doubled in this role).⁶⁴⁷

Card playing was among the variety of 'initiation' tests used to trick new inmates into accumulating debts with experienced prisoners. Alongside the *maidanshchik* and croupier, Doroshevich also reported a number of further roles which related specifically to the prevalence of gambling. Fitting into the more general picture that inmates involved in financial activities on Sakhalin were able to exercise informal power, a 'player' (*igrok*) was someone who displayed

⁶⁴² Dostoevskii, *House of the Dead*, p.47.

⁶⁴³ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.204

⁶⁴⁴ Chekhov, *A Journey to Sakhalin*, p.117

⁶⁴⁵ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.211; Chekhov, *A Journey to Sakhalin*, p.117.

⁶⁴⁶ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.204. Dostoevskii also lists a number of other games such as 'hillock' and 'three leaves': Dostoevskii, *House of the Dead*, p.47.

⁶⁴⁷ Gentes, 'Beat the Devil!', p.214.

expertise in the various games. This status was often not attained through their proficiency in cheating, however, with Doroshevich stating that gambling on Sakhalin was ‘absolutely and without fail unfair’, and that ‘gambler’ and ‘cheater’ could be considered synonyms.⁶⁴⁸ Repeated success meant that ‘players’ could employ a *sukharnik* (‘husk’) to perform work duties in their place and, at least one, *podduvala* whose main tasks were to deliver meals, clean their place on the bunks and make tea.

The nature of gambling, albeit in this poorly regulated form, often premeditates a fall and gamblers who lost everything became known as *zhigany* (at this point one of the lowest categories in prisoner hierarchy). The transient nature of their agency quickly disappeared and penal society remorselessly turned upon them, appropriating their belongings, forcing them to sleep on the floor and administering physical punishment if they were unable to re-pay their debt. These prisoners were then forced to survive by cleaning the wards, emptying the *parasha* and hiring out their services as a *podduvala* to more successful players.⁶⁴⁹ The role of makeshift guard could also be taken by a *zhigan*, according to Dostoyevskii receiving five kopecks per night to keep lookout while the games took place, at a price of often standing for five or six hours in the entryway at minus thirty degrees listening intently for every sound or tap on the door.⁶⁵⁰

Accounts of gambling were also included in the fictionalised memoir of Petr Iakubovich, arrested in 1884 after his contact details was found of People’s Will members. First serialised in 1895, Iakubovich recalled how, after being separated from other administrative exiles at Irkutsk prison, he lived in a ‘noble’ room alongside described a twenty-six year old former army deserter named Tiupkin, who tended after him. Tiupkin was a ‘fearsome gambler’ who often borrowed money from Iakubovich before disappearing to play *shtos* until he lost everything down to his last kopeck. When questioned by Iakubovich about why he had turned himself to the authorities, Tiupkin replied that he

⁶⁴⁸ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.445.

⁶⁴⁹ Gentes, ‘Beat the Devil!’, p.213.

⁶⁵⁰ Dostoevskii, *The House of the Dead*, p.48.

had fled the military as a result of his longing for ‘drinkin’ ‘n cards’, twin passions which prison life would allow him to indulge.⁶⁵¹

Like many accounts of late Imperial penalty, Iakubovich connected gambling to the potential for prison reform, suggesting that distribution of the *stipend* (allowance with which exiles could purchase food along the transportation route) could be changed in favour of handing out soup and bread at way stations. Iakubovich suggested that this would have a detrimental effect on the activities of the ‘worst half’ of prisoners, namely card-sharps and tight-fisted *maidanshchiki* (about one of whom Iakubovich claimed had also been involved in prostituting a young woman who had voluntarily followed him⁶⁵²). These prisoners would no longer be willing to trade items and would, therefore, lead to a reduction in the number of prisoners drawn to the ‘prison *maideny*, card game(s), and other fascinations.’⁶⁵³ Iakubovich’s account shows that, although gambling played an important role in structuring penal hierarchies, during this period it was almost exclusively linked to the activities of the *maiden*. Although revolution, war, and the growth of the Gulag, would see the *maiden* disappear from view, card playing continued to be a key feature of daily life in the camps.

Kartezhnye igry ugolovnikov (‘Card Games of the Criminals’)

As discussed in chapter 2, card playing continued to play an important role in K. E. Utomskii’s account of prisoner society at Vyatlag, which described *shpana* as ‘card masters’ and described the money which it provided for different groups.⁶⁵⁴ Gambling was to feature even more prominently, however, in an article written by Dmitrii Likhachev in January 1930. In the second, and final, article produced by the camps criminological department, Likhachev began *Kartezhnye igry ugolovnikov* (‘Card Games of the Criminals’) by describing the ‘considerable importance’ that card games had on climbing the ranks of ‘fraudulent qualifications’. The differences between high-ranking criminals

⁶⁵¹ P. F. Iakubovich, *In the World of the Outcasts: Notes of a Former Penal Laborer*, (New York, 2013) pp.21-23.

⁶⁵² Iakubovich, *In the World of the Outcasts*, p.25.

⁶⁵³ Iakubovich, *In the World of the Outcasts*, p.18.

⁶⁵⁴ Utomskii, ‘Tyuremnyye Byt’.

were subtle enough for them to be divided into a *dukhovym* (brass), which Likhachev's footnotes described as a 'big' thief, and a *zhigan*, considered to be a 'genuine', brave criminal looked upon as a hero to the lower-ranked *shpana*.⁶⁵⁵ Likhachev's definition clearly states how *zhigan* were regarded as an authoritative prisoner, displaying a marked difference from Doroshevich's earlier definition which placed them on a lowly rung in prisoner society.

Likhachev recalled how those not prepared to risk money and rags, alongside their lives or loyalty to 'thieves' ethics', were considered to be a 'cheap person' (*deshevogo cheloveka*). Linking gambling inside the camps with life on the outside, he stated how experienced criminals would always carry a pack of cards and be ready to play under any circumstances, even when going 'to work' (used in the same way as the song from chapter 1). Likhachev reflected that, for these individuals, gambling directed all of their actions, describing this as a current which flowed through their nervous system. Although the spatial organisation of camp life made this difficult, playing cards gave prisoners the same psychological sensation of risk which they found in their crimes.⁶⁵⁶ Many 'crooks' (*zhuliki*) compared winning at cards to a daring theft, with one pickpocket describing how it provided the same sensation as slipping his hand onto a fat wallet (*tolstyy bumazhnik*). This connection, according to Likhachev, was further emphasised through the prisoners 'figurative language', which likened playing cards to being chased by a team of police investigators, with 'cards' often replacing well-known criminal instruments such as the 'skeleton key' (*fomka*).⁶⁵⁷

Reflecting that the same division evident elsewhere in the pages of the Solovki press, games could be divided into *frayera* and *svoi*, with prisoners in the second group, which included *shpana*, exclusively playing such games as *stos*, *bura*, *rams* and *ters*, with *frayera* taking part in a number of other games. Although low-level *shpana* groups, such as 'lice' (*vshi*) and so-called 'jolly beggars' (*veselie nishie*, described as 'young *shpana*') would play 'common' games such as *ochko* and *petukha*, any real 'brass' (*dukhovym*) looked upon these activities with disdain. Likhachev discussed

⁶⁵⁵ Likhachev, 'Kartezhnye igry ugolovnikov', p.32.

⁶⁵⁶ Likhachev's article reinforces gambling counsellors and psychologists, who have noted that card games can provide an outlet for individuals accustomed to 'high-risk' behaviour. Andrew Gentes notes the link between gambling, impulsivity and risk-taking, along with his definition of 'high-risk personalities' (in reference to repeat offenders who often took risks): Gentes, 'Beat the Devil!', pp. 214-215. The core of prisoners participating in the card games described by Likhachev would also broadly fit into this category.

⁶⁵⁷ Likhachev, 'Kartezhnye igry ugolovnikov', p.32.

how before the war, craps (a dice game in which bets are taken on the outcome of a roll of the dice) had strongly competed with cards. By the early 1930s, however, playing craps was virtually extinct, giving way to *bura*, *rams*, and Solovki's 'most popular game', *stos*.⁶⁵⁸ According to prisoners the main reason for the continued popularity of *stos* lay in its convenience in being played extremely fast (in case of any interruption), an advantageous trait over games such as *ters* and *rams* which all required a calm, peaceful environment.⁶⁵⁹ In order to demonstrate the popularity of *stos*, Likhachev reproduced a poem written by a *svoi* prisoner which first appeared on the Kond Island wall newspaper in March 1926:

After breakfast play,
Reopen the casino,
Enough players everywhere,
Players everywhere full.

One hid behind the stove,
And puffed like a steam train,
The other in the corner huddled,
Neatly dealing wonderful '*stos*'.

Instantly the cards were dealt,
It is impossible to know how (this was done).
If the platoon is confiscated,
At the ready again.

Suddenly we dispersed as 'cats',
'alarm', brothers – we are on fire!
Two unfortunates were caught,

⁶⁵⁸ Shtos was listed in Galler & Mayer's dictionary of prison slang as a popular game of chance resembling the popular French game *faro*, or *Pharaoh*: Galler, & Marquess, *Soviet Prison Camp Speech*, p.185.

⁶⁵⁹ Likhachev. 'Kartezhnye igry ugovnikov', p.33.

Captured by the commander.⁶⁶⁰

In order to highlight the difference between the groups *frayera* and *svoi*, Likhachev stated how games played by *shpana* must satisfy two requirements; the first being that the game should always be of commercial interest (stating that in 13th company checkers (*shashki*) and chess (*shakhmat*) were also played for money), and the second being that games should never be left to chance (*na sluchay*).⁶⁶¹ Reported how, on Solovki, there were card ‘masters’ who would win at least six times out of ten, Likhachev agreed with Doroshevich’s description of how ‘gambler’ and ‘cheater’ could be considered synonyms by claiming that cheating had been ‘institutionalised’ amongst prisoner society.⁶⁶² Despite their propensity for bending the rules, Likhachev observed how games could be interrupted if any of the participants suspected that cheating had taken place and, provided that they explained correctly how it how this had taken place, the challenger would receive the pot.⁶⁶³

These games would usually be played for money, rags or ‘on tick’ (*pod otvet*) but highly valued items regarded as ‘cherished’ (*zavetnoye*) or ‘blood’ (*krov*) such as underwear, coats, pillows and rations were not played for by ‘rogues’ (*zhulikami*). This stipulation was considered so important that old thieves recalling how, during their time, if they saw any of these items being waged they considered themselves to have the right to attack both players and end the game. Likhachev lamented, however, that ‘cherished’ items were being played for with increasing frequency by ‘lice’ and ‘cheap people’ on Solovki giving the example that, in 13th company, prisoners began by staking ‘junk and rags’ followed by lunch and dinner rations before, finally, playing ‘on tick’ with every remaining items they still had. This situation resulted in the best three players in the company claiming every possible item, with medical staff required to force-feed the remaining 150 prisoners while guards watched them carefully to make sure they did not hide any bread rations in order to pay off their debt.⁶⁶⁴

⁶⁶⁰ Likhachev, ‘Kartezhnye igry ugodovnikov’, p.33.

⁶⁶¹ Likhachev, ‘Kartezhnye igry ugodovnikov’, p.33. 13th Company was the work battalion Likhachev was originally assigned to before he joined *Krimkab*: Likhachev, *Reflections*, p.103.

⁶⁶² Likhachev, ‘Kartezhnye igry ugodovnikov’, p.33.

⁶⁶³ Likhachev, ‘Kartezhnye igry ugodovnikov’, p.34.

⁶⁶⁴ Likhachev, ‘Kartezhnye igry ugodovnikov’, p.35.

Failure to pay on time could result in prisoners being declared an ‘outlaw’ (*zaigrannim*), viewed in the same way ‘bitches’ (*ssuchennymi*) and passive pederasts (*passivnymi pederastami*). This could also result in a group decision to ensure the debt was paid ‘by blood’, in which the offending prisoner was forced to stand with his arms at his side and unable to defend himself against his attackers. After this beating had been administered, the prisoner was not necessarily required to pay, but remained as a low-ranking prisoner. To emphasise this, Likhachev reproduced an old *svoi* folktale about a prisoner who owed two hundred roubles and was ordered to pay up ‘in fifteen minutes’. According to the story, after this time had expired the prisoner went to the bindery and cut off two fingers with a knife on his own accord, rather than waiting to receive the punishment from other prisoners.⁶⁶⁵

Likhachev stated that old criminals (*starii ugolovniki*), would swear an oath to their freedom (seen as one of the biggest sacrifices) carefully calculating how much money they could afford to lose, not becoming too attached to losses but, similarly, not expressing joy at winning large amounts. Outside prison, Likhachev clarified, criminals would often steal immediately after losing in order to repay their debt. On the occasion of them being arrested for doing so, they were not required to pay back the debt until the first opportunity after their release.⁶⁶⁶ According to Likhachev, on Solovki the number of cases where ‘*vishivok*’ (‘lice’) failed to pay back their debts was numerous, resulting in ‘thieves ethics’ being greatly disturbed and the influence of old criminals gradually declining. Furthermore, some games could be orchestrated in order to ostracise certain individuals who were not allowed to speak or touch common bowls. Recalling how, traditionally, games could be played for the affection or ownership of ‘mistresses’ (*lyubovnitsa*), losses in these games of so-called revenge resulted from over-ambition and could include the removal of gold teeth or other body parts, such as fingers and ears. Likhachev likened these types of game to an old-fashioned duel which could also be used to pay back personal grievances. According to the article, revenge on opponents after the games had ended was also considered ‘legitimate’, as was the actions of an outsider who carried out their

⁶⁶⁵ Likhachev, ‘Kartezhnye igry ugolovnikov’, p.35.

⁶⁶⁶ Likhachev, ‘Kartezhnye igry ugolovnikov’, p.36.

own vigilante-style punishment on one of the players if they had witnessed some kind of indiscretion during the game.

Likhachev concluded his article by describing how the '*shpana* milieu' was in near terminal decline, and, as a result of prisoners reporting to the authorities, debts were becoming impossible to recover. In the situation of 'half-work, half-freedom' in the Solovki camp, *shpana* 'laws' could no longer be strictly adhered to. The 'face of *shpana*' and authority of *zhigany* was, therefore, being slowly eroded by the system forced labour, citing the decline of card 'ethics' as one symptom of this. Although this decay was undoubtedly good in 'preparing the soil' for rehabilitation, Likhachev warned that if there was nothing to replace *shpana* 'morals' there would be negative consequences, as prisoners would return to their 'professional skills'. Therefore, it was down to forced labour to provide them with other principles (such as re-education programmes).⁶⁶⁷ Despite his detailed anthropological study, Likhachev was ultimately incorrect in his assertion that forced labour would erode criminal groups. Following the expansion of the camp system, memoirists indicated that card playing activities continued to remain an integral part of the both penal arc and wider inmate subculture.

Following his arrest in 1935, Vladimir Petrov described inmates fashioning playing cards with newspapers, soap and coloured pencil in a centrally-located remand prison in Nizhny Novgorod, before bearing witness to the 'never-ending' card games during transportation to Siberia.⁶⁶⁸ Five years later, Polish prisoner Gustaw Herling, recalled a game between three prisoners in a Stolypin wagon heading toward Yercevo, near Arkhangel'sk. Herling remembered how criminals staked money, food and clothing of other prisoners, referring to one particular recidivist as a 'gorilla'. This again demonstrates the propensity to depict criminals outside of the boundaries of civilisation as animals or monsters.⁶⁶⁹

⁶⁶⁷ Likhachev, 'Kartezhnye igry ugodolnikov', p.37.

⁶⁶⁸ Petrov, *It Happens in Russia*, p.44,98.

⁶⁶⁹ Kuntsman, 'With a Shade of Disgust', p.313

“Give me the coat,” he yelled, “I’ve lost it at cards.” Shklovski opened his eyes and, without moving from his seat, shrugged his shoulders. “Give it to me,” the gorilla roared, enraged, “give it, or *–glaza vykolu* –I’ll poke your eyes out!” The colonel slowly got up and handed over the coat.⁶⁷⁰

Herling added that it was only when he reached the labour camp that he understood the meaning of this ‘fantastic scene’, going on to describe cards as one of the *urki*’s most popular ‘distractions’ and the phrase ‘*glaza vykolu*’ one of their most popular threats. This movement was made by two fingers of the hand outstretched in the letter ‘V’ and thrust towards the victim, whose only defence was to bring the edge of their hand up to stop their assailant from reaching their eyes. In Herling’s case, as he duly noted, the prisoner had less chance of carrying out this threat as the index finger of one of hands hand was missing.⁶⁷¹ This particular movement was also described by Solzhenitsyn, as he recalled how young prisoners would often copy the violent techniques of elder inmates (see chapter 1).

Within the individual camp or colony, barracks became one of the main ‘free spaces’ for illicit activities such as gambling to take place. According to Likhachev, games would be played almost constantly either on or beneath the bunks and surrounded by a crowd of spectators, including a lookout (*tsinkovyye*, from ‘zinc’) who would warn participants of any approaching threat.⁶⁷² As in late Tsarist penality, card playing remained officially prohibited throughout the entirety of the Gulag (and the institutions which followed), with archival evidence reflecting continued problems in controlling these infractions. These official documents include, most notably, a 1940 Operational Order from Lavrentii Beria which listed a number of infractions at the Krasnoiarsk camp including ‘drunkenness, card playing and the *sozhitel’stvo* (‘co-habitation’) of men with prisoner women’ which described how the ‘bandit element’ terrorized the camp population by “looting, beating prisoners, raping (*nasiluiut*) etc.”⁶⁷³ As indicated, gambling was often listed alongside a number of other offenses. This is further demonstrated by a 1947 report by the local procurator of the Novosibirsk

⁶⁷⁰ Herling, *A World Apart*, p.18.

⁶⁷¹ In this instance, Herling puts the loss of his finger this down to self-mutilation rather than as a punishment for losing at cards: Herling, *A World Apart*, p.18.

⁶⁷² Likhachev, ‘Kartezhnye igry ugolovnikov’, p.33. The spatial organisation of the labour camps alongside the problems in recruiting low-level staff, such as guards, often ensured games could take place in the barracks with limited surveillance from the authorities.

⁶⁷³ GARF f.9401, op.1a, d.56,11. 209-210 *ob*.

Province Camp and Colony Administration, technically independent of the camp administration, which noted that out of 4,361 regime infractions in the first half of the year card playing (367 cases) was ranked below waste (729), work refusal (659) and theft (412) but above hooliganism (365) cohabitation (242), hiding forbidden items (88), drunkenness (63), connections with locals (15) and camp banditry (5). As the report listed 1,356 other offenses, card playing was not necessarily the highest priority for camp officials but certainly represented a persistent problem in terms of controlling their inmate population.⁶⁷⁴

Karlo Stanjer's account of Norilsk in 1939 confirmed both late Imperial accounts and Likhachev's findings by describing how a number of peripheral actors were also employed in the games. Stanjer remembered how, 'there was a strict ordinance against card games, but that didn't bother the criminals. Usually, the players would sit on a bunk and the others would form a 'wall' around them to prevent the guards seeing anything through the peephole. The criminals would get so excited about these games that they would lose all sense of their surroundings.'⁶⁷⁵ Like late Imperial commentators, Gulag memoirists also described the makeshift way cards were created from any available artefacts.⁶⁷⁶ In order to do create the cards, Likhachev suggested that the main difficulty lay in the 'acquisition of paper', which could be taken from books in the library, or sometimes newspapers and journals found in the red corners (*krasnyye ugolki*). These were then stuck together in several layers with bread glue and stencils used to apply drawings often made from crayons, soot or black soap.⁶⁷⁷ In prison slang, the homemade dye used to create images was known as *himiya* (chemistry) while decks were referred to as *karty*, *svyattsy* or *bibliya* (the last two having religious connotations as 'calendar' and 'bible' respectively).⁶⁷⁸ Similarly to Shalamov's reference to Victor Hugo, memoirist Michael Solomon described how a copy of Romain Rolland's *Musiciens d'autrefois*, *musiciens d'aujourd'hui* was stolen from him while he slept and turned into a pack of cards, with the painted figures and numbers made by coloured medicine and burnt rubber.⁶⁷⁹ Bardach also

⁶⁷⁴ Bell, 'Sex, Pregnancy, and Power', p.212.

⁶⁷⁵ Stanjer, *Seven Thousand Days in Siberia*, p.106.

⁶⁷⁶ Goffman, *Asylums*, p.187

⁶⁷⁷ Likhachev, 'Kartezhnye igry ugolovnikov', p.32.

⁶⁷⁸ Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.413,431.

⁶⁷⁹ Solomon, *Magadan*, p.138.

recalled how cards in the Sverdlovsk transit prison ‘were so flimsy they felt like well-used paper roubles. The red designs were smudged and worn off. The corners were bent, peeling or missing entirely.’⁶⁸⁰

As was the case in games from both late Imperial period and on Solovki, a number of Gulag memoirists also reflected on their dubious legality. In the Sverdlovsk transit prison, Janusz Bardach who lost his pants, boots, tunic, and two days rations in a game of blackjack, remained convinced that he was cheated by the dealer Vanya.⁶⁸¹ Bardach was forced to remove to his clothing, and was threatened with handing over his *paika*, soup and sugar for the following two days although this was nullified after he became a storyteller for the group. As previously demonstrated, Bardach was close enough to describe the groups established hierarchy and, it is clear that, gambling formed part of their prisoner code as an acceptable way to earn money. However, there is no mention in Bardach’s account, or indeed elsewhere, of proceeds forming a contribution to a communal fund (*obshak*), as described in accounts of both *vory-v-zakone* and the Georgian mafia.⁶⁸² There also appears to be little discernible difference along ethnic lines, despite Solomon’s suggestion that groups of Korean prisoners were liable to stab the loser at cards and unable to pay their debts, ‘more promptly than other criminals’.⁶⁸³

As indicated earlier, prisoners would continue to gamble anything they had, including clothes, soup, bread (*paika*) and tobacco (*makhora*), all limited but valuable commodities which played a central role in the well-developed rituals of penal society.⁶⁸⁴ Stanjer recalled how, after gambling away their own rations, some prisoners would go hungry unless they stole from other inmates, describing how this was done by simply walking up to someone and ordering them to remove the article of clothing (as described by Shalamov). Stating how it was ‘an honour to steal from a political prisoner’, Stanjer also noted how the loser would often rely on the charitable nature of the winner,

⁶⁸⁰ Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man*, p.168. Alongside this *ad hoc* method, a number of Gulag institutions in Western Siberia were “porous” and had a thriving black market trade with the local community, which could have *conceivably* included packs of playing cards: Bell, ‘Was the Gulag an Archipelago?’

⁶⁸¹ Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man*, p.148-149.

⁶⁸² Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man*, p.151; Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, p.155.

⁶⁸³ Conquest, *Kolyma*, p.99.

⁶⁸⁴ Pallot, Piacenti w/ Moran, *Gender, Geography & Punishment*, p.200.

although any ‘gifts’ had to be repaid with a good deal of subservience. This further demonstrates how, as in Late Imperial *katorga*, games played a central role in the barter economy of the camps.⁶⁸⁵

The more violent aspects of these games are well-documented by memoirists. Likhachev article shows, however, that there were graduations along the punishment spectrum which held less serious physical consequences. Within the barracks on Solovki, *shpana* would group together according to streets or districts and play some games ‘for fun’. These games would involve a number of humiliating punishments, such as prisoners collecting a thousand crosses, flies or cockroaches. In these cases, victorious prisoner(s) would oversee accurate ‘payment’ of the debt which could be carried out so vigorously that medical staff became convinced that inmates had become insane and took them away on a stretcher. Alongside this, Likhachev noted further punishments for the losers, such as having hundreds of balls of crumpled paper stuck to their foreheads and trying to prevent as many as possible from falling off, providing a song or a story for fellow prisoners or shouting out of a window for down a pipe for ten to fifteen minutes “*ya durak, ya durak...*” (“I am a fool, I am a fool....”).⁶⁸⁶

Nevertheless, many punishments provide examples of community-enforced norms and ostracism which saw prisoners relegated down the ranks of penal hierarchy. Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko, described his encounter with an porter in the Pechora regional camp in 1944. As a ‘deaf mute’, the porter, Nikola, was exempt from tree felling and instead cleaned the bathrooms and was teased by female prisoners who ‘told him everything that came into their heads.’ Having not spoken a word to Anton in six months, Nikola explained how had forfeited the use of his voice and hearing after losing a card game and, therefore, had to remain silent for three years, describing how violating this agreement was punishable by death.⁶⁸⁷ Other punishments combined humiliation with physical pain. Polish prisoner Karol Colonna-Czosnowski witnessed a prolonged game which ended when one inmate had lost all of his possessions and the winner demanded a humiliating tattoo as a further

⁶⁸⁵ Stanjer, *Seven Thousand Days in Siberia*, p.105; Bell, ‘Sex, Pregnancy, and Power’, p.206.

⁶⁸⁶ Likhachev, ‘Kartezhnye igry ugodovnikov’. p.36 In this instance, like Vlas Doroshevich, Likhachev uses the term, *fartoyvi*, a corrupt derivation of *fortuna*, which in the most literal sense means ‘fortunate’.

⁶⁸⁷ Antonov-Ovneenko, *The Time of Stalin*, p.316.

penalty. This punishment was administered in this case out by the ‘barrack artist’ who tattooed a penis onto the loser’s forehead.⁶⁸⁸

More violent punishments transmitted powerful messages that someone had a serious complaint about an individual’s behaviour. This was reflected in General Gorbатов’s account of a camp at Kolyma where he met a prisoner convicted for multiple murders who was nicknamed ‘Stumpy’ as a result of having three fingers removed from his left hand. Before his transfer to Kolyma, ‘Stumpy’ had staked the suit of a political prisoner during a card game. Forgetting to remove the suit from prisoner after losing the game, the ‘staked’ prisoner was transferred away along with his possessions the following day. Subsequently, a ‘council of seniors’ met to discuss an appropriate penalty, with the *plaintiff* (winner of the card game) demanding all of the fingers on his left hand be removed. After the ‘seniors’ first suggested two fingers, it was agreed by the victor of the original game that three should be removed, and he proceeded to carry out the punishment personally.⁶⁸⁹ Karlo Stanjer also remembered how ‘once in a while, the object of the game would be a human life. A victim would be designated - either because no other stake was available or because a conflict had erupted among the criminals - and the loser had to carry out the murder. If the victim was present, the murderer would pick up a suitable instrument and take immediate action. But if the victim was in another cell or in another section of the camp, the killer had to find a way to reach him. Sometimes the victim would be warned in time; then a regular manhunt would ensue. In some cases, it was years before a killer caught up with his victim.’⁶⁹⁰

Existence of this brutal practice is confirmed by the term ‘to play the fifth’ (*igrat’ na pyatovo*), which stood for a recidivist who had nothing left to stake and therefore bet the life of the second, third, fourth, fifth person etc. to enter the barracks.⁶⁹¹ Games between female prisoners also appeared to have followed similar rules, with one group of recidivists charged with the killing of another inmate in March 1948 in the Kus’inlag camp. The report suggested that, while playing cards, the four prisoners

⁶⁸⁸ Colonna-Czosnowski, *Beyond the Taiga: Memoirs of a Survivor*, p.126-31.

⁶⁸⁹ Gorbатов, *Years Off My Life*, p.140-141.

⁶⁹⁰ Stanjer, *Seven Thousand Days in Siberia*, p.106.

⁶⁹¹ Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.350.

decided who should carry out their ‘sentence’. In this case, the designated executioner refused and was punished accordingly.⁶⁹² Although these more violent punishments occupy a more prominent place in the literature of the camps, it remains important to demonstrate these graduations, even if humiliation or physical pain remained a key feature and ultimately led to this zenith. The punishment spectrum can again be observed in the ways in which card playing related to the sexual order of the camps.

Card Playing and the Gulag’s Sexual Order

It is imperative, firstly, to clarify that card playing did not come close to defining the Gulag’s sexual order. It does, however, provide an opportunity to discuss attitudes toward female and homosexual prisoners. Emphasising the importance of change over time, whether in regard to shifting prison systems, wider conceptualities of sexuality or the changing nature of prisoner demographic⁶⁹³, Healey demonstrates how the Gulag’s specific economic and moral objectives often facilitated inmate same-sex relations,⁶⁹⁴ showing how a structured hierarchy of violent and consensual homosexual relations, inherited from Tsarist prisons, expanded with the growth of the camp system. Although reports of same-sex relations in accounts of late Imperial penalty were rare, one of the few references can be found in Doroshevich’s dispatches, in which he demonstrates how the term *kham* was used to indicate a sexual subordinate to a dominant master:

‘There is no further drop. ‘*Kham*,’ in essence, simply signifies in the prison language a man who is another man’s lover. ‘*Zakhamnichat*’ means to take it and not give it. A man who’s left without even a semblance of the conscience of a throat, suborn or a piper (terms for other categories of prisoners) is called a *kham*. They befoul the prisoners’ environment. The *kham* is a traitor; for lack of a bread ration, for a small respite, he’ll inform on escape preparations and reveal where fugitives have hidden. This type is encouraged by the wardens, because only through them can they know what goes on in prison.’⁶⁹⁵

⁶⁹² Varese, ‘Society’, p.535.

⁶⁹³ Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of American Sexuality* (Chicago, 2008); Christopher Hensely, (ed.), *Prison Sex: Practice and Policy* (Colorado, 2002).

⁶⁹⁴ Healey, ‘Forging Gulag Sexualities’.

⁶⁹⁵ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.316.

Shalamov's sketch 'Women in the Criminal World' demonstrated how male prisoners would sometimes take on traditional female roles and how other prisoners responded to them as if they saw nothing unusual, shameful or offensive in them.⁶⁹⁶ Shalamov also discussed how this 'moral decay' could also be observed in the Gulag's medical facilities where criminals' young 'wives' (*zhertvy*) were admitted with syphilis, adding that 'almost all the professional criminals were homosexuals. When no women were at hand, they seduced and infected other men – most frequently by threatening them with a knife, less frequently in exchange for 'rags' or bread.'⁶⁹⁷ Like Shalamov, Ginzburg partnered homosexuality and criminality, describing how 'the professional criminals are beyond the bounds of humanity.'⁶⁹⁸ Kuntsman has demonstrated how memoirists often positioned activities between criminal prisoners beyond the border of the feminine, in contrast with the discrete nature of same-sex relations between political prisoners.⁶⁹⁹

Although same-sex relations in the camps were not solely confined to criminal prisoners, they often provided the most visible examples, with the majority of memoirists largely avoiding talking about same-sex relations between those from a similar background. This has created a binary division between heterosexual 'politicals' and homosexual 'common criminals' rarely challenged by researchers.⁷⁰⁰ Healey and Kuntsman both suggest that lesbian relations in the camps appear to be less violent than those between men, although some memoirists recalled young women being sexually assaulted and 'claimed' by tougher, more experienced prisoners. Lesbian relations were often based on gendered divisions where 'lesbians' (often described as *kovyrialki*) took on 'feminine' role with long hair, kerchiefs and skirts, while 'studs' (*kobly*, sometimes translated as 'dogs'), had cropped hair and tattoos, played a more 'masculine' role.⁷⁰¹ Although more recent studies of female correctional institutions in contemporary Russia show the motivations of lesbian relationships to be complex, and make a clear distinction between those which fulfil erotic needs and 'real feelings' (understood as a

⁶⁹⁶ Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, p.205

⁶⁹⁷ Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, p.204-5. Shalamov expanded further on this image in another story, 'Swindler's Blood', which again described the criminals (*blatari*) as pederasts and how each of them in the camp were surrounded by young people with swollen and muddy eyes, namely 'Zoikas', 'Man'kas' and 'Verkas,' whom they would feed and sleep with, adding that prisoners had done the same with a female dog who they slept with openly in front of everyone in the barrack: Kuntsman, 'A Shade of Disgust', p.315.

⁶⁹⁸ Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, p.12, 101.

⁶⁹⁹ Kuntsman, 'A Shade of Disgust', pp.312-314

⁷⁰⁰ For a discussion of Russian scholars Vladimir Kozlovskii and Ol'ga Zhuk: Kuntsman, 'A Shade of Disgust', p.310.

⁷⁰¹ Kuntsman, 'A Shade of Disgust', p.312; Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, p.237.

need for intimacy), they continue to describe masculine roles in female-only colonies. As part of their identity, inmates known in prison slang as ‘real guys’ (*nastoiashchie patsani*) cut their hair short, dress like men, develop a male gait, prefer not to shower with women, and look for jobs around the colony most commonly associated with men, such as electricians and plumbers.⁷⁰²

Despite Federico Varese’s brief comments on prison homosexuality in his study of *vory-v-zakone*, same-sex relations played an important role in enforcing hierarchies of power.⁷⁰³ Prisoners who gambled at cards without a stake to lose, just as those who broke other unwritten rules of the prisoner code, could find themselves anal or orally assaulted and/or publically humiliated. Tattooing ‘degraded’ prisoners made this status visible and inescapable through the Gulag and indicated that they formed part of the group of ‘untouchables’ (lit. the degraded ones, *opushchennye*).⁷⁰⁴ These prisoners found themselves on the lowest rung of penal hierarchy and were often forbidden to eat from common bowls and ostracised from communal spaces. Tattoos of the suits of hearts and diamonds could indicate that these prisoners were sexually available to all ‘normal’ prisoners, whose normality was preserved as long as the gendered active/passive hierarchy was respected. This is further demonstrated by the image below (fig.16) which shows the suits of hearts and diamonds alongside the well-known term *suka* (‘bitch’).⁷⁰⁵

⁷⁰² Pallot, Piacentini w/ Moran, *Gender, Geography and Punishment*, pp.201-204 In camp slang, active lesbians who wore short hair, dressed like a men and were characterised by masculine features could be referred to using the male name *volodya*: Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, p.53

⁷⁰³ Federico Varese simply states that ‘although passive homosexuality was strictly forbidden, active homosexuality was allowed’: Varese, ‘Society of the Vory-v-Zakone’, p.519. For some brief notes on homosexual practices in camp memoirs: Toker, *Return from the Archipelago*, p.61.

⁷⁰⁴ Healey, ‘Forging Gulag Sexualities’; Kaminski, *The Games Prisoners Play*.

⁷⁰⁵ Conceivably, the initials ‘V’ and ‘T’ could also stand for *valet* (jack) and *tuz* (ace) but, unfortunately, there is no explanation alongside the drawing: Baldaev (ed.), *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 3. p.183.



Fig.16- 'Bitch' *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, vol. 3. Danzig Baldaev.

Although labour camps were, theoretically, a homosocial space, in practice this not always the case. Authorities routinely complained about *illicit activity* between men and women yet also helped to create conditions which made heterosexual sexual contact possible through a spatial organisation which facilitated inmate interaction.⁷⁰⁶ In larger camps, male and female prisoners were divided into separate sections, known as stations (*punkty*) or zones (*zony*), however, areas designated female-only frequently housed male prisoners, not to mention visitors from male civilian employees and camp personnel.⁷⁰⁷ This flow of human traffic between separate zones was acknowledged by memoirists as early as the 1920s, with Malsagoff describing female *shpana* parading naked in front of camp personnel, cursing furiously, drinking, stealing and being 'just as addicted' to cards as their male counterparts, stating how, often in lieu of money, clothes or food to pay, the loser of card games would be forced to go to a male hut and 'give herself' to ten men in the presence of a witness.⁷⁰⁸ Buber-Neumann noted that, while men and women were forbidden from entering each other's barracks, 'certain of the criminals seemed to be exempt from this rule, and when the guards found them with the women, they were not interfered with'. She further recalled how both male and female prisoners sat in the reception centre at Karaganda playing cards, referring to the women wearing 'only

⁷⁰⁶ Bell, 'Sex, Pregnancy, and Power', p.199.

⁷⁰⁷ Bell, 'Sex, Pregnancy, and Power', p.208.

⁷⁰⁸ Malsagoff, *An Island Hell*, pp.132-138.

knickers and brassieres, apart from the coloured scarves they wore neatly turbaned around their heads, one end hanging decoratively down the side.’ Buber-Neumann added that female prisoners she observed staked their own clothes and when they lost resorted to stealing from other prisoners, stating that they were never short of vodka and always seemed to have plenty of food.⁷⁰⁹ Although absent from her description, card games could provide a pretence for coerced sexual relations. This is alluded to in Pogodin’s *Aristokraty*, when the recidivist Kostia ‘wins’ the engineer’s secretary Margarita Ivanova during a card game. Although Kostia is berated by the supervising officer Gromov (in keeping with the plays’ ‘reforged’ story), another inmate remarks ‘they are playing for a live babe! These are my kind of people!’⁷¹⁰ One female prisoner also recalled an entire women’s barrack’s being ‘lost’ on a game, and an anxious wait of several days until a group of recidivist criminals attempted to ransack the barracks. In this instance, however, they were seen off by another group of prisoners with only a few bundles of clothes stolen alongside an assault on the *starosta*.⁷¹¹

Wilson Bell’s work on heterosexual relations in the camps, however, warns that viewing all relationships in the camps as coerced removes any agency from the women involved.⁷¹² Buber-Neumann’s refusal to submit to a prisoners proposition, despite his ‘good connections in the kitchen’, shortly after arriving at her camp in Kazakhstan demonstrates that some women could exercise a degree of sexual autonomy in the camps, choosing to use relationships with men to negotiate power dynamics and limit the harshness and isolation of daily life.⁷¹³ Although these formal and formal rules were remarkably different from those of a free society, frequent references to ‘barter’ indicates that sex could provide a form of resistance and formed part of the camps complex web of negotiated relationships.⁷¹⁴ Ginzburg described the moral dilemma faced by female prisoners in Kolyma, many of whom became intimate with recidivists and, almost unanimously described the sexual relations and partnerships which took place with reservation and shame. One prominent exception to this is the

⁷⁰⁹ Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, pp.70-7. This is also described in Buber-Neumann’s description of the Karaganda Punishment Compound in which she noted how a sack was hung in front of the door and her astonishment at the ‘nonchalance’ in which male criminal prisoners entered and exited the hut, speculating that relations must have been good with the guards: Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, p.122.

⁷¹⁰ Ruder, *Making History for Stalin*, p.167.

⁷¹¹ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p.268.

⁷¹² Bell, ‘Sex, Pregnancy, and Power’, p.205.

⁷¹³ Bell, ‘Sex, Pregnancy, and Power’, p.211; Tobien, *Dancing under the Red Star*, pp.188-189.

⁷¹⁴ Bell, ‘Sex, Pregnancy, and Power’, p.206.

recollections of Valentina Ievleva-Pavlenko who recalled a number of admirers and lovers, including a thief nicknamed ‘Tolik the Hand’ who later died while they were corresponding between different areas of the camp.⁷¹⁵ Like others who met their future husband in the camps, such as Ginzburg and Anna Larina, some women married former prisoners after their release and, unable to return to major cities and their former lives, settled with them in Kolyma.⁷¹⁶ It is clear that prisoners used sexual barter for a number of reasons, for some becoming ‘camp wives’ (in which the ‘husband’ would protect the ‘wife’ in exchange for sexual favours) was a way of avoiding hunger and horrific conditions, for others it was about desire, while some avoided any form relations altogether as, according to Ginzburg, it was ‘too easy to slip into prostitution.’⁷¹⁷ As Ginzburg’s quote suggests, while sexual barter is often related to prostitution it should be treated differently.⁷¹⁸

In regards to female prisoners, existing work on criminal subculture has recorded a highly masculinized hierarchy which emphasises their primary function as subordinates.⁷¹⁹ For instance, Federico Varese describes how women ‘had no place in the hierarchy of thieves’⁷²⁰ while Chalidze states that, while not viewed as contemptuously as prostitutes or those outside the criminal world, the wife of a thief was ‘the property of her husband’.⁷²¹ Although female criminals, referred to by names such as *vorovka*, *blatnaia*, *blatniachka* and *vorovaika*, did not follow the same hierarchical structure as their male counterparts they retained common behavioural norms, including their own court proceedings, tattoos, slang, card playing. Women were not permitted to enter the male-only *vor-v-zakone* fraternity, a characteristic shared with other mafia organisation, yet females from the broader mass of criminals often played important roles as ‘accomplices’ (indicated in the song ‘Music is Playing in the Moldavanka’ from chapter 1). The consistent negotiation of borders between, theoretically, different camp zones in the larger labour camps would further suggest that male and female hierarchies should not be considered entirely separate, as has previously been the case.

⁷¹⁵ Shapovalov (ed.), *Remembering the Darkness*, pp.317-353.

⁷¹⁶ Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, p.12

⁷¹⁷ Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, p.12. Daniel Healey also describes how an ‘exchange of favours’ for sex was common between males from the mid-nineteenth century, including inside prison: Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*. p.232

⁷¹⁸ Bell, ‘Sex, Pregnancy, and Power’, p.206.

⁷¹⁹ Varese, ‘Society’, p.519.

⁷²⁰ Varese, ‘Society’, p.519.

⁷²¹ Chalidze, *Criminal Russia*, pp.51-2.

Moreover, previous scholarship regarding criminal gangs does not engage with recent scholarship on masculinity. Although the examples of ‘negotiated power’ suggest a slight degree of agency in the biographies of some memoirists, incidents involving criminal prisoners were often defined by an aggressive hegemonic masculinity. A number of studies have noted the symbiosis between masculinity and criminality.⁷²² James Messerschmidt suggests a definition which formulates that hegemonic masculinities are formed through unequal and hierarchical relationship between masculinities and femininities (including femininities constructed in and through male bodies).⁷²³ This seems particularly apt in the Gulag given how male criminals viewed their female counterparts and the active/passive hierarchy in regard to homosexual relations. Furthermore, Salagaev and Shashkin’s work on street gangs shows how ‘aggressive hegemonic masculinity’ is characterised by an extreme sexism displayed not only in relationships with the opposite sex, but through micro-cultural norms and practices which include sexist expressions in everyday discourse.⁷²⁴ In reference to Gulag prisoners, this can be observed through the number of derogatory names toward women replicated in a number of collections of camp slang.⁷²⁵

Furthermore, Salagaev and Shashkin demonstrate that gang masculinity is constructed not only through sexist expressions, but by sexual violence and rape performed as a group.⁷²⁶ This can be seen in some of the Gulag’s most notorious examples of gang rape such as Elinor Lipper and Elena Glinka’s descriptions of prisoner transportation to Magadan (see chapter 3).⁷²⁷ Memoirists confirm that rape was a regular occurrence in the camps, as described by Tamara Petkevich.⁷²⁸ It is important to highlight, however, that some female prisoners also gang raped men, confirmed by a report from the Yaya women’s camp of Novosibirsk where a group of male prisoners had been sent on official business.⁷²⁹ While official documents rarely use terms for rape (*nasilovat’*, *iznasilovanie*), they often

⁷²² Richard Collier, *Masculinities, Crime and Criminology* (1998); Pat Carlen and Tony Jefferson (eds), *Masculinities and Crime* (1996); James Messerschmidt, *Masculinities and Crime*, (1993).

⁷²³ Messerschmidt, ‘Engendering Gendered Knowledge: Assessing the Academic Appropriation of Hegemonic Masculinity’, p.64.

⁷²⁴ Salagaev & Shashkin, ‘Violence and Victimization on the Street’, p.7.

⁷²⁵ Rossi. *The Gulag Handbook*, p.162.

⁷²⁶ Salagaev & Shashkin, ‘Violence and Victimization on the Street’, p.8

⁷²⁷ Lipper, ‘The God that Failed in Siberia’, p.25; Glinka, ‘On the Tram’, p.301-310.

⁷²⁸ Tamara Petkevich, *Memoirs of a Gulag Actress* (Northern Illinois, 2010), p.174.

⁷²⁹ Emma Mason, ‘Women in the Gulag’, Melanie Illic (ed.), *Women in the Stalin Era* (Basingstoke, 2001), p.138.

substituted *sozhitel'stvo* ('co-habitation') in its place.⁷³⁰ The problem of 'cohabitation' was not solely an issue for camp authorities in terms of their inmate population, however, but often also became a disciplinary issue for camp personnel and demonstrated one of the most explicit examples of interaction between staff and prisoners.⁷³¹

Interpersonal Relations: Urki and Camp Staff

In her study *Labor Camp Socialism*, Galina Ivanova asserts that the subject of Gulag personnel is a 'composite and voluminous subject' which could, theoretically, include a broad circle of people whose professional duties were associated with punitive policy.⁷³² More recently, Lynne Viola has used the large body of work on the Holocaust to describe an *ecosystem* of violence in the Stalinist 1930s (in which the Gulag was one of the primary sites) to suggest a framework in which to approach the question of the Soviet perpetrator.⁷³³ Anne Applebaum also discusses the subject of Gulag personnel in her chapter *The Guards* (also including descriptions of other roles such as camp commanders and domestic orderlies). Although Applebaum recalls Lev Razgon's statement that 'some were more cruel, others less; some were just clock-punchers, others fanatical about their calling', she concludes that 'nobody forced guards to rescue sick and murder old, camp commanders to kill off the sick, Moscow to ignore implications of inspectors reports. Yet decisions were made openly, every day on the ground by guards and administrators who were convinced that they had the right to make them.'⁷³⁴ In a chapter from his recent PhD thesis, Wilson Bell offers a more complex analysis of Gulag employees, dividing personnel at Sibltag could be divided into three main groups: administrators, civilian employees and guards. Describing training methods, disciplinary matters and their attitudes toward prisoners,⁷³⁵ Bell concludes by stating that, although there was a certain

⁷³⁰ Bell, 'Sex, Pregnancy, and Power', p.211.

⁷³¹ Wilson Bell highlights the case Leonid Arkad'evich Kotliarevskii, a Gulag boss in the Tomsk Province Labour Colony, who was fired from his job in May 1947 for engaging in sexual relations with prisoners: Bell, 'Sex, Pregnancy, and Power', p.198.

⁷³² Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, p.127.

⁷³³ Lynne Viola, 'The Question of the Perpetrator in Soviet History', *Slavic Review*, 72:1 (2013).

⁷³⁴ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp.241-260.

⁷³⁵ Bell, 'The Gulag and Soviet Society in Western Siberia', PhD Thesis (2011), p.203-245.

‘banality’,⁷³⁶ to many Gulag cadres, their tendency to form informal networks with prisoners shows that they were not just cogs in a bureaucratic machine but were also looking out for their own self-interest.⁷³⁷ Camp employees were often faced with making decisions to resolve ‘local’ issues, despite their methods often conflicting with formal Gulag directives. This is evident in the memoirs of Fyodor Mochulsky, a graduate of the Moscow Institute of Railroad Transport Engineering who was posted to Pechorlag as a ‘specialist’ in September 1940. Once at Pechorlag, Mochulsky’s transfer to the 93rd Unit saw him come into contact with, ‘hardened criminals’ who considered the Gulag to be their ‘second home’ and refused to work for the authorities. Mochulsky clarified that the only thing that the ‘godfathers’ would do was work ‘for themselves’, taking positions preparing food, cutting wood, lighting the stove or cleaning shoes or delegating their work duties to inexperienced ‘newbies’ who were forced to work ‘for two’ via threats and intimidation.⁷³⁸

Believing it to be a test of his abilities, Mochulsky was soon called upon in order to attempt to quell a revolt by the prisoners of the 93rd Unit. Entering the barracks where ‘the elite of the criminal world lived’ Mochulsky soon discovered that this revolt was triggered by the poor standard of soup coming from the kitchen. The ringleader of the attempted rebellion and the brigadier both insisted on appointing a new cook, who had formerly worked in the restaurant of the Metropol Hotel. This had been vetoed by the camp commander of the security platoon on the grounds that the kitchen was outside the camp zone and the prospective cook was serving a 25 year sentence for murder and attempting a group escape. After receiving assurances that he would ‘absolutely escape’ at some point but not ‘right now’, and from the other prisoners who insisted on hunting down him if he did. Mochulsky took personal responsibility for appointing the cook, who later escaped during transfer to the 6th Department, several kilometres away, and outside Mochulsky’s jurisdiction.⁷³⁹

As in the Nazi concentration camps, there were multiple ‘grey zones’⁷⁴⁰ in which, as a result of personnel shortages, local authorities (sometimes in violation of central law) used ‘socially close’

⁷³⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the Banality of Evil*, (New York, 1994).

⁷³⁷ Bell, ‘The Gulag and Soviet Society in Western Siberia’, p.244.

⁷³⁸ Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss*, pp.52-53.

⁷³⁹ Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss*, pp.58-63.

⁷⁴⁰ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York, 1989).

or common criminals in staffing roles.⁷⁴¹ The boundary between staff and prisoners was further blurred by appointing ‘counter-revolutionaries’ (political prisoners often sentenced under Article 58) to positions in clinics, kitchens, statistics offices and engineering. In doing so, prisoners contributed toward their own survival while playing a role in the continued operation of the camps.⁷⁴² Instigated as early as Solovki, the scale of using prisoners in staff positions was remarkable. For instance, in 1938 ‘more than half of the administrators and nearly half of the armed guard...were former or actual prisoners’⁷⁴³ at the Belbaltlag camp. One prisoner further recalled that, during the late 1930s, group leaders (*zven’skye*), brigade leaders (*brigadiry*), foremen (*desiatniki*) and work assigners were all prisoners, along with those in accounting, the dispensary, the kitchen, the cafeteria, the bakery, at the fire house, the bath house, the sanitation room and in the workshops and workhouses.⁷⁴⁴

Beyond the use of prisoners, the armed guard (*voenizirovannaia okrana* or VOKhR) formed the largest group of camp staff. Their ratio to prisoner population was around 5% before 1939, then rising slightly after the war.⁷⁴⁵ At no point, however, were they fully staffed with the number remaining ‘perpetually below’ the goal of 9% set by central authorities.⁷⁴⁶ Their stereotypical portrayal in memoirs as young and uneducated is reflected in the Gulag *fondy*, which mainly focuses on disciplinary matters. Further central party documents highlight the well-known recruitment problems (often due to difficult conditions of service and low prestige) and confirm that a large number of former Red Army soldiers made up an extremely high percentage (95%) of the guards. There are numerous references to the ‘low quality’ of the guards, in particular a memorandum to all camp commanders and regional chiefs from Gulag chief Victor Chernyshev who made particular reference to high levels of ‘suicide, desertion, loss and theft of weapons, drunkenness and other amoral acts.’⁷⁴⁷

Like the incarcerated population, gambling often appeared in disciplinary matters concerning camp employees. This is reflected in a complaint to Moscow by a camp administrator who claimed

⁷⁴¹ Viola, ‘Question of Perpetrator’, p.18.

⁷⁴² Viola, ‘Question of Perpetrator’, p.18.

⁷⁴³ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p.257

⁷⁴⁴ Bell, ‘The Gulag and Soviet Society in Western Siberia’, p.205.

⁷⁴⁵ Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, p.148.

⁷⁴⁶ Filtzer, *Soviet Workers*, 26–27.

⁷⁴⁷ GARF f.9401 op.2 d.319.

that a lack of entertainment led to regular “desertions, violations of discipline, drunkenness and card-playing.”⁷⁴⁸ As with prisoners, this behaviour was often connected with the monotony of their daily tasks and alcohol, along with the geographical distance from the centre.⁷⁴⁹ Distribution of alcohol was often seen a reason for negotiating borders between and the development of black-market activities. For example, authorities at Karlag claimed that drunken prisoners had led to a growth in criminal activities, later identifying two sources of the sources of alcohol as free citizens who lived near the camp borders and groups of prisoners working in transport.⁷⁵⁰

Despite the political expenditure which went into impressing upon camp staff that their prisoners were the worst enemies of Soviet power, internal memorandums demonstrate that members of the armed guard in some regions did not know ‘names of members of the Politburo, or leaders of the Party’⁷⁵¹ while a report from a camp official in 1939 stated that “the people who served were not second-class but forth class people, the very dregs.”⁷⁵² This also reflects Late Imperial *katorga*, as guards on Sakhalin were described as *Rossiiskogo navoza* (‘shat out of Russia’).⁷⁵³ Regardless of these attitudes toward them, low-level employees should not be viewed as an isolated group of individuals but helped to transmit the subculture of the camps to wider society.⁷⁵⁴ Their relationship with both prisoners and the liminal community of ‘free workers’, believed to be comprised of around 40% of former prisoners in 1937⁷⁵⁵, appears to be an important one in fostering links with the surrounding community.

References to card playing appeared again Petrov’s account of the voluntary population of Magadan, after he obtained a pass which allowed him to temporarily leave the camp: ‘I also utilised my stay in Magadan to secure, for any eventuality, a certain number of well-wishers who had influence in camp affairs, people employed in the Allocation Administration of the camps. These

⁷⁴⁸ GARF f.9401 op.2 d.319.

⁷⁴⁹ Lynne Viola also discusses the role of alcohol in reference to the execution teams who carried out the murders of 1937-38. Making a comparison to the Nazi *Einsatzgruppen*, Viola notes that in the Soviet context alcohol was less directly a cause than a ‘lubricant, willingly self-administered and an enhancer of excess’: Viola, ‘The Question of the Perpetrator’, pp.11-12.

⁷⁵⁰ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, p.46.

⁷⁵¹ GARF f.9414 op.4 d.3.

⁷⁵² Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, p.150.

⁷⁵³ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.138.

⁷⁵⁴ Ivanova, *Labour Camp Socialism*, p.184.

⁷⁵⁵ N. V. Petrov & N. I. Vladimirtsev (eds.), *Istoriia Stalinskogo Gulaga, Tom. 2, Karatel' naia Sistema: struktura I kadry*, pp.34, 44-8.

acquaintances were made either at cards or over drinks.⁷⁵⁶ Petrov also added that, upon leaving Kolyma: ‘about a thousand former prisoners, almost exclusively from the ‘socially close’ category, not liable to a second arrest, had gathered in the Magadan transit camp. They were all waiting to be taken to Vladivostok and meanwhile were playing cards and organising drinking bouts.’⁷⁵⁷ Petrov’s recollections, from the late 1930s, reflect what Kate Brown describes as ‘concentric circles of unfreedom’ and pre-empted problems faced after mass amnesties in 1953 when large numbers and released prisoners were re-arrested, often drinking and singing ‘anti-Soviet’ songs at railways stations.⁷⁵⁸ Vlas Doroshevich’s reports show, however, that these problems were not solely confined to the Soviet era. The journalist described alms houses in free settlements on Sakhalin became drinking and gambling dens where ‘shivering, aged, beaten and lacerated bodies of the ‘tattooed ones’ wander round muffled in rags’⁷⁵⁹ Like late Imperial urban slums, administrators would refuse to visit these locations, again demonstrating clear links between penal subculture, the release of prisoners, and wider society.

Despite the traditionally symbiosis between gambling and criminal society⁷⁶⁰, it is important to specify the way that games were played at different times and by different individuals. In the case of camp personnel, the persistence of these activities appears to be associated more with the monotony of their tasks and their dislocation from the centre. Notwithstanding, it continues to raise important questions regarding the evasion of formal directives and the relationship with their prisoner population. As with late Imperial *katorga*, where ‘prohibited’ activities such as the *maiden* were commonplace, access to supply chains was crucial in providing social capital to facilitate this

⁷⁵⁶ Petrov, *It Happens in Siberia*, p.171.

⁷⁵⁷ Petrov, *It Happens in Siberia*, p. 279.

⁷⁵⁸ Dobson, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer*.

⁷⁵⁹ Doroshevich, *Sakhalin*, p.444.

⁷⁶⁰ Dick Hobbs describes the involvement of a number of UK crime gangs with legal and illegal gambling activities: Hobbs, *Lush Life*, pp.58-88.

interaction.⁷⁶¹ Furthermore, it continues to suggest that the Gulag was an institution defined as much by ‘informal’ practices as it is by its intended goals.⁷⁶²

While prisoners in Tsarist penalty remained literally destitute, gambling provided a way of funding the prison collective and bribing guards and executioners, as well as lining the pockets of *maidanshchik*.⁷⁶³ In an environment which was, generally, disempowering, card playing alleviated, at least temporarily, the victimisation often felt by prisoners by providing examples of winners and losers, displaying a degree of agency and social mobility. With the development of the police camp system, card playing continued to perform some of these mimetic functions, helping to construct prisoner hierarchy and isolating certain groups. The lack of any finances to stake, as meagre as these had been in late Imperial *katorga*, the decrease in rations, and a lack of items to stake ‘on tick’, meant that the punishments associated games appear to have become more violent over time in line with a more general trend as the camp system reached the peak of its population in the post-war era.⁷⁶⁴ Card playing remained one of the most important forums for prisoners to assert their hegemony and display agency, including helping to define the Gulag’s sexual order, yet it was far from the only method in which they violently enforced hierarchies of power. This was also prominently displayed in the way they enforced their own system of punishment for infractions of the prisoner code.

⁷⁶¹ Robert Putman, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, 1993), p.173

⁷⁶² Terry Martin, ‘Modernization or Neo-Traditionalism? Ascribed Nationality and Soviet Primordialism’. *Stalinism: New Directions* (London, 2000), pp.348–67.

⁷⁶³ Gentes, ‘Beat the Devil!’, p.217.

⁷⁶⁴ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p.466.

Chapter 6

Punishment and Conflict in Gulag Society

‘We are going to have a trial’ Mihailovich whispered.
‘What trial?’ I murmured, half-asleep.
‘They have mixed us with thieves and murderers.....and they are going to judge one
of theirs’
‘Where did they get such ideas?’ I asked the patriarch as we waited for something to
happen.
‘I don’t know. Maybe from Makarenko’

Michael Solomon, *Magadan*.

Michael Solomon’s account of a transit camp en route to Berlag described how a young prisoner, Sashka, was tried and sentenced in front of court of his peers.⁷⁶⁵ In this instance, the patriarch referred to by Solomon was Victor Mihailovich, a former Professor of the Odessa Polytechnical Institute who had nineteen years camp experience.⁷⁶⁶ Mihailovich referred to a particular incident from Makarenko’s *Pedagogicheskaiia Poema* in which a juvenile at the correctional colony named Barum stood before a ‘Peoples Court’ suspected of stealing items from the housekeeper. Makarenko narrated how ‘the ragged dirty judges arranged themselves on the beds and tables of the dormitory’ charges were read before the accused, while a ‘little oil lamp lit up their agitated faces and Barum’s pale features, heavy, immobile and set on a stout neck’. After his denial elicited an indignant response from the judges, calm was eventually restored to proceedings by the pedagogue himself, who, as founder and head of the colony, punished the young criminal with solitary confinement.⁷⁶⁷

Finding himself in the transit camp shortly after his arrest in 1948, the prisoner described above by Solomon was Sashka, a twenty three year old recidivist who refused to work and lived off ‘food he stole from the kitchen and his fellow prisoners’. Hauled from his bunk and forced to face

⁷⁶⁵ Solomon, *Magadan*, p.135. Berlag was part of the Kolyma complex which at its height in the post war period housed around 200,000 prisoners. When Michael Solomon first arrived in 1948 the prisoner population had risen sharply from 100,000 to 150,000: Bollinger, *Stalin’s Slave Ships*, p.85.

⁷⁶⁶ This would place his year of entry into the camps at 1929, although Solomon’s account does not describe any further details regarding Victor’s biography.

⁷⁶⁷ Makarenko, *Road to Life*, p.27.

three senior prisoners sitting on the upper bedbunks, Sashka faced the accusation of being a *suka* (bitch) and informing to camp authorities. Solomon recalled how no hot-headedness or passion was present at Sashka's trial, with the triumvirate of judges clinically 'acting upon unwritten laws of the 'honest-thieves' profession.'⁷⁶⁸ Remaining calm throughout and not disputing either the charges read against him or the rudimentary death sentence he now faced, Sashka responded to the judges only to declare how he wished to die. In this instance, the executioner was not an isolated individual, as was common-place in late Imperial penalty, but the chief judge who administered the punishment personally by slitting Sashka's throat over a wash basin. After washing the knife and his hands under a barrel of drinking water, the chief judge knocked on the door to inform the guard he had 'slaughtered a bastard'. This prompted the arrival of the duty officer, *politruk* (political officer), assistant commandant and a number of armed guards. As the political officer ordered that Sashka's body be taken away to the mortuary, his murderer was escorted away, convinced that he had done the right thing.⁷⁶⁹

Punishment rituals between prisoners not only replicated those used by camp authorities but were entrenched in a system of penalty and justice which had historically contained strong elements of theatre.⁷⁷⁰ These ad hoc proceedings displayed remarkable resemblance to other 'trials' during the same period, such as case Pavlik Morozov or the 1930s 'show trials', whose public confessional and condemnatory rituals performed functions similar to Foucault's 'spectacle of the scaffold' in the nineteenth century.⁷⁷¹ This lineage is reflected in Solomon's longer description which drew a comparison between the proceedings he witnessed and *samosud*, the widespread culture of 'self-judging' found in the Tsarist village.⁷⁷² Although linked with vigilantism and characterised by some as 'lynch law', *samosud* represented a complex and consistent way of maintaining order and shared

⁷⁶⁸ Solomon, *Magadan*, p.135.

⁷⁶⁹ Solomon, *Magadan*, p.136.

⁷⁷⁰ Pallot, 'Russia's penal peripheries: space, place and penalty in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30 (2005), p.99.

⁷⁷¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London, 1977), p.33. For a brief synopsis regarding the theatrical nature of 'show trials' in the 1930s: Catriona Kelly, *Comrade Pavelik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero* (London, 2005), p.96-97.

⁷⁷² Solomon, *Magadan* (London, 1971), p.133

cultural values within the pre-revolutionary peasant commune.⁷⁷³ Occurring mainly in rural areas with a weak police presence and strong traditional peasant institutions, samosud was found in nearly every province of the empire and amongst most ethnic groups well into the twentieth century. It often provided a response to threats and challenges from outside the community, with crimes likely to damage the communes' cohesiveness and chances of survival punished the most severely. Various punitive methods included in a number of violent measures including hanging, shooting, beating with sticks or flogging.⁷⁷⁴ For relatively minor infractions, payment was often accepted in the form of alcohol and a number of 'shaming' rituals were deployed, seeing offenders paraded through the streets on foot or by cart. To warn off other potential offenders, thieves were forced to wear the goods they had stolen, women had skirts raised or were stripped naked while some men also faced removal of their clothes before being tarred and feathered.⁷⁷⁵

This chapter will demonstrate how strong visual aspects such as those found in samosud were also displayed in courts between prisoners. The trial parodied official practices and presided over the most minor infractions of the prisoner code, with the ritual surrounding proceedings as important as the subsequent sentencing and punishment. The spectrum of punitive measures, which stretched from forms of ostracism and humiliation to severe physical torture and even death, provided a powerful mechanism to ensure the cohesiveness of criminal gangs and disseminate powerful messages to the rest of prisoner society. Court proceedings performed an important function in setting and regulating behavioural norms yet were far from the only violent acts which took place between groups of criminal prisoners. While a number of different criminal factions managed to co-exist in earlier periods, the Great Patriotic War saw changes in prisoner composition which led to a period of prisoner-on-prisoner violence most commonly referred to as the 'Bitches War' (*Such'ya Voina*). Pitting several criminal factions into direct conflict with each other, the bitches' war revolved around one of the main tenants of the prisoner code, stipulating hostility toward institutional structures, and

⁷⁷³ Stephen Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia* p.246; Cathy Frierson, 'Crime and Punishment in the Russian Village – Rural Concepts of Criminality at the end of the 19th Century', *Slavic Review*, 46:1 (1987); Galeotti, 'The World of the Lower Depths', p.90.

⁷⁷⁴ Frierson, 'Crime and Justice in the Russian Village', p.62.

⁷⁷⁵ Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, p.250.

has subsequently received near-mythical status in both camp historiography and criminal folklore.⁷⁷⁶

The main battle lines were drawn between ‘thieves’ and ‘bitches’ (*suki*), who, following their participation on the frontlines entered the licit hierarchy by performing ‘soft jobs’ for camp authorities. Although the main rupture between ‘thieves’ and ‘bitches’ remains the most studied, more recent archival work also shows the participation of a number of smaller groups factions.

As demonstrated in chapter 3, groups were aligned by factors such as pre-prison acquaintance and cultural similarities. They all contained similarities including their own form of crude justice for anyone found transgressing the rules and traditions of the collective. Although competing for power and agency, these factions helped to create a system with some stability as their authority rarely extended beyond localised areas, such as one individual camp or sub-section.⁷⁷⁷ As the overall population of the camps grew, however, so did the potential for more widespread territorial conflict.⁷⁷⁸ This chapter will, therefore, also look to demonstrate the involvement of a numerous groups and their contribution to an inherently unstable camp system in the post-war period. As recalled by many memoirists, this rising tide of violence meant that camp authorities were often unable to do little more than attempt to separate the factions and clean up the bodies, leaving an indelible mark on the entire prisoner population.

Ritual

Maria Bochkareva’s memoir ‘Yashka’ demonstrates an example of trial proceeding between prisoners in the late Imperial period. During her transfer to exile in 1912, Bochkareva found herself in a party which mixed political prisoners and recidivist criminals. Describing the continuous feud between the two groups, Bochkareva stated how a privileged group of long-sentence convicts were given priority by the unwritten laws of the criminal world. These prisoners always had the first use of kettles to

⁷⁷⁶ Danzig Baldaev refers to this period as *razborki* (‘settling of scores/showdown’): Baldaev (ed.), *Drawings from the Gulag*, p.199. Donald Clemmer defines *conflict* as arising ‘when a person or a group with one set of principles comes into contact with a person or group with a different set: Clemmer, *The Prisoner Community*, p.83.

⁷⁷⁷ Solomon, *Magadan*, p.137.

⁷⁷⁸ Rodgers, ‘When Vigilantes Turn Bad: Gangs, Urban Violence and Social Change in Urban Nicaragua’, David Pratten & Atreyee Sen (eds.), *Global Vigilantes* (Columbia University Press, 2008), p.362.

prepare food and hot water, and no other prisoners dared approach them until they had finished. According to the memoir, their word was law and even the soldiers and officers respected these privileges.

When they reached an exile-station at Katchugo, Bochkareva recalled a scene which she described as a ‘trial of a criminal by criminals.’ These proceedings presided over the ‘rigid a code of morals’ and called upon the accusers to state their charges in front of the whole travelling party. The privileged criminals were chosen as judges and were informed that that the accused had betrayed a former partner during a robbery. Amidst cries of ‘Kill him! Kill him! The traitor! Kill him!’, described by Bochkareva as the usual punishment for anyone found guilty, the penal authorities watched on as the judges called for order and demanded the crowd listen to the defendant. The prisoner testified how, during the robbery, his partner was caught while he managed to escape through a window. As further evidence of his character, the defendant presented the accomplishments of his career and lists of ‘chiefs’ he had worked under and partners he had previously carried out robberies with. On hearing this evidence, several prisoners raised voices in his favour and spoke in glowing terms while others objected. Following their deliberations, which lasted for several hours, the judges eventually acquitted the prisoner of all charges.⁷⁷⁹

Several memoirists also describe makeshift court proceedings between Gulag prisoners, although they often do so under different names. The persistence of the common features of this ritual, however, demonstrates the imprecise nature of orally-transmitted ceremonies and the need to not allow minor variations to impact on the symbolic core.⁷⁸⁰ For instance, Galler & Marques’ dictionary of prison slang lists *sud* as simply ‘camp court’, with jurisdiction only over prisoners.⁷⁸¹ One of the earliest references comes from Likhachev’s 1935 article which describes how ‘behaviour in their environment is limited by countless rules, norms, particular notions of ‘decency’, ‘good tone’ and a complex hierarchy of subordination to each other’. Each violation of these behavioural norms was punishable by a ‘thieves’ court’ (*vorovskim sudom*) of which punishment was ‘immediate and

⁷⁷⁹ Mariia Bochkareva, *Yashka: My Life as Peasant, Officer and Exile* (New York, 1919), pp.44-46.

⁷⁸⁰ Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia*, p.148.

⁷⁸¹ Galler & Marques, *Soviet Prison Camp Speech*, p.186.

always cruel'.⁷⁸² These elementary proceedings were further referred to by Shalamov as 'courts of honour' (*sudakh chesti*) in which male prisoners 'tried and sentenced each other for violating their code of ethics'. The brief description given in 'Women in the Criminal World' also suggests that 'trials' could also take place between female prisoners, although they were neither as cruel nor bloody as their male counterparts.⁷⁸³

Also occasionally using the word '*pravliki*' ('small courts'), Shalamov described the main function as being a 'judicial' interpretation of suspicious acts. The courts would provide an affirmative answer to decisions regarding a prisoner's guilt and 'bloody reprisals' would apply almost immediately. Sentences would often be carried as an 'initiation' for young thieves with more experienced criminals imploring how such 'acts' would be useful for them to gain experience.⁷⁸⁴ Solzhenitsyn also invoked the concept of honour, describing sentences as merciless and punishments executed implacably, even if the condemned person was out of reach in a different compound. In Solzhenitsyn's view, punishments were often 'unusual' and could involve groups of prisoners jumping in turn from the upper bunks onto another inmate lying below.⁷⁸⁵ Another camp survivor, Maximilian de Santerre, used the medieval form *tolkovishcha* to describe the trials. Arrested in 1946, his unruly behaviour and repeated escape attempts meant that de Santerre was placed among prisoners 'refusing labour discipline'. According to de Santerre, courts would discuss 'all questions' concerning the prisoners placed alongside him in the punishment compound. These proceedings could last for several days and include seemingly the most insignificant biographical details.⁷⁸⁶

These mock judicial proceedings often revolved around adherence to the prisoner code. As the code dictated that members were required to share everything with each other, concealing items such as food and cigarettes could lead to a trial and subsequent deprivation of privileges.

Unsanctioned violence toward other members, along with them insulting or raising hands, was also prohibited. Unlike in other penal societies, the *pakhan* (who could take on several roles) was often

⁷⁸² Likhachev, 'Cherty Pervobytnogo Primitivizma Vorovskoi Rechi', p.60.

⁷⁸³ Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, p.419.

⁷⁸⁴ Shalamov, *Sobraniye Sochineniy v 4-h Tomah*, pp.60-63.

⁷⁸⁵ Solzhenitsyn. *Arhipelag GULag, 1918-1956*. Vol.3, p.433.

⁷⁸⁶ Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, p.157.

central to the proceedings. While all participants had the right to vote, the judgement of the most senior prisoner would carry the greatest weight and their vote often decided the outcome.⁷⁸⁷ Although senior figures could take on multiple roles, tattoos also indicated this particular status. The image below (Fig.17), displaying the scales of justice, an orthodox cross, olive branches and a skull, was found on the shoulder a prisoner from Chita Jail in the 1950s. This image would often be bestowed on an ‘orthodox’ (someone who had never transgressed the code) and marked them as someone who could settle accounts both inside and outside the camps.⁷⁸⁸

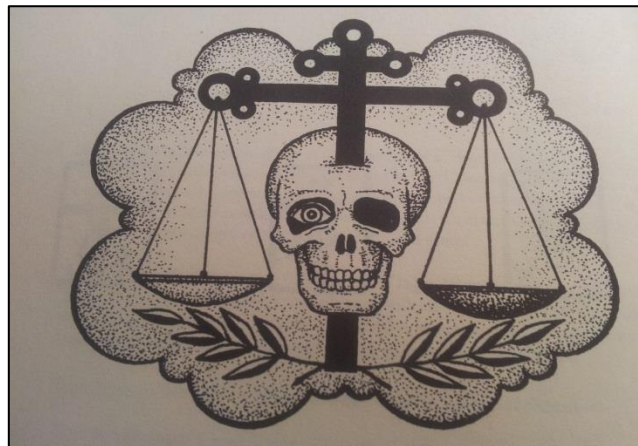


Fig.17 –*Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, vol. 1. Danzig Baldaev(ed.).

Female prisoners reportedly had their own proceedings, although there is no reference to them in memoir accounts. According to Shalamov, disputes regarding women would often be taken up in male courts, stating that, in ‘instances when hot tempers and the hysteria characteristic of all criminals will make him defend ‘his woman’ before prosecutors would cite age old traditions and demand the guilty man be punished.’⁷⁸⁹ Former actress Camilla Horn was protected from the advances of

⁷⁸⁷ V. I. Monakhov. *Gruppirovki vorov-retsidivistov i nekotorye voprosy bor’by s nimi*, (Moscow, 1957) p.18.

⁷⁸⁸ Baldaev (ed.) *Russian Criminal Tattoo*, Vol.1, p.138.

⁷⁸⁹ Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, p.420.

Timofey, a prisoner sentenced for murder and robbery, by another inmate named Valentin Matveich. When Timofey reached for a knife to react to being slapped by Camilla, Valentin intervened and grabbed hold of Timofey's arm, forcing him to drop his weapon. After a tense stand-off, Timofey angrily informed Valentin that he would get revenge, stating: 'You have disgraced me! You made me lose face for a pair of legs, you bastard! I will have to answer for this disgrace to the *samosud* tribunal!'⁷⁹⁰ Unfortunately, Solomon's memoir gives no indication of whether this trial actually took place.

Punishment

It has been well-documented that a litany of interrogation and torture methods not only characterised the arrest and imprisonment procedure, but was also a regular feature of life in the camps. On Solovki guards were reported to punish prisoners by forcing them to jump into the freezing rivers, make them strip and to sit on a perch in for hours and push them down the giant staircases of Mount Sekira.⁷⁹¹ This cruelty towards inmates continued throughout the expansion of the camp system and, while not reflected in archival material, is detailed graphically in survivor memoir.⁷⁹² A 1952 letter from 32 year old prisoner Alexander V. Ivanov to Lavrenty Beria described how he was 'naïve' to watch movies about the development of torture in capitalist countries and believe that it did not exist in the Soviet Union, confirming: 'there is torture (*pytki*) and torment (*isitazaniia*), and they exist in Pechorlag.'⁷⁹³ Ivanov's letter described how guards would place prisoners in strait jackets, twist their arms and legs and break their spine. Handcuffs would regularly be used, along with stuffing dirty rags into prisoner's mouths and keeping them in punishment cells well beyond the formal term of their sanction.⁷⁹⁴

Torture methods used by prisoners mirrored practices used by police and camp authorities.

These techniques were just as violent and often even more primitive in their utilisation of the penal

⁷⁹⁰ Solomon, *Magadan*, p.147.

⁷⁹¹ Robson, *Solovki*, p.227.

⁷⁹² Applebaum, *Gulag*, p.255.

⁷⁹³ Alexopolous, 'A Torture Memo'. p.157.

⁷⁹⁴ Alexopolous, 'A Torture Memo', p.164.

environment. Not only that, but many also bore strong resemblance to those used in late imperial Russia, whose striking, visceral images reinforced the symbolic power of the state.⁷⁹⁵ For instance, Bardach described how he witnessed a fellow prisoner in the Buchta Nakhodka transit prison suspended by a rope with his hands and legs tied behind his back (similar to a medieval form of torture known as ‘the rack’), while two prisoners pulled him repeatedly up and down onto a boxboard. As he watched on, Bardach was informed by Jora (an *urka* whom Bardach previously treated in the camp medical ward) that the victim was ‘getting what he deserves. He had his word in court. He’s lucky to stay alive.’⁷⁹⁶

Camp slang includes multiple terms for various forms of verbal and physical humiliation, including a number of execution methods.⁷⁹⁷ These punishments could take the form of beatings, sexual assaults, drowning, sealing in concrete, impaling on a pike or crowbar, ‘plugging the throat’, sawing prisoners (known as an ‘Indian *krant*’, from *kranty*, slang for ‘finished’ or ‘done in’), executions or hanging.⁷⁹⁸ There is little doubt that this sadism, humiliation and sexual perversion served to both dehumanise and violently enforce hierarchies of power. However, as Foucault demonstrates, torture should not be viewed as just an expression of lawless rage but a technique in which a whole economy of power is invested.⁷⁹⁹ While impossible to verify all of these methods from Baldaev’s collection with survivor memoirs, this multiplicity of torture methods is particularly important in understanding the escalating violence which took place in camp society following the Second World War.⁸⁰⁰ Despite this, earlier descriptions demonstrate marginally more lenient punishments, displaying some similarity with *samosud* which did not always take a violent form but provided examples of community-enforced norms and morality.⁸⁰¹

⁷⁹⁵ Schrader, *Languages of the Lash*, p.50.

⁷⁹⁶ Bardach, *Man is Wolf to Man*, p.178.

⁷⁹⁷ Baldaev (ed.), *Drawings from Gulag*, pp.208-214.

⁷⁹⁸ Baldaev (ed.), *Drawings from the Gulag*, pp.129-141.

⁷⁹⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.35.

⁸⁰⁰ Alexopoulos, ‘A Torture Memo: Reading Violence in the Gulag’, Golfo Alexopoulos, Julie Hessler & Kiril Tomoff (eds.), *Writing the Stalin Era: Sheila Fitzpatrick and Soviet Historiography* (New York, 2011), p.160.

⁸⁰¹ Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia*, p.246.

One of the main punishments in Likhachev's article on thieves' slang was the banning of 'boasting' (*khvastovstva*).⁸⁰² As previously noted, storytelling was a highly sought after commodity between prisoners and some memoirists were able to enhance their chances of survival as a result of their oratory skills. This sentence, however, refers to a criminal's personal biography and the embellishment of their own achievements. As previously noted, the construction of an abstract thief (or family of thieves) was often apparent in criminal songs and tattoos. This has led to Julie Draskoczy suggesting that, with their elaborate requirements to get into character, frequent and specific gestures, speech characterised by intense emotion and slang, a particular type of gait, certain clothing and the ubiquitous presence of tattoos, criminals often resembled performers.⁸⁰³ Likhachev's article also highlighted a certain sensitivity to these performative aspects, with the audience giving a thief added motivation to take extra 'risks' during gambling sessions and circulation of the popular phrase 'in public, even death is beautiful.'⁸⁰⁴

Therefore, a common phenomenon in the 'thieves' environment' was the embellishment of criminal exploits. The actual events which took place became only the starting point yet to stop the story and expose the narrator was considered a deep insult on 'criminal dignity' (*blatnye dostoinstvo*). One could only object to a story being told if backed by an infringement of thieves' ethics or law. If this did happen, however, a prohibition against boasting would be enforced. This punishment was considered to be as serious as exile from the criminal sphere. Not only would the thief in question no longer have the right to talk about his exploits, he could be stopped by anyone, even if telling an absolute truth.⁸⁰⁵ These stories were almost always stereotypical, evoking prison songs and bandit tales of the nineteenth century. They would usually take the form of self-sacrifice and enhance the agility, resourcefulness and ingenuity of the heroes of the story, although the ability to talk 'bitterly' (*khlestko*) about events was also a valued commodity. According to Likhachev, the whole character of 'boasting' resembled the rites of a medieval shaman, aiding self-confidence while simultaneously consolidating power over subordinate 'brothers' (*brazhkoy*). Likhachev noted how most prisoner

⁸⁰² Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, p.158.

⁸⁰³ Draskoczy, *Belomor*, p.101-102.

⁸⁰⁴ Likhachev, 'Cherty Pervobytnogo Primitivizma Vorovskoi', p.63.

⁸⁰⁵ Likhachev, 'Cherty Pervobytnogo Primitivizma Vorovskoi', p.63.

songs also bore hallmarks of boasting, usually telling a story of a criminal's own 'exploits' and often leading from the first person (singular or plural).⁸⁰⁶ Prohibitions against boasting, therefore, provided a method of distinguishing social status and assigning individuals to a particular class of inmates, often resulting in permanent ostracism from the group. Similar to Clemmer's descriptions of 'grouping' and 'ungrouping', this punishment would mean the loss of some of the benefits gained through group interaction.⁸⁰⁷ This relegation through the ranks of penal hierarchy was also described by de Santerre as *zemlenie* ('earthing').⁸⁰⁸

Similarly to the punishments which took place as the result of card games, some transgressions merited more severe punishment. Physical violence provided a powerful mechanism for punishing norm violators, although, like gambling, it also involved a number of gradations. One punishment for minor infractions, such as insulting another criminal, was a 'public slap in the face'.⁸⁰⁹ To slap another member was not only a severe blow to their reputation, but also sent a powerful message to the rest of prison society, communicating strong messages about an individual's loyalty to the prisoner code. An inmate who received a beating could heal without permanently tarnishing their reputation.⁸¹⁰ For more serious violations, gangs utilised their own form of corporal punishment. These often displayed similarities to methods used in late Imperial penalty. For instance, punishments of this type could be comprised of fifty hits with a stick (similar to the military penalty of 'running the gauntlet'). An executioner, occasionally a prisoner who had been a victim of the accused, would sometimes pronounce beforehand that they took no 'responsibility for bruises or blood!' under the threat of replacing the original perpetrator if they failed to declare this statement.⁸¹¹ Punishments like this were usually reserved for communicating stronger messages about someone's character and their adherence to the prisoner code, with the physical scarring signalling to other prisoners that someone had a serious complaint regarding that individual's behaviour.⁸¹²

⁸⁰⁶ Likhachev, 'Cherty Pervobytnogo Primitivizma Vorovskoi', p.64.

⁸⁰⁷ Donald Clemmer discusses grouped and 'ungrouped' interaction: Clemmer, *The Prisoner Community*, pp.111-133.

⁸⁰⁸ Glazov, 'Thieves' in the USSR - A Social Phenomenon', p.35.

⁸⁰⁹ Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, p.158.

⁸¹⁰ Skarbeck, *Social Order of the Underworld*, p.80.

⁸¹¹ Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, p.159.

⁸¹² Skarbeck, *Social Order of the Underworld*, p.80.

For more severe transgressions, such as informing on fellow prisoners or repeatedly cheating or stealing from other inmates, a rudimentary death penalty was enforced. Alongside Solomon's description of Sashka, a further example was provided by de Santerre, who described how one condemned prisoner was 'rotated' (a process believed to take away his soul). The victim was then given the chance to die 'with honour' by standing to face his executioners armed with knives, tearing the front of his shirt open and declaring 'take my soul!' Reportedly, senior criminals could also decide if the accused were 'worthy' of a dignified death. If they were not, prisoners facing being killed while they were sleeping (reportedly against criminal ethics if unsanctioned).⁸¹³

Varese describes how the fate of *vory-v-zakone* members often took place in larger criminal meetings, known as *skhodki*. These took place both inside and outside the camps from the 1950s onwards and are comparable to mafia punishment sanctions. Archival documents further reinforce the authority of *skhodki* across the length and breadth of the camp system.⁸¹⁴ For instance, a decision in 1951 in Vostochno-Ural'skii corrective labour camp (ITL) sentenced the prisoner Yurilkin to death. Camp authorities responded to this decision by transferring him several hundred kilometres away to Vyatskii ITL. They later moved him to a transit prison in Kirov and then Mekhre'gskii ITL for precaution. Despite this, four years later two recidivist prisoners executed Yurilkin. They were later found guilty of murder and shot by the authorities, with the official report noting that they were fully aware of the punishment they would face but did not have the authority to disregard the court's decision.⁸¹⁵ This account in particular, reflects the lack of control of the authorities and increasing levels of violence as the inmate population rose. Prisoner-on-prisoner violence was not limited to criminal courts, however, but expressed in an bloody internal battle which spread throughout the post-war Gulag

⁸¹³ Glazov, 'Thieves' in the USSR – A Social Phenomenon', p.35.

⁸¹⁴ Slade, *Reorganizing Crime*, p.96-7.

⁸¹⁵ Monakhov, *Gruppirovki vorov-retsdivistov i nekotorye voprosy bor'by s nimi*, p.19-20. Widespread obedience to these rulings continued to be major problem for camp authorities in the post-Stalin camps. A 1955 report sent to the Procurators office of the Soviet Union from the Procurator of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic described how a decision at the end of summer 1954 in one Siberian camp reached the Ukrainian camps by September/October of the same year and a note from the Procurators office of the Soviet Union dated 13 June, 1956, remarked that how: 'This criminal formation exists in all Corrective Labour camps and often the decision to murder one or another prisoner who is in a different camp is executed in the camp unquestioningly.' Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, p.159.

Conflict

Like Soviet society as a whole, the Gulag was shaken irreversibly by the onset of the Great Patriotic War. As of 1st January, 1939, collected camps, colonies and prisons held a total of around 1.9 million prisoners. This included 1,290,000 in corrective labour camp institutions, of whom 107,000 were women and 440,000 had been sentenced for counterrevolutionary activities. Annexation of the Baltic republics (western Belorussia, Moldavia and western Ukraine) in 1939-40 resulted in the percentage of inmates from these regions increasing by over 120%.⁸¹⁶ Two years later, in January 1941, the total number of prisoners would rise again to almost 2.9 million (with another 930,000 in exile).⁸¹⁷ This population was not static but subject to constant flux as large numbers continued to be transferred between camps, colonies and prisons, attempted to escape, or were released early in order to join the Red Army.⁸¹⁸ In order to provide extra manpower in order to halt Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, People's Defence Committee Order Number 227 released around one million prisoners to fight in penal battalions (*shtrafnye bata'lony*).⁸¹⁹ Originally, these battalions had initially been comprised of soldiers accused of disrupting discipline through cowardice and/or lack of rigour. As the war turned in favour of the allies, improved morale and reduced desertion rate meant that units were restocked with former inmates who were granted early release on the condition that they join the army.⁸²⁰ Although this was initially limited to those serving sentences relating to absenteeism and 'insignificant work-related or economic crimes', some recidivists also ended up serving on the frontlines.

This promise of amnesty was halted however, in 1944, when the government began to send huge waves back to the camps (along with ex-prisoners who had been released but were subsequently re-arrested).⁸²¹ This resulted in a notably more diverse penal society in the post war Gulag than had existed previously. Mass death and release resulted in the total prisoner population falling by half

⁸¹⁶ Varese, 'Society of the Vor-V-Zakone', p.527. Steven Barnes describes professional criminals 'strutting around like dandies' in tight-fitting jackets, vests, coats, hats and scarves stolen from newly arrived prisoners who arrived from the annexed territories: Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, pp.109-110.

⁸¹⁷ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, p.113.

⁸¹⁸ Edward Bacon includes detailed statistical analysis of intra-Gulag transfers, turnover ratio in the camps, distribution of prisoners added to the camps and the sources/destinations of those entering and leaving the camps: Bacon, *Gulag at War*, pp.110-122.

⁸¹⁹ Slade, *Reorganizing Crime*, p.15.

⁸²⁰ Baldaev (ed.), *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 3, p.27.

⁸²¹ Rawlinson, *From Fear to Fraternity*, p.60. The promise of amnesty was not particularly unique as the Gulag operated a 'revolving door' system of frequent arrests and releases as 20-40 percent of the total inmate population were released every year, even at the height of Stalinist terror: Alexopolous, 'Amnesty 1945'.

throughout 1944, the first substantial decline in the history of the camps.⁸²² As fighting on the frontlines drew to a close, the total number in corrective labour camps and colonies began to rise again by more than 40% (from 1.2 million in January 1944 to 1.7 million in 1946).⁸²³ This total included 355,000 Soviet POWs who passed through NKVD Verification and Filtration Camps. Eventually, under two thirds of these were returned back to the Red Army, while the remainder were sentenced to serve time in the Gulag.⁸²⁴ The upward spike continued into the following year, when a total of 626,987 new inmates entered the camps. This trend would not stop until 1953, when the population of inmates reached its peak of 2.45 million, the zenith of what has become known as the camp-industrial complex.⁸²⁵

Adjustments to the Criminal Code also added to the swelling of numbers, and resulting in the traditional divisions becoming more pronounced and violent than in the camps of the 1930s.⁸²⁶ An order from the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet ‘On the Strengthening of Criminal Responsibility for Stealing’ in June 1947 allegedly worked as a pretext to have many executed.⁸²⁷ Mandatory 25 year sentences from decrees ‘on the protection of socialist property’ and ‘on the protection of personal property’ saw 300,000 convicted from 1947-1952.⁸²⁸ Previously sentences for these crimes could only last a few months or a year or two, but now recidivists faced a much longer period inside the camps.⁸²⁹ The abolition of the death penalty for murder by Supreme Council Decree in May 1947 has been seen to trigger a dramatic escalation of violence within the camps, with some prisoners suspected of murdering fellow inmates to be transferred to an investigatory prison while the case was investigated.⁸³⁰

Exacerbated by the implementation of stricter law enforcement, one of the main tensions was formed between convicts who joined penal battalions and those who remained in the camps.⁸³¹ By fighting for

⁸²² Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, p.113.

⁸²³ Bacon, *Gulag at War*, p.91.

⁸²⁴ Bacon, *Gulag at War*, p.93. This figure included a number of ‘Vlasovites’, members of the army created by General Vlasov who deserted the Red Army to join forces with German troops.

⁸²⁵ Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp.414-427.

⁸²⁶ Varese, ‘Society of the Vory-v-Zakone’, p.527.

⁸²⁷ Slade, *Reorganizing Crime*, p.15.

⁸²⁸ Varese, ‘Society of the Vory-v-Zakone’, p.537.

⁸²⁹ For crimes during collectivization: Hagenloh, *Stalin’s Police*, pp. 53-57, 91-93, 95-96.

⁸³⁰ Baldaev, *Drawings from the Gulag*, p.199

⁸³¹ Slade, *Reorganizing Crime*, p.15.

the Red Army and, de facto, the state, prisoners known as the *voenshchina* (solidery) had violated one of the main tenets of the prisoner code which stipulated hostility toward symbols of authority. After the war, these former prisoners would be returned to the camps, having been convicted of crimes after fighting had ceased. Among this group, some were known as ‘warriors’ (*voyaky*) and awarded medals while others, often injured during the conflict, were left begging on commuter trains. The *voeshchina* included a number of prominent figures from the criminal underworld. Faced with returning to the camps, it was agreed that they could not continue to live under their ‘old ways’, and the matter would be discussed further when they arrived back. While they believed that they would be welcomed by those who had stayed in camps during the war, these hopes did not materialise. The old criminal underworld would not permit them back into their ranks, stating that participation in the military was strictly forbidden. Although the issue of how to deal with these returning prisoners was a complex issue, Shalamov recalled how the main divide between them was a simple one:

‘You were in the war? You picked up a rifle? That means that you are a bitch, a real bitch and should be punished by the ‘law’. Besides, you are also a coward! You did not have the will power to abandon the company - you should have taken a new sentence or even died, but not taken the rifle!’⁸³²

According to Shalamov’s story (now widely accepted in Gulag historiography), leaders of the *voeshchina* met at a transit prison at Vanino in 1948 to attempt to find a solution to this problem. During this meeting, it was decided that a new ‘law’ would be announced allowing prisoners to collaborate with the administration and work as trustees, foremen and in various other positions.⁸³³ Growing co-operation amongst criminal elements is reflected in GARF documents. In an order sent to Republican government and the Gulag administration in February 1950, General Serov, deputy minister of Interior Affairs, acknowledged that ‘signs of repentance’ had begun to appear among ‘criminal-bandit elements’. Serov instructed the administration to identify roughly 15-20 prisoners of this type in each camp and to transfer each one of them from strict regime to ordinary regime camps,

⁸³² Shalamov, *Sobraniye Sochineniy v 4-h Tomah*, p.63.

⁸³³ Shalamov, *Sobraniye Sochineniy v 4-h Tomah*, p.65.

stating that informants for the camp administration were to be selected from this pool of inmates.⁸³⁴

This was also the case in strict regime camps, confirmed in a May 1952 report sent to G. M.

Malenkov, Secretary of the Central Committee, which stated that ‘in some camp sub-units of the strict regimen the administration of Dal’stroi camp recruited dangerous criminal recidivists in the camp service. Although they had received several sentences, some of these criminals were appointed prisoner representatives.’⁸³⁵

According to camp legend, this new position ensured that *voeshchina* retained their position in prison society by joining the licit hierarchy but their alignment with the authorities now brought them into direct conflict with the prisoner code.⁸³⁶ These growing tensions meant that open conflict was inevitable and an internal battle broke out across the camps. While the war has achieved near-mythical status yet there is little doubt that it raged between different camp zones and complexes. This has been confirmed by a number of former prisoners including Shalamov, who used the name given to the conflict as the title of one of his short stories. Shalamov’s account opens with a doctor called into the emergency room where, on the freshly cleaned floor, orderlies were treating a tattooed man with knife wounds. After lamenting that the floor would be difficult to clean, the doctor described how a lieutenant of the special department was hunched over the injured man holding papers in his hands. This incident had to be documented, and the lieutenant was attempting to get information from the wounded prisoner. Asking for the same basic biographical information which had to be recited by prisoners ‘ten times a day’ (first name, surname, article of criminal code, length of sentence etc.) the injured man gave some information, but with the lieutenant, doctor and orderlies waiting over him, the most important question remained:

‘Who are you? Who?’ – Kneeling beside the wounded man, the lieutenant excitedly cried.

⁸³⁴ Varese, ‘Society of the Vory-v-Zakone’, p.529.

⁸³⁵ Varese, ‘Society of the Vory-v-Zakone’, p.529.

⁸³⁶ Olenik, *Crime, Prison and Post-Soviet Society*, p.72.

‘Who?’

And the wounded understood the question. His eyelids fluttered, and his bitten, parched lips parted and exhaled a long, painful:

‘*Su-u-ka....*’

And lost consciousness.

‘Suka!’ The lieutenant cried delightedly, standing up and brushing his hands and knees.

‘Suka!’ ‘Suka!’ Happily repeated the paramedic.⁸³⁷

Shalamov described why camp authorities were so delighted to find a *suka* in the Surgical Department, explaining that, following the end of the war, a ‘bloody underwater wave’ had ran through the criminal world which no-one had predicted. This collusion of *suki* and camp authorities was further explained by *pakhan* Valentin the Intelligent. After boasting how his gang had sold items ‘liberated’ from new arrivals, splitting the proceeds with the guards who in turn brought them food and tobacco from the surrounding areas, Valentine described how camp commanders had tried unsuccessfully to punish the guards. After this failed, they attempted another approach by threatening recidivists with jobs which were ‘absolutely against the code of the underworld’ stating that, as an *urka*:

“You must never help build a prison wall or put up barbed wire. No self-respecting *urka* will ever do that; the rest would rub him out. So they forced them to break their own unwritten laws, do you see? Forced them to be a foreman in a work project. Absolutely taboo. Every *chelovek* (person) knows that. Accept a job like that and you have practically committed suicide. These were the *suki*, then. They had to be separated from the rest of the criminals or they would have to be rubbed out first. The *suki* are the MVD’s converts. The *chestnyagi* (honest thieves), the unconverted, hate their guts. So the MVD always separates the two groups, particularly when there’s an etap. They don’t want their precious converts wiped out. All the same the war goes on in camp. Any time a *suka* is discovered, he usually loses his head”

“Literally? Somebody cuts his head off”

“That’s right....or strangles him. It’s the code.”⁸³⁸

⁸³⁷ Shalamov, *Sobraniye Sochineniy v 4-h Tomah*, pp.60-63.

⁸³⁸ Dolgun, *Alexander Dolgun’s Story*, pp.147-8.

Although stating that the ‘bitches’ war’ deserved a chapter of its own, Solzhenitsyn deferred his readers to Shalamov’s work.⁸³⁹ For Solzhenitsyn, however, there was little practical difference between the two factions, claiming that while ‘people will object that it was only the bitches who accepted positions, while the ‘honest thieves’ held onto the thieves law. But no matter how much I saw of one and the other, I never could see that one rabble was nobler than the other.’⁸⁴⁰ This distinction began in the transit camps, where ‘permanent residents’ such as work assignment clerks, office workers, book keepers, instructors, bath attendants, barbers, stock room clerks, cooks, dishwashers, laundresses and tailors were able to take extra rations, live in cells, eat on their own out of the common food pot or steal from ordinary *zeks*:

“‘But those aren’t thieves!’” The connoisseurs amongst us explain. “‘These are bitches – the ones who work for the prison. They are enemies of the honest thieves. And the honest thieves are the ones imprisoned in cells.’” But somehow this is hard for our rabbit brains to grasp. Their ways are the same; they have the same kind of tattoos. Maybe they really are enemies of those others, but after all they are not our friends either, that’s how it is...”⁸⁴¹

Although Solzhenitsyn suggests that it was impossible to tell images from the two factions apart, prisoner tattoos acquired a different dimension after World War Two with this period seeing the beginning of the more detailed codification regularly associated with Russian criminality. By adding an arrow to the commonly found image of a dagger piercing the heart, inmates indicated a desire to seek vengeance against those who had violated the prisoner code. The popular compass rose, usually found in pairs, would become known as ‘thieves’ stars’ and expressed aggression against prison

⁸³⁹ Despite this, Solzhenitsyn stated that Shalamov’s writings on the bitches’ war were incomplete: Solzhenitsyn, *Arkhipelag GULaga*, Vol.3, p.438.

⁸⁴⁰ Solzhenitsyn, *Arkhipelag GULaga*, Vol.3, p.438; Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, p.174.

⁸⁴¹ For Solzhenitsyn the animosity began before the Great Patriotic War, describing a female thief, Beregova, who was sent to Dmitlag in July 1933. After being dispatched to the India barracks (known for housing recidivist criminals) Beregova was astonished by the lack of “mother oaths” and card games. Convincing the physician to sign her off sick despite her lack of illness and practicing tufta during excavations, Beregova encountered an old acquaintance, Polyanka, who had become a work assigner. At this point Beregova decided, in Solzhenitsyn’s words, that she would like to become a bitch too. The same day, after being order to go outside to attend line-up, Beregovaya decided to expose Polyanka’s ‘machinations’. She was eventually being put in charge of a lagging men’s brigade, replacing Polyanka as work assigner before rising to the position of chief of a construction detachment with her image proudly displayed upon the red bulletin board of Dmitlag in a leather jacket and with a field pouch. Solzhenitsyn also used the word *suki* to describe characters from Podogin’s *Aristokraty*, claiming that it would have been impossible for the Mitya to enter the cell of a Strict Regimen Company unarmed, and it was ludicrous that Kostya would hide under the bed boards from him. Instead the criminal leader would have had a knife ready, or else would have been prepared to hurl himself upon Mitya to choke him, resulting in one of them being killed: Solzhenitsyn, *Arkhipelag GULag*, Vol.1, p.539.

officials. Tattoos on the shoulders represented the vow that one would ‘never wear epaulets’ (an expression of hatred toward those who had served in the army) while stars on the knees indicated ‘I will not kneel before the authorities’ (indicating a refusal to be subjugated). During this period, it also became customary to tattoo dots or small crosses on the knuckles to indicate the number of terms served, images of insects became known as pickpocket emblems and abbreviations which echoed the acronymic brands of the late Imperial era became more widespread.⁸⁴² Demonstrating how the ‘bitches’ war played a significant role in further divisions between prisoners.

Shalamov’s account of the war further clarifies the role played by tattoos. In 1948, all inmates of Vanino transit prison were lined up and forced to strip and the *vory* were identified by their tattoos. If they wanted to save their lives, they had to reject the old law and go through a new ritual which marked their entrance into the *suki*. This ritual, taken from a novel by Walter Scott (another popular author in the camps) consisted of kissing a knife to knight them as ‘new *vory*’. If the *vory* refused to take part in this ritual, they were threatened with execution. When many declined, news of the subsequent massacre spread to Kolyma, where Shalamov was incarcerated. According to the story, a fully-fledged war across institutions began to formalise after Korol’ (‘the king’), leader of the *voenshchina*, and his assistants were given permission to visit other transit prisons. Korol’ himself later became a victim of the war after he was blown up with explosives from a mining site, alongside several other prominent criminal figures.⁸⁴³

Collaboration with the administration continued to provide the primary reason for these violent clashes. Lev Kopelev’s friendship with ‘Sasha the Captain’, a deputy chief ‘trusty’ serving a year after a restaurant brawl, provided an alternate viewpoint. Sasha described to Kopelev some ‘bad business at the *BUR* (strict regime barracks)’ where a prisoners’ head had been cut off and placed outside the door. The trustees had discovered the head in the dark but wouldn’t enter the barracks, which was always locked for the night. Kopelev also noted a battle between groups of thieves and ‘bitches’, who had previously fought each other in another camp. Describing how, despite guards firing rounds into the air to attempt to quell the disturbance, fighting continued until they burst into

⁸⁴² Baldaev, (ed.), *Russian Criminal Tattoo*. Vol. 3, pp.33-35.

⁸⁴³ Shalamov, *Sobraniye Sochineniy v 4-h Tomah*, pp.60-63.

the camp. According to Sasha, combatants fought with axes, knives, bricks and shovels, resulting in three men killed and twelve seriously injured. In this particular camp battle lines were drawn three ways between bitches and their assistants (‘shepherds’), ‘vipers’ (camp staff) and thieves, with Sasha recalling the complexity of this growing animosity:

‘At least at the front you know who is your enemy and who’s your friend, but here you don’t know what to expect, and from what quarter. Some night some raggedy-ass kid will lose everything at cards in some barracks and start betting with blood. You know what that means? He loses, he’s got to pay by spilling blood-the first man he sees when he goes outside the next morning. So here your walking along and some little shit-head you’ve never laid eyes on is slinking after you with an ax. They tell us to maintain order; they let us have sticks, but what good are sticks against knives, axes, crowbars? They’re not human beings, those thieves-they’re worse than animals.’⁸⁴⁴

Kopelev was later warned by a doctor that the camp was ‘in a state’ after two men had been killed the previous night. One of these was a ‘trustie’, strangled in the toilet, and the other a ‘goner’ who had been beaten by ‘shepherds’ and left near the garbage dump. The doctor and Kopelev calculated the total deaths now at around a dozen, with two more on a list of those to be killed. Toward the end of the day, a prisoner named Vahktang (a former soldier who was ‘friends’ with some professional criminals), warned Kopelev that ‘the bitches plan to attack the hospital tonight’ and that his name had been was also on the list. The situation was only resolved when Sasha denied that he ever intended to kill Kopelev and informed him that he was being transferred to Butyrka the following day.⁸⁴⁵

Conflict could also pit former acquaintances against each other. Edward Buca recalled how six civilian bosses arrived late at night in the Vorkuta transit camp, looking to appoint a prisoner representative. Asking if there were any former Red Army officers present, a group of about thirty men stepped forward. The highest rank among belonged to a colonel, arrested and sentenced in 1945 after being captured by the Germans. The colonel was appointed as ‘senior officer’ (along with the next seven in rank) and placed in charge of cleaning out the *parasha*. The spokesman of the civilian

⁸⁴⁴ Kopelev. *To Be Preserved Forever*, p.245.

⁸⁴⁵ Kopelev. *To Be Preserved Forever*, p.248-252.

bosses then asked if there were any ‘Bandera partisans’⁸⁴⁶, or any members of the criminal world present. Greeting the spokesman, a man stepped forward:

‘‘You don’t recognise me, Grisha, fuck your mother, but I knew it was you right away.’

There was a moment’s hesitation, then the civilian smiled.

‘Ivan, you son-of-a-snake, it’s you’

He shook the ragged man’s hand, embraced him, and explained to his friends: ‘He’s a friend of mine. We were in prison a couple of times.’⁸⁴⁷

Although still a prisoner, Grisha had taken the role of ‘camp boss’ and his entourage comprised of a number of assistants. Plying him with *makhora*, newspaper, matches, bread and a bowl of porridge, Grisha explained that, under his command, Ivan would be in charge of the hut. The following morning the prisoners were suddenly woken by a string of obscenities from Grisha’s assistants, who were lashing out indiscriminately with clubs. Grisha then faced Ivan, asking him ‘Where’s the hut boss? Why doesn’t he report the hut number and the name of the prisoners?’ Holding a steady gaze straight at Grisha, Ivan refused to reply, leaving the ‘camp boss’ to announce that a new hut boss would be named later. The hostility between the former allies finally spilled over the next day when it was discovered that the colonel and his assistants had not cleaned out the *parasha*. After forcing them to empty it, and then eat their breakfast without washing their hands, the majority of prisoners slowly dispersed and the guard left to shut himself away in his cubicle. Grisha now approached Ivan where he was sitting on an upper bunk. During the tense stand-off, the two spoke with dramatic emphasis as though they were on the stage. Suddenly, Ivan leapt down at Grisha, slitting his throat with a makeshift knife concealed behind his back. Eight of Ivan’s friends accompanied him in the attack, holding off Grisha’s assistants. The fight lasted only a couple of seconds, and Ivan stood over Grisha and announced in loud voice: ‘Death to the bitches!’ It’s a pity,

⁸⁴⁶ Banderites were Ukrainian partisan armies who continued to fight battles with the Soviet government well into the post-war period: Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, p.162.

⁸⁴⁷ Buca, *Vorkuta*, pp.53-57.

you were my friend and an *urka*.⁸⁴⁸ Buca's account provides a microcosm of how the bitches' war divided the criminal underworld as a whole, with the clash between Grisha and Ivan replicated on a much larger scale across a number of different institutions.

Further fighting highlights the main divide between *vory* and *suki*. Santerre recalled an incident in the summer of 1948 at a camp in the Inta region involving around 100 *vory* and 150 *suki*. With camp authorities reportedly only allowing *suki* to arm themselves with weapons, only a handful of *vory* survived the attack. This fighting continued into 1949, when an armed group of *suki* attacked a number of *vory* contained in a disciplinary barrack.⁸⁴⁹ Despite being housed in separate barracks at the Vorkuta Lime Factory, 'bitches', thieves and '*frayera*' would attack each with knives, ladles and iron rods on a daily basis.⁸⁵⁰ Later reports suggested that camps in the Vorkuta area at one point were completely controlled by *suki* while the Aleksandrovsk transit prison and the camps of Pot'ma and Ust'-Vymlag were run by criminals.⁸⁵¹

Finding yourself in a camp controlled by an opposing faction was particularly dangerous, with one report noting how prisoners sought refuge 'in the isolation wards and penalty isolation wards.....in order to escape reprisal.'⁸⁵² This alludes to how fighting mostly took place within individual camp complexes, with penalty isolators often becoming the most dangerous locations. At Dzhantui, near Pechora, criminals burned down two barracks, stopping the cooking and murdered two officers. The remaining officers, under the threat of demotion, refused to enter to enter the penalty isolator. The commandant resorted to enlisting the help of a notorious *suka* who, along with his assistants, carried out an attack on the thieves inside.⁸⁵³ Further reports also described violence inside penalty isolators and the incompetence of camp employees. Aleksei Gerasimovich Podsokhin (a member of *otoshedshie*, 'departed') was given an extra ten-day term having already served one previous ten-day term, and transferred into a cell with members of the *vory*. On May 23rd one of the supervisors, who reportedly knew of Podsokhin's membership in the *otoshedshie*, placed a *vory* named

⁸⁴⁸ Buca, *Vorkuta*, pp.53-57.

⁸⁴⁹ Varese, 'Society of the Vory-v-Zakone', p.529.

⁸⁵⁰ Solzhenitsyn, *Arkhipelag GULag*, Vol.3, p.413.

⁸⁵¹ Varese, 'Society of the Vory-v-Zakone', p.530.

⁸⁵² Varese, 'Society of the Vory-v-Zakone', p.538.

⁸⁵³ Solzhenitsyn, *A. Arkhipelag GULag*, Vol. 3, p.412.

Andreev in the cell. After the two were left alone, Andreev strangled Podsokhin and the supervisors were punished with 10 days house arrest.⁸⁵⁴

Despite these localised accounts, the larger picture of the war is barely mentioned in archival documents. One report, from July 1953, stated how a group of 218 prisoners arriving in the Pevek settlement of the Chaun-Chukotskii camp were greeted with the refrain: ‘Hurrah to *vory!* We’ll kill all *suki!*’⁸⁵⁵ While many sources continue to refer to a conflict between the two main groups (*vory* and *suki*) it is clear a number of smaller factions were also involved. Alongside thieves and bitches, there were smaller gangs known as ‘‘Thieves without Limits’’ (*bespredel’nyy vori*), the *Makrovsty*, the *Uprovsty*, ‘‘Brewers’’ (*pivovarovsty*), the ‘‘Red Cap Gang’’ (*krasnaya shapochka*), ‘‘Fuli Nam!’’, and the Crowbar-Belted (*lomom podpoyasannyye*). The ‘‘Red Cap Gang’’ were named after the red band of their garrison cap while, *Makrovsty* were comprised of ‘stoolie thieves’ (from ‘stool pigeon’, informant) who, despite their name, carried no association with Ukrainian bandit leader Nestor Makhno.⁸⁵⁶ Official reports from Karlag identified three groups fighting each another, naming them as *vory*, the *otoshedshie* (‘‘departed’’), and the *otkolovshiesia* (‘‘breakaway/splinter’’). As indicated by their names, the latter two groups appeared to have broken away from the *vory*. On February 21, 1950, a member of Karlag’s ‘‘criminal-bandit element’’ murdered a prisoner ‘‘belonging to the category ‘departed’’’, with a camp employee also inadvertently shot by a guard in the process. A document from May 1950 also described a number of recent ‘bandit murders’, stating how, in one division medical clinic, four invalid prisoners were killed in one day. Another report, on May 30th of the same year, reprimanded camp employees for ‘‘cowardice’’ after they had fled leaving two ‘bandit’ prisoners to beat another to death with an iron bar.⁸⁵⁷

Divisions between various groups were often so blurred that camp officials had problems identifying which factions prisoners belonged to. These difficulties in reconstructing events are further compounded by reports which mostly refer to individual incidents and warring prisoners as

⁸⁵⁴ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, p.177.

⁸⁵⁵ Varese, ‘Society of Vory-v-Zakone’, p.530.

⁸⁵⁶ Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook*, pp.181, 229, 305, 470. The association with Nestor Makhno (denied by Jacques Rossi) is suggested by Michael Solomon: Solomon, *Magadan*, p.137.

⁸⁵⁷ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, p.177.

simply recidivists and/or bandits (which could mean little more than two or more criminals acting together). The label ‘bandit elements’ was ascribed to any prisoners engaged in collective action by the security services, and guards were also known to manufacture the existence of criminal gangs and artificially construct recidivists in an attempt to turn prisoners against each other (or to redirect antagonism from themselves).

Nevertheless, reports show how violence spread across the camp system. In the Voronezh region in August 1952, a prisoner was killed, with the report of the incident stating that it was part of a larger plan of ‘criminal-bandit elements’ to carry out ‘‘physical execution of prisoners, foremen and their assistants’. Elsewhere, on September 4th 1952, group disturbances took place in the Peschanyi MVD with 4 prisoners killed. According to the report, this was ‘Contrary to the orders of the MVD of the USSR no.00840-1951 and no. 0043-1952’ which stated that ‘‘groups of prisoners that are at enmity with each other are not isolated, continue to be kept together and terrorise the camp population.’⁸⁵⁸ In Pechorlag, a number of gang related incidents were recorded throughout 1952. Some of these included; a group of nine prisoners suffocating a prisoner using a bed sheet, two prisoners suffocating another with a towel, a group of five prisoners killing another inmate with a pickaxe, a group of ten prisoners suffocating another convict using a shirt, five prisoners strangling an inmate to death, nine prisoners strangling another inmate to death and a group of nine prisoners who planned the murder of a prisoner who they suspected of informing to authorities about their planned escape.⁸⁵⁹ Violence was also displayed along ethnic lines as a group of Russian and Ukrainian prisoners used knives, weights and sticks to attack a brigade of Dagestani prisoners, killing two and injuring thirteen others.⁸⁶⁰

Central camp organs continued to blame local authorities for this rise in violence. On December 4th 1952, fifty-one ‘*byvshie*’ (former) *vory*’ came into conflict with 42 prisoners ‘hostile to them’ at Construction Site no. 508. A mass disturbance broke out as a result, with camp guards firing at prisoners attempting to find refuge inside the prohibited zone. This incident ended with six deaths

⁸⁵⁸ Varese, ‘Society of Vory-V-Zakone’, p.538.

⁸⁵⁹ Alexopolous, ‘A Torture Memo’, p.166.

⁸⁶⁰ Alexopolous, ‘A Torture Memo’, p.166.

and twenty nine injuries. Another report, from the Pechorskii corrective labour camp on 10th November 1953, described how twenty four prisoners were killed and twenty nine injured when ‘hostile attitudes between different groups of prisoners had not been taken into consideration’ and groups were allowed to mix. On 28 January 1953, in a sub-unit of Kizellag, proceedings were brought against two employees for beating an inmate to near-death. This reportedly occurred during an interrogation which looked to ascertain ‘which one of the groups that are at enmity with each other’ the prisoner was from.⁸⁶¹ Although the war reportedly began in 1948, it appears to have been at its most violent point during 1951- 52 with Gulag authorities acknowledging that they were losing ground in their battle to halt the conflict. A conference of Gulag commanders in 1952 reported that: ‘the authorities, who until now have been able to gain a certain advantage from the hostilities between various groups of prisoners, (are) beginning to lose their grip on the situation....In some places, certain are even beginning to run the camp along their own lines.’⁸⁶²

It also needs be factored into the equation that a large influx of combat-hardened arrestees also created further groups that tended toward the ‘bitches’ and, in general, the institution.⁸⁶³ Graziosi describes how a decisive change came about with the arrival of prisoners with military and organisational experience, including many officers who were ‘used to fighting and difficult to handle.’ Even those who had been convicted for crimes unrelated to nationalist activities were likely to have served in the war and have experienced combat first-hand. Grigorii Antonov had been demobilised from the army and was working at the Groznyi Oil Institute when, in the summer of 1951, he was arrested. Antonov remembered how, in the Pechorskaia transit prison, he found himself ‘in a barrack where most of the inmates are criminal offenders and one of them took a fancy to my high collared naval jacket. Since I did not want to give it up voluntarily a fight broke out.’ Unlike previously discussed memoirists who stood up individually when outnumbered, convicts like Antonov formed ‘a united mass of people, ready to repel (criminal prisoners).’⁸⁶⁴ Alongside those with military experience, the group of ordinary prisoners (*muzhiki*) who consistently formed the largest group of

⁸⁶¹ Varese, ‘Society of Vory-v-Zakone’, p.538.

⁸⁶² Alexopolous, ‘A Torture Memo’, p.164, 171, 175; Werth, *The Black Book of Communism*. p.239

⁸⁶³ Slade, *Reorganizing Crime*, p.15.

⁸⁶⁴ Varese, ‘Society’, p.537.

convicts also increased their resistance towards criminal gangs.⁸⁶⁵ Official documents describe some of the tensions between new ‘working prisoners’ and bandits. On 10th January 1951, on Construction Site no.501 of the Obskii corrective camp, a group of bandits entered the barrack and tried to seize a parcel and money from two prisoners. When the convicts resisted, one of them was wounded by the bandits. As a result, a number of other prisoners rose to defend them, with nearly 400 people taking part in the assault against the bandits. As a result, 4 people were killed and 9 wounded.⁸⁶⁶

The experience of prisoners during wartime features prominently in the recent television series *Shtrafbat (Penal Battalion)*. Created by NTV to coincide with the 60th anniversary, the series reconciles how the Gulag has been incorporated into the memory of the Great Patriotic War and situates it within recent dialogue of post-Soviet nationalism. The series begins with the story of Vasiliï Tverdokhlebov, a former Red Army officer who survives his own execution by the Nazis by climbing out of his own grave in the opening scene of the first episode. Facing a jail sentence for treason, Tverdokhlebov agrees to lead a battalion comprised of prisoners from different backgrounds. The series revolves mainly around the former officers ability to win over his troops, including the summarily execution of a soldier who knifes a comrade to death and defending his battalion from accusations of disloyalty from an NKVD officer attached to them. The further subordination to both their commander and sense of Soviet-Russian nationhood is compounded through the, initially resistant, knife-carrying *pakhan*, Glymov, who, reminiscent of the ‘reforged’ films of the Soviet era, is transformed from murderer to patriotic hero.⁸⁶⁷

⁸⁶⁵ Slade, *Reorganizing Crime*, p.15.

⁸⁶⁶ Varese, ‘Society of the Vory-v-Zakone’, p.528.

⁸⁶⁷ Steven Hutchings & Natalia Rulyova, *Television and Culture in Putin’s Russia: Remote Control*, (New York, 2009) pp.114-138. For more on *Strafbat*: Stephen Norris, *Blockbuster History in the new Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism*, (Indiana, 2012). For further insight into how the focus has been shifted away from Gulag victims to the legacy of the Great Patriotic War see the NTV documentary about Perm-36, ‘The Fifth Column’: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W99Y9aZ6C_o

Nevertheless, the aftermath of the Great Patriotic War oversaw huge changes in Gulag society as divisions between prisoners became more pronounced and violent. Although the bitches' war now is regarded in an almost mythical sense, comparisons to a number of other penal institutions reveal a similar emergence of criminal gangs within prison walls or barbed wire. Usually small and ethereal, these opposing factions (like street gangs) have been known to create structures with some stability in holding effectively a precarious balance of power with penal authorities. Notwithstanding, the inherently oppositional nature of these factions always contains the potential for territorial conflict.⁸⁶⁸ Hostilities between different criminal factions can be observed in a number of different examples, one of the most prominent being the 'Numbers Gang', thought to have emerged from the Western Cape prison of Pollsmoor to control most prisons in South Africa.⁸⁶⁹ The 'Numbers' contain some similarities with criminal gangs from the Gulag, including their own trial and punishment for anyone found betraying the strict code of conduct. In US prisons informal groups have been known to enforce obedience to the prisoner code through 'extended social networks or crowds' (known as 'tips' or 'cliques') who help to resolve disputes. In these situations influential prisoners would take on leadership positions but play a limited role.⁸⁷⁰ In Gulag society, however, the *pakhan* could take on multiple roles, becoming an important figure in both sentencing and subsequent punishment (as Solomon's example). Moreover, while rituals between criminal formations in the Gulag often contained the strong element of theatre that continues in recent examples of Russian penalty and justice, the study of these practices within the camp walls cannot be divorced from the regulation of punishment between inmates in other penal societies.

⁸⁶⁸ Rodgers, 'When Vigilantes Turn Bad: Gangs, Urban Violence and Social Change in Urban Nicaragua', *Global Vigilantes*, p.62.

⁸⁶⁹ Nicholas Haysom, *Towards an understanding of prison gangs* (Cape Town, 1981); Johnny Steinberg, *The Number: One Man's Search for Identity in the Cape Underworld and Prison Gangs*, (South Africa, 2004).

⁸⁷⁰ Skarbeck, *Social Order of the Underworld*, p.31.

Conclusion

As highlighted in Aleksandr Proshkin's perestroika era film *Cold Summer of '53*, in which a group of newly released prisoners arrived to destroy the harmony and security of an idyllic rural settlement, criminal subculture became an important and divisive issue in post-Stalinist society. Following the shifts in prisoner composition which took place at the end of the Great Patriotic War, Stalin's death on 5th March 1953 saw the population of the Gulag change again in an even more dramatic fashion. As early as 18th March, Georgii Malenkov, chair of the Council of People's commissars, signed over the transfer of nearly all economic activities out of the MVD to the ministries in charge of the respective industries along with the responsibility of housing all prisoners to the Ministry of Justice. On March 27th, Soviet authorities declared an amnesty of over 1.2 million prisoners, nearly half of the overall total. Although Article 58 prisoners were excluded, this represented a profound shift in the operation of the camps as the prisoner population fell from 2,466,914 in April 1953, to 550,882 by 1960.⁸⁷¹

During this transitional period, released inmates were often rearrested for allegedly slandering the country's leaders or expressing their alienation through songs which overtly criticised the Soviet regime.⁸⁷² Miriam Dobson has shown how this played into wider societal concerns regarding released prisoners, rising levels of crime and the perceived threat a cult of criminality might have on Soviet *kul'turnost*.⁸⁷³ In locations such as Vorkuta, where a large number of the population consisted of former camp officials, the identity of former prisoners became a remarkably complex topic. Tensions between the local population and returnees were exacerbated by violence between camps guards and newly-released inmates. Public fears about crime, confirmed and exacerbated by newspaper reports, demonstrated how many former prisoners identified themselves with organised criminal formations (such as *vory-v-zakone*). However, as Alan Barenburg has shown hostility and suspicion was equally

⁸⁷¹ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, p.205.

⁸⁷² Dobson, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer*, pp.109-122.

⁸⁷³ Dobson, 'Responses', p.590; Dobson, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer*, p.1.

directed toward former counter-revolutionaries (who represented a large proportion of Vorkuta inmates) especially in the aftermath of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising.⁸⁷⁴

Prisoners who remained in the camps also continued to provide a problem for the authorities. Steven Barnes' rendering of the 'Kengir Uprising' (16th May-26th June, 1954) shows how the reintroduction of recidivists into the camp aggravated an already tense situation between inmates and camp employees that following the arrest of NKVD Chief Lavrenti Beria and the death of six prisoners. Although camp authorities believed that the criminal gangs would resume their position in camp hierarchy and help quell the dissent, events followed a different course. After eighteen prisoners were killed, and up to seventy wounded, while attempting to scale walls dividing them from the service yard and women's zone, a universal strike was declared. Breaching all of the internal walls to unite the camp, prisoners soon divided themselves into two groups: one elected commission and one so-called 'conspiracy centre' controlled by unelected criminal gangs and Ukrainian nationalists.

The propaganda war which ensued saw camp authorities attempt to convince the prisoners that their situation was hopeless while simultaneously trying to revive the traditional animosity between them. Article 58ers were reminded that they were aligning themselves with prisoners capable of raping their wives and daughters, whilst a recently released inmate was used to remind recidivists of their deep-rooted hostility toward counter-revolutionaries. From the perspective of camp authorities, one of the most concerning aspects of the uprising appears to have been the free association of male and female prisoners. While the impression was given to the outside world of a camp overrun by impurity and sexual depravity, Gulag chief Dolgikh appealed directly to the female inmates via radio address to remind them of their roles as defenders of purity and the family. Nevertheless, first-hand accounts of the uprising agreed that 'thieves behaved like decent people', supported by official investigations into the uprising. The strike was eventually broken by force on the morning of June 26th. Neither side ultimately achieved their goal of either convincing the inmates to end the uprising peacefully, or bring a member of the Central Committee to Kengir, with 46 prisoners

⁸⁷⁴ Barenburg, *Gulag Town, Company Town*, pp.206-209.

killed when soldiers opened fire.⁸⁷⁵ Events in Kengir highlight one of the few examples of criminal gangs participating in an outright act of resistance against the authorities (even in this example it arguably only occurred as the strict nature of the camp regime was at a particularly vulnerable point).

Although excellent scholarship continues to be developed on the camps of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, this period marks the point where inmate subculture found a forum outside the camps. The popularity of bard Vladimir Vysotsky is widely acknowledged as playing an important role in this transition. Vysotsky began his career singing old camp songs, as recalled by friend Igor Golomstok: '(Vysotsky) did not compose his own songs at the time. He sung old camp songs...but he sang them in such a way, slow and passionate that they felt new and tragic, like those songs he would compose in the future.'⁸⁷⁶ Vysotsky was so influenced by prison folklore that, when he began writing his own songs in 1961 they were all variations of *blatnye pesni*, achieved stylistically by inserting references to the geography of the camps, concepts specific to camp life and singing in a low voice which gave the impression of being inebriated.⁸⁷⁷ Alongside others, such as Alexander Galich, Vysotsky brought prison folklore to a mainstream literature and theatre audience and was convincing enough to persuade one former prisoner that he must have spent time in the camps.⁸⁷⁸ This phenomenon has continued in the post-Soviet era, demonstrated through the popularity of performers such as Mikhail Krug whose songs evoke the symbolism of prisoner tattoos (and were allegedly written with the help of a 1924 dictionary of underworld slang). Alongside this, the ratings of 'Radio Chanson', a station dedicated to songs of the underworld, regularly pools amongst the top five most popular Russian radio broadcasters.⁸⁷⁹ Reportedly, one in ten Muscovites are considered regular listeners and more than 7.5 million people across the country tune in every day.⁸⁸⁰

Images of criminal subculture also continue to be transmitted via a number of TV shows and films. This includes Vysotsky's crime drama *Mesto vstrechi izmenit nelzya* (The Meeting Place

⁸⁷⁵ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, pp.211-232.

⁸⁷⁶ Etkind, *Warped Mourning*.

⁸⁷⁷ Stites, *Russian Popular Culture*, p.58-71.

⁸⁷⁸ Etkind, *Warped Mourning*.

⁸⁷⁹ Synovate Comcon, 'Monitoring of radio audience' (2002-2007). Last accessed on 26 September 2015: <http://www.comcon-2.com/default.asp?trID=38>

⁸⁸⁰ WCIOM, Russian Public Opinion Research Center, 'Popularity Rating of Russian Radio stations' (2012). Last accessed on 26 September 2015: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=1127572012>

Cannot be Changed), in which he plays a detective hunting for a gang of armed robbers named ‘Black Cat’ and continues in Pavel Chukhrai’s 1997 film *Vor* (‘Thief’), where the tattoo of Stalin on the chest of the protagonist, Tolian, indicates his time spent in the zone (not, as he claims, his status as Stalin’s son). This practice is also demonstrated in Alix Lambert’s documentary *The Mark of Cain*, in which the prisoner Viktor Tyriakin proudly displays the images tattooed across his chest.⁸⁸¹ Although the main narrative of the film centres on the Russian mafia in London, the popularity of David Cronenberg’s 2007 film *Eastern Promises*, complete with tattoos and initiation rituals, highlights a sustained interest in criminal subculture.⁸⁸² This continued fascination is not only evident in shows such as *Strafbat*’ and *Zona* which relate directly to the experience of prisoners, but the dissemination of notorious late Imperial figures like Son’ka alongside motifs from the early Soviet period such Murka and Mishka Kult’yappy, both featured in the 2014 television series *Gentlemen, Comrades*, set in post-revolutionary Moscow and featuring the activities of a number of criminal gangs.



Fig.18 – ‘Murka’ from *Gentlemen, Comrades* (2014).

⁸⁸¹ Lambert, *Russian Prison Tattoos*, p.48.

⁸⁸² For a lengthy discussion of the film, including a full-body analysis of Nikolai Luzhin’s (Viggo Mortenson’s) tattoos: <http://easternpromises.livejournal.com/47809.html>

Reflections

This thesis looked to primarily answer two main questions. Firstly, how were approaches and perceptions of criminality shaped during the period in question? The first section of the thesis shows how both late Imperial accounts and early Soviet newspapers and journals framed images of criminal prisoners in specific ways, often dependent on broad social trends or their ideological perspective. Chapter 1 demonstrates how, although the 1917 boundary marked a clear shift in criminological approaches, penal and criminal norms continued to be circulated through oral tradition between prisoners. While some aspects retained a certain literary aesthetic, they also provided important reference points for future accounts of criminality and penalty. This can be seen in Mikhail Dyomin's *The Day is Born of Darkness*, where the activities of Son'ka are recalled by Margo, 'The Queen', who is the head of a local Rostov den.⁸⁸³

The continued use of *klichka* further highlights the ways in which real life and fictional would often intersect. This feature can be observed in the aliases of both Van'ka and *Kamchatka*, whose name bears no relation to the place but because he was a fugitive from a sail-making factory, to other bandit leaders like as Mikhail *Zaria*, and their various associates the Wolf, the Monk, and the Hat.⁸⁸⁴ This later continued with Anton Makarenko's *besprizorniki*, most prominently Tomka 'Zhigan', leader of the 'Wild Boys' in the 1931 film version and Kostia, 'The Captain', from Podogin's *Aristokraty*. One key difference between Son'ka, Marina Tarnovskia and El'ka Zaz is that their respective nicknames ('Golden Hand', 'Diva of Death' and 'Queen of Stylish Hairdos') appear to have been awarded to them by the *boulevard* press, although a cursory look through the names of female recidivist prisoners in later Gulag memoirs reveals many *klichki* were constructed using the same features as their male counterparts. The use of nicknames moved beyond simple imitation, however, and also helped to structure internal group hierarchies (as seen in Alan Ball's examples of street gangs).

⁸⁸³ Dyomin, *The Day is Born of Darkness*, p.192-3.

⁸⁸⁴ The origins of the word 'kamchatka' suggest that it indicated 'linen or patterned fabric': Gasperetti, *Three Russian Tales*, p.216.

Prison songs demonstrated a further carrier of inmate culture, demonstrating their strength and resilience by retaining the same common characteristics and themes.⁸⁸⁵ As Clemmer has shown, verses could control thinking and attitudes and behaviour of inmates, holding up traits held in high regard esteem and setting up standards of behaviour.⁸⁸⁶ The importance of this has often been overlooked in previous scholarship, which has often focused elements of *perekovka* or the Jewish influence of the songs origins. This thesis has shown that, while important, these elements were not as crucial as what Katerina Clark describes as the ‘master plot’⁸⁸⁷ which continued to transmit universal values accepted by the criminal world such as; not reporting on fellow criminals, remaining defiant against the authorities and showing willingness to give your own life before breaking these principles.

Chapter 2 also highlights a number of problems in previous scholarship. While many commentators continue to regard Solovki as an exceptional case, dialogue regarding criminality displayed within the pages of its press contains overt similarities to those expressed by criminological organisations such as the Moscow Bureau.⁸⁸⁸ These approaches were to be overtaken by police practices of the late 1930s, yet articles from camp journals and newspapers show how common features such as ‘hierarchies of crime’ also impacted on life on the archipelago. An exchange of information between Solovki and the mainland can also be seen in the reproduction of articles from *Sud Idet* and the circulation of journals and other publications, such as Glubokovskii’s *49*, as far away as Kharkov. Alongside prisoners who were tasked with selling copies in surrounding areas, this continues to reinforce that the boundaries between the camps and wider society were more porous than Solzhenitsyn’s grand metaphor suggests. Further reasons also demonstrate the importance of utilising the microfiche collection even further. Targeting readers outside the camps appears to have given editors further impulse to include articles which might appeal to a wider audience (i.e. describing criminal mores or reinforcing images of criminality such as those by Kuprin or Gorkii).

⁸⁸⁵ Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, pp.172-177.

⁸⁸⁶ Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, pp.172-177.

⁸⁸⁷ Katrina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as a Ritual* (Chicago, 1981) p.4

⁸⁸⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Atrell (Chicago, 2005). The view of Solovki as being ‘exceptional’ in regards to its conception and operation, along with its cultural life, is evident in the majority of secondary literature on the camp (Gullota, Robson, Applebaum). Fischer von Weikerstahl demonstrates, however, that although Solovki was not bound to the reformatory penal system it engaged into the discourse regarding re-education through its newspaper organs: Fischer von Weikerstahl “The OGPU, Re-education and the Solovki Press”. Similarities in prisoner composition and discussions of criminality from locations such as Vyatlag and Gornyi would further support this argument.

The lengthier and more detailed articles used in this thesis were mainly drawn from the socio-political section of the journal or the findings of *Krimkab*, all mainly found within the pages of one publication (*Solovetskie Ostrova*) between specific periods. Aside from the Solovki camps, the large collection of newspapers and journals produced before the 1930s remains virtually untouched by researchers.

Alongside continuing to investigate the relative degree of freedom afforded to the contributors of their various publications, the inner workings of institutions in places such as Vyatka and Gomel, are in desperate need of additional exploration in order to create more complete picture of the embryonic camp system of the 1920s and address further potential continuities from late Imperial penality. The same could be said of the work of the Moscow Bureau, whose study *Criminal World Moscow* needs to be integrated more fully into a discussion of crime and punishment in the early Soviet period.

Using camp journals, however, also further highlights one of the most crucial issues facing the development of Gulag scholarship. The inclusion of article mainly from amongst a small, esoteric group of prisoners demonstrates the same labelling issue in regards to how we view certain groups of inmates. The familiar political prisoner/common criminal divide from later Gulag memoirs is replicated in the pages of the press by the categories *svoi* and *frayera*. Although little empirical evidence exists in order to support this hypothesis, it is implicit in a number of articles that groups of recidivist criminals divided prisoner society by defining the boundaries 'our own' and 'outsider'. Regardless of their origins, responsibility for the circulation of these terms to a wider audience (at least in printed form) lies with the contributors to the camp journals, who were often from the *intelligentsia*. This is also apparent in with the dissemination of Glubokovskii's discussion of Article 49ers, for those convicted under that particular article of the criminal code. This discussion from the Solovki camps demonstrates the fundamental importance of addressing the second main question of this thesis; what can we learn from the reconstruction of criminal subculture from the large literary corpus regarding daily life in the camps?

The construction of historiography of daily life in the camps almost entirely through survivor memoir contains to frame perceptions of criminal prisoners in certain ways. Accounts by former

inmates such as Alexander Dolgun, Janusz Bardach, and Valentina Ievleva-Pavlenko demonstrate, however, that not every account demonstrates universal disgust and contempt as discussed by Adi Kuntsman. The aforementioned accounts all suggest that movement through penal hierarchy and a degree of agency was possible for all prisoners. Chapter 3 shows how *etap* and arrival in the camps were vital moments for inmates. Initial contact with prisoners from a variety of different backgrounds, along with the processes of initiation and socialisation, were often crucial for memoirists both in enhancing their reputation amongst other inmates and expanding their survival skills. As in the late Imperial era, the prisoner code remained a fundamental part of this process in regards to how prisoners acted toward each other by suggesting a range of praiseworthy behaviours.⁸⁸⁹ Following the same basic principles as Tsarist *katonga* and exile, circulation of the prisoner code through important songs and symbols ensured that all prisoners could understand regardless of their educational background.

Chapter's 4, 5 & 6 all demonstrate how, despite their omnipresence within Gulag memoirs and historiography, little consideration has been given to how methods of enactment such as slang, tattooing, card playing and punishment rituals performed multiple functions in daily life. The continued dominance of these narratives in the public domain through compilations such as the Baldaev drawings demonstrates the way in which symbols remain central to 'collective memory' of the camps.⁸⁹⁰ Collating together these often disparate collections, however, does not create an opposing memory to the one created by those arrested under political crimes, but one which creates a more comprehensive understanding of daily life for all prisoners. Importantly, they also reinforce how remembrance of the past does not always result in the necessary reconciliation or healing we might seek, becoming an important component of what Etkind describes as the 'software' of post-Soviet memory.⁸⁹¹ What this study does remind us, however, is that images such as those in Baldaev collection can easily become conflated with cotemporary film and television depictions and require further verification from sources such as the Moscow Bureau study. While the detailed system of codification was not as developed as in the post-World War Two camps, however, prisoner tattoos

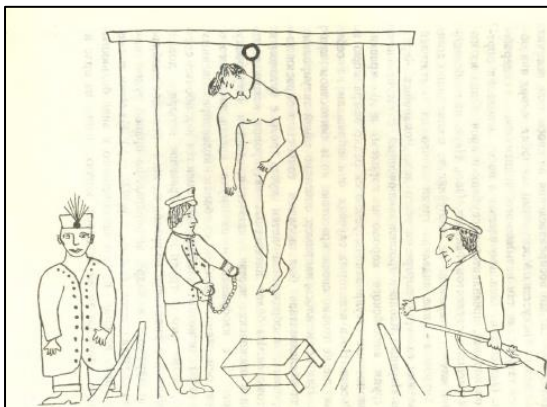
⁸⁸⁹ Skarbeck, *Social Order of the Underworld*, p.27.

⁸⁹⁰ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis Coser (Chicago, 1992), p.38.

⁸⁹¹ Alexander Etkind, 'Post-Soviet Hauntology: Cultural Memory of the Soviet Terror', *Constellations*, 16:1, pp.182-200.

remained important in order to transmit inmate culture to an audience both inside and outside the camps.

This persistence of memory is further demonstrated through the two tattoos below. On the left, from Mikhail Gernet's 1924 article is one Vyatlag prisoner's visual tribute to a 'hanged companion'. His desire to create a permanent record of the penal experience is further supported by another prisoner from the same study who, when asked about a large crucifixion scene on his chest, recalled how it was necessary to take a 'memory from prison back to the village.'⁸⁹² Similarly, the image on the right, taken from the Baldaev collection, shows a tattoo belonging to a prisoner nicknamed 'Head' (itself an indication of his senior status). Like his father before him, 'Head' bore an image which first belonged to his grandfather, an exile to Sakhalin in the late nineteenth century. According to Baldaev's notes, 'Head' was tattooed by a convict artist at Kolyma to signify his inheritance as a hereditary, 'legitimate thief'.⁸⁹³ These images shows how criminal subculture can be used to preserve years of cultural and institutional memory, as locations of Tsarist penality such as Nerchinsk and Sakhalin are replaced by twentieth century institutions such as Solovki, Kolyma and, more recently, the infamous White Swan prison in Solikamsk, creating metonyms of penality and examples of *mesta ne stol' otdalennie* ('places not so remote').⁸⁹⁴



⁸⁹² Gernet, *Prestupnyi Mir Moskvy*, p.243.

⁸⁹³ Baldaev (ed.), *Russian Criminal Tattoo*, Vol.1, p.186.

⁸⁹⁴ Judith Pallot & Laura Piacentini, "In Exile Imprisonment' In Russia", *British Journal of Criminology*, 54:1(2014), p.30.

In regards to their role in daily life in the camps, the various methods of enactment discussed in the second section of this thesis became important carriers of inmate culture. In his 1993 study, *Tyuremnaya Obshchina*, Valerii Anisimkov describes how ‘ethics, principles, beliefs and habits’ between prisoners are characterised by, not only individual custodians, but groups of prisoners of which the average age of ‘carriers’ is 37 years of age. Although almost impossible to verify, this is roughly around the same demographic as suggested by many descriptions of *urki* in survivor accounts.⁸⁹⁵ In a society defined by violence and honour codes, these various ethics and principles also helped share further stereotypes of group behaviour. The hegemonic masculinity often prevalent in memoir accounts can be seen in not just incidents of sexual violence, but through sexist expressions in everyday discourse and feminised roles in male bodies (and vice versa). Alongside their use in transporting inmate culture, methods of visual and verbal communication through tattooing and slang and activities such as card playing, also performed other tasks including assigning inmates to different roles and helping to define the camps sexual order. Punishment rituals not only provided high exit barriers to ensure cohesiveness and solidarity but also transmitted powerful messages to the rest of Gulag society. In line with the main tenants of the prisoner code, conflict between criminal gangs was both territorial and marked by traditional hostility toward institutional structures and co-operation, as highlighted explicitly during the bitches’ war. Any further work on any social groupings in the Gulag will have to take into account the powerful symbolism presented by their various rites and rituals.

At the macro-level, this study also highlights a number of key features regarding the spatial layout and organisation of the camps. Many of the methods of enactment highlighted above, such as tattooing and card playing, constitute what Goffman describes as *secondary adjustments* (unauthorised means or ends to get around the organisations assumptions as to what one should do or be). Moreover, examples of illicit behaviour involving prisoners has been shown to often take place in spaces characterised by a lack of surveillance from the authorities. Unlike spaces which were off-limits or under surveillance, aided by the Gulag’s well known staffing problems, inmates and staff tacitly co-operated to allow the emergence of bounded physical spaces where the inmate could engage

⁸⁹⁵ Anisimkov, *Tyuremnaya obshchina*, p.9.

in taboo activities with some degree of security (referred to by Goffman as ‘free places’).⁸⁹⁶ Most prominently, this includes examples of sexual assault during prisoner transportation, but can also be observed in transit prisons and individual barracks where activities often took place late at night. Other illicit activities, such as co-habitation and black market supply chains demonstrate the importance of ‘social capital’ and informal networks. This is further supported by Terry Martin’s concept of neo-traditionalism which shows how informal methods often formed more practical solutions at ground-level than formal directives from central authorities.⁸⁹⁷ Bosworth and Carrabine have challenged traditional notions of valorising drastic strategies of subverting penal power, such as riots and escapes, suggesting a fresh understanding that recognises multi-faceted dimensions of prisoner agency.⁸⁹⁸ Daily life in the Gulag was characterised by microscopic, but nevertheless important and ongoing, negotiations of power.⁸⁹⁹ Although both central and local authorities benefitted from the hegemony of criminal formations in order to suppress other groups considered to be more dangerous (such as Article 58ers and various nationalities), a variety of acts, such as the refusal to perform work duties and the enduring resilience of various aspects of criminal subculture, continued to undermine the ability of the authorities to fully control their incarcerated population.

The main discussion at core of this thesis, however, shows that prisoners responded to the ‘pains of imprisonment’ by creating small social groups for support and solidarity. While continuing to preserve the same basic hierarchical structure from late Imperial penality, a close sociological reading shows the ability of senior figures, such as the *pakhan*, to take on several roles also displays similarity to other accounts of twentieth century penality such as those by Donald Clemmer and Marek Kaminski. Although cross-comparative analysis remains problematic, the hegemony of certain prisoner groups also displays remarkable similarity to an account of the Chinese Logai (modelled on the Gulag) which states; ‘the government’s policy to stir up mutual incrimination and denunciation among the prisoners has become so successful that it has weakened or even paralysed inmate solidarity. Moreover, the prison administrations dependence among inmate chiefs has often enabled

⁸⁹⁶ Goffman, *Asylums*, pp.171-172, 203-212.

⁸⁹⁷ Martin, ‘Modernization or Neo-Traditionalism?’, pp.348–67.

⁸⁹⁸ Mary Bosworth & Eamonn Carrabine, Reassessing Resistance: Race, Gender and Sexuality in Prison’, *Punishment and Society*, 3 (2001), p.501

⁸⁹⁹ Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss*, pp.58-63.

cell tyrants to lord it over the rank-and-file like criminal kingpins.⁹⁰⁰ Like the Chinese camps, the Gulag was a site of great power inequalities, supported by Foucault's assessment that; 'Prison makes possible, even encourages, the organization of delinquents, loyal to one another, hierarchized, ready to aid and abet any future criminal act'.⁹⁰¹

An unwritten code regulated entry and exit barriers into group formations. Although this has regularly become conflated with *vory-v-zakone* 'understandings' they display more similarity to more rudimentary prisoner codes observed by Donald Clemmer and others which stipulate hostility toward informants and institutional structures as their most basic and important principles. This thesis, therefore, looks to challenge the historical orthodoxy regarding the dominance of *vory-v-zakone* during this period, demonstrating the picture on the ground to be a lot more complex (something acknowledged by Varese's statistic regarding the proportion of criminal prisoners). In addition to challenging the hegemony of certain groups, the finding of this thesis show agency in the camps was not only defined by important individual roles, such as the *pakhan* and *shestyorka*, but how different groups interacted with each other.

The reconstruction of these various practices demonstrates that any of these categories should not be studied in isolation, but through the ways in which they relate to each other. *Urki* were involved in a complex web of relationships with *pridurki*, Article 58ers, *muzhiki* (who consistently formed a high percentage of prisoners) *dohodyagi*, and the 'untouchables' (*opuschchenye*). Alongside this there were a number of other groups comprised of juvenile prisoners, various nationalities and camp personnel whose social spheres often over-lapped. While serious lacunae remains regarding these groups, a similar approach to the one undertaken this thesis may help elucidate some of the many different cultures which existed within the camps. This is highlighted through the brief discussion of female prisoners which shows that, while we still know very little about inmates outside

⁹⁰⁰ Philip Williams & Yenna Wu, *The Great Wall of Confinement; The Development of Chinese Communist Prison Camps Through Contemporary Fiction and Reportage* (London, 2004) p.84.

⁹⁰¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (London, 1977), p.267; Bosworth & Carabine, 'Reassessing Resistance', p.501.

of the *intelligentsia*, any further exploration of their internal hierarchies will have to take into account of the role of prostitution and ‘negotiated power’.⁹⁰²

In order to create a more complete picture, however, it is vital that scholars continue to contest the familiar common criminal/political prisoner dichotomy that currently prohibits the further exploration of daily life in the camps. It is problematic and counter-productive to continue to label certain prisoners with heavily contested terms which are almost impossible to verify. This study has shown that a close analytical reading from a varied source base can begin to help reconstruct prisoner society from the ground-level. Further adoption of methods and techniques from social sciences can provide important observations in attempting to trace interactions between inmates and movement through prisoner hierarchy, regardless of the terms labelled upon them. This has been demonstrated in this thesis through the examples of Eugenia Ginzburg, Janusz Bardach and many others. In the same manner that recent work has shown the borders between outside and inside the zone to be more permeable than first-thought, we also need to challenge the boundaries between prisoners. Until we begin to do so, our knowledge as the Gulag as a lived experience will remain incomplete.

⁹⁰² Bosworth & Carrabine, ‘Reassessing Resistance’, p.501.

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