

"Worse Than Guards:" Ordinary Criminals and Political Prisoners in the GULAG (1918-1950)

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“WORSE THAN GUARDS:” ORDINARY CRIMINALS AND POLITICAL PRISONERS IN
THE GULAG (1918-1950)

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in History
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the volatile relationship between the political prisoners and the common criminals in the Soviet GULAG. Lenin's theories on crime and punishment shaped the early Soviet penal system; he implemented policies which favored the common criminals and repressed the political prisoners. He deemed that the criminals, as "social allies" of the working class, were more likely to become good Soviet citizens than the political prisoners, considered "counterrevolutionaries" and "enemies of the state." In the decade after the Bolshevik revolution, the prison administration empowered the criminals in the GULAG by giving them access to the life-saving jobs and goods in the labor camps, while gradually withdrawing the political prisoners' access to the same. From the 1930s to shortly after the end of World War II, the strong criminal fraternity in the GULAG robbed, beat, and killed the political prisoners, while the GULAG administration refused to intervene. Using the testimony of former political prisoners and GULAG personnel, as well as secondary sources, I identify the policies that led to the criminals' "reign of terror," I address theories regarding if and why the administration permitted such violence and disorder in the camps, and I demonstrate that the political prisoners responded to their situation in a range of ways, from holding their tormentors in contempt to forming tentative friendships with individual criminals who could offer them their protection and a way to survive the camps.

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INTRODUCTION

“I had more than a fair share of patience, enough to withstand work beyond my physical powers, starvation, and slavery. But never should I be able to put up with living among common criminals.... What was uppermost was a feeling of anguish – not for them, but for myself – that by some devilish conjuration I was condemned to a form of torture more fearful than starvation or disease, to the torture of life among subhuman creatures.”

-Eugenia Ginzburg¹

This excerpt in Eugenia Ginzburg’s memoir highlights one of the most challenging aspects of life in the Soviet prison camps for those unfortunate enough to receive a sentence for a “political” crime. Ginzburg, as one of these political prisoners, spent over eighteen years in labor camps and in exile, during which time her first husband and her firstborn died, where she endured “starvation and slavery,” yet the experience of “life among subhuman creatures” ranked as one of her greatest challenges. Ginzburg was not alone in this sentiment; references to the torment of living with the common criminals litter the memoirs of former prisoners of the GULAG.

The acronym GULAG stands for *Glavnoe Upravleni Lagerei* (Main Camp Administration). It refers to the administrative body that controlled the Soviet penal system from 1934 to 1956, but it has become synonymous with the penal system itself, which spanned the entire Soviet regime, and which included labor camps, special punishment camps, prisons, and forced-exile colonies. The GULAG was an integral part of the Soviet system. It originated with the imprisonment of political prisoners following the Bolshevik revolution, it expanded to receive the victims of Stalin’s paranoia in the 1930s, and it collapsed after the death of its most

¹ Eugenia Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 55-56.

loyal supporter in 1953, although it never truly disappeared until the end of the Soviet Union. About twenty million prisoners passed through the GULAG at its height, between 1929 and 1953,² but they experienced the GULAG differently according to their social and political class. The administration distinguished between the “socially friendly” criminals and the “socially hostile” political prisoners, and treated them accordingly. They granted power and privileges to the criminals, who harassed, robbed, beat, and killed the political prisoners with impunity.

To my knowledge, there are no scholars that focus particularly on this aspect of the GULAG. In a sense, the GULAG is still a very young field. The Soviet government heavily restricted access to information about the GULAG while it was in power. In the late 1980s, it permitted the publication of many GULAG memoirs, and opened a number of their archives to historians, but research into the GULAG truly blossomed after the fall of the Soviet regime in 1991, when historians gained access to much of the previously classified information. As Soviet historian Robert Conquest put it: “If a historian’s problem in Soviet history used to be a shortage of material, the current challenge is the opposite: the enormous number of documents available.”³ The difficult process of deciding what to use and how to use it shaped much of the historiography of the GULAG.

The first significant studies of the GULAG were comprehensive, detailed volumes about the GULAG’s creation, evolution, prisoners and practices. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn clandestinely published the first history of the GULAG, *The Gulag Archipelago*, in 1973; his ground-breaking work bypassed the closed archives by using “reports, memoirs, and letters by 227 witnesses” as

² Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 580.

³ O. V. Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), xi.

well as his own experiences to explore and explain the GULAG.⁴ In 2003 Anne Applebaum published *Gulag: A History*, which resembles Solzhenitsyn's in subject and scope, but greatly added to the field by its use of the newly-opened archives to verify information gathered from "several hundred camp memoirs."⁵

Researchers then turned away from the big picture to focus on specific elements of the GULAG. Oleg V. Khlevniuk's *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* is a document-based study of the GULAG during one of its most significant phases – its expansion and evolution under Stalin. By restricting himself to a smaller timeframe, Khlevniuk was able to examine and collect the relevant material very thoroughly. Steven A. Barnes kept a wide time frame but narrowed the location in *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, in which he used official documents and biographies to construct a complete history of a camp in Karaganda, "one of the few locales to experience most of the major institutions and events of the GULAG's history."⁶

These works include information about the criminals in a variety of ways: in chapters dedicated to the subject (Solzhenitsyn and Applebaum), as part of the historical narrative (Barnes), or mentioned in passing (Khlevniuk). Solzhenitsyn wrote the most on the subject, but, because his work is a cross between a monograph and a memoir, I discuss his views in full when I examine the testimony of other political prisoners in chapter two of this paper. These historians established the general character of the criminals, described the hostility between the criminals

⁴ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 1:xix.

⁵ Applebaum, *Gulag*, xxiv.

⁶ Steven A. Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 3.

and the political prisoners, and identified the early Soviet theories and policies that fostered the criminals' eventual rise to power in the GULAG. I want to go beyond generalizations and find out if there are subtler patterns of behavior between the criminals, the administrators, and the political prisoners.

The GULAG administration divided its prisoners into two general categories: those who committed "political" crimes and those who committed "non-political" crimes. They considered the "non-political" criminals as ordinary criminals. There were two types of "ordinary criminals" in the GULAG: the petty offenders, usually peasants or workers who received sentences for minor theft, like stealing a pencil from the workplace, and the professional criminals, for whom crime was a means of survival or a way of life, and who either belonged to, or aspired to belong to, the wide-spread criminal fraternity, the *vory-v-zakone*.

In this paper, the term "criminal" refers to the latter type of criminal, whom the memoirists also called "professional criminals," *blatnye*, and *urki*. Their identity as criminals depended more on their life before the GULAG and their membership in the criminal fraternity than on the type of sentence they received from the Soviet courts. For example, a criminal could receive a sentence for a "political" crime, such as stealing something from a state warehouse, which would condemn him to the status of a political prisoner in the eyes of the GULAG administration, but his or her fellow prisoners would still consider this individual a criminal, not a political prisoner.⁷

⁷ Serguei Cheloukhine, "The Roots of Russian Organized Crime," *Crime, Law, Social Change* 50, no. 4 (2008).

“Political prisoners” refer to all those in the GULAG who did not engage in traditionally criminal activity prior to their arrest and whom the authorities sentenced for “political crimes.” In the earliest years of the labor camps, the political prisoners were dissidents or active members of other political parties whom the Soviet regime imprisoned for their political views. After the mass expansion of the GULAG in the 1930s, this type of political prisoner almost disappeared and the new political prisoners, especially those sentenced during the Great Terror, were only political in name: they did not know why they were in the GULAG, for few had intentionally or openly opposed the regime. This thesis will touch on the former type of political prisoner, but it will direct the majority of its attention to the latter.

The criminals and the political prisoners had a complicated relationship throughout the history of the GULAG. From 1918 to 1934, the criminals’ power gradually increased, and so did their violence toward the political prisoners. This unchecked aggression peaked from 1934 to 1945. Beginning in the 1950s, the political prisoners, with the unintentional help of the administration, successfully subdued the criminals, reorienting the balance of power in their favor. In this paper, I focus on the years 1918 to 1950, from the creation of the first labor camps to the year that the criminals began to lose their status as leaders of the camps. I address how the criminals rose to such power and if and why the administration permitted it. Then, I examine how the political prisoners perceived the criminals who controlled the camps.

Lacking knowledge of the Russian language, I use translated GULAG memoirs and other first-person accounts as my primary sources. These include memoirs written by former political prisoners and members of the administration, who experienced life in the GULAG between 1918 and 1950. I do not have access to any verifiable memoirs left by criminals; many of them joined

the criminal gangs at a young age, as discussed in chapter three, and they never escaped the criminal life, despite their “reeducation” in the labor camps.⁸ Thus, there is a paucity of information about the criminals from the individuals themselves. Much of what historians know about the criminals is from the observation of outsiders who came into frequent contact with them in the GULAG. Likewise, this paper reflects how these outsiders – memoirists of various nationalities, but mostly well-educated and moderately prosperous – perceived and experienced life with the “alien” criminal class.

The first chapter of this paper uses secondary sources to outline the history of the GULAG from 1918 to 1956; it does not cover the history of the entire system in all its complexity, only those events and elements that are relevant to the subject of this paper. It demonstrates how the Bolshevik theories on crime and punishment shaped the early prison camps, and how the dynamic between the administration, criminals, and political prisoners changed over time in response to events inside and outside the camp walls. As the scattered network of labor camps transformed into a huge, centralized detention system, the camp administration intensified the way that it interpreted and enforced Lenin’s theories, which had direct consequences for the criminals and political prisoners.

The second chapter addresses factors that contributed to the criminals’ status in the GULAG. The first part of the chapter looks at how the criminals in the GULAG banded together into a strong fraternity, the *vory-v-zakone*, whose code of conduct united this otherwise

⁸ I do include the memoir, *The Day is Born of Darkness*, by Mikhail Dyomin, who could be considered a criminal because he reportedly spent many years as a train thief and belonged to various criminal gangs before entering the GULAG. However, historians regard him as an unreliable narrator, so I only cite his memoir regarding information that has been backed up by other sources.

disjointed group into a powerful, close-knit society. This unity was the criminals' greatest strength, and gave them a significant advantage when they interacted with the political prisoners. The second part of the chapter focuses on the GULAG administration; why they perceived the criminals as "socially friendly elements" and how this influenced their policies which empowered the criminals at the expense of the political prisoners. It also identifies two main theories concerning why the administration permitted the criminals to wield such power over their peers and cause such chaos in the camps: first, that the administration fully intended to use the criminals as an extra level of control over the "dangerous" political prisoners, either out of perceived necessity or convenience, or second, that the administration fostered the empowerment of the criminals because of the theory that were "socially friendly," but the criminals gained too much power, and during the height of their dominance in the camps, the administration permitted their violent activities because they could not control them.

The final chapter covers how the political prisoners experienced life with the criminals. I address the women's experiences separately, because they were especially vulnerable to abuse by both male and female criminals. By examining the way that the political prisoners wrote about the criminals, the incidents they related, and the emotions that they demonstrated in their memoirs, I identify a range of attitudes toward the criminals. Many loathed them, but for different reasons – fear, jealousy, betrayal, and moral indignation. A couple of political prisoners managed to forge more positive relationships with the criminals, giving them a unique insight into the lives of a few individual criminals, and more sympathetic perception of the criminals in general. This paper ultimately shows that, while there is a dominant narrative regarding the

criminals, their alliance with the GULAG administration, and their behavior with the political prisoners, there are also exceptions and nuances to this narrative that deserve attention.

CHAPTER ONE: THE HISTORY OF THE GULAG (1918-1956)

As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote, the GULAG “was born with the shots of the cruiser *Aurora*” – that is, at the very beginning of the Bolshevik revolution.⁹ In the following forty years, the GULAG became an integral part of the Soviet Union’s political and economic system. This chapter gives an overview of the history of the GULAG, from the establishment of the first forced labor camps in 1918 to the dismantling of the system in 1956. Based on the work of GULAG historians, this chapter does not provide a comprehensive history of the GULAG; rather, it focuses on the key theories and events that influenced the subject of this paper. It examines how Bolshevik theories on crime and punishment – that is, the existence of class enemies and the re-educative nature of forced labor – drove the first prisoners into the Soviet penal system, while the regime’s fluctuating priorities between re-education and economic efficiency shaped the early camps into the extensive system that blossomed under Stalin. It also highlights how the GULAG’s evolution reflected the momentous events that affected the free population, such as the Stalin’s “Revolution from Above,” the Great Terror, World War II, Stalin’s death, and Khrushchev’s Secret Speech. This chapter provides a framework for the discussion in the following two chapters about the relationship between the GULAG administration, the common criminals, and the political prisoners.

⁹ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 2:9.

Lenin's Theories on Crime and Reformation

When the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917¹⁰, they embarked on a mission “to transform society, to engineer a new socialist soul.”¹¹ Part of this transformation was the eradication of crime, to which Lenin referred as “social excess;” he argued that the underlying cause of crime was “the exploitation of the masses,” but that once they removed the cause, it “will lead to the withering away of the excess.”¹² Capitalism caused crime, and thus the most harmful members of Soviet society were the capitalists, also called “class enemies” or “counterrevolutionaries,” who sought to undermine the Bolshevik regime. Lenin emphasized that “imprisonment [be] seen not as social retribution exacted on the criminal, but as a means of reforming the prisoner.”¹³ He saw manual labor, in service of the State, as the key to reform.¹⁴

Lenin had considered the idea of forced labor for the “former people” even before the Bolsheviks came to power, when he sketched out plans for “‘obligatory work duty’ for wealthy capitalists.”¹⁵ After becoming head of the government, he elaborated on the idea, saying that “universal labor service” is the “most powerful means ... for ‘setting in motion’ the state apparatus, for overcoming the resistance of the capitalists, for subjecting them to the proletarian state.” In the same essay, he insisted that “We must *make people work* within the framework of the new state organization. It is not enough to “get rid of” the capitalists, it is necessary (after

¹⁰ November 1917 by the standard calendar.

¹¹ Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, 14.

¹² Applebaum, *Gulag*, 5., Michael Jakobson, *Origins Of The Gulag: The Soviet Prison Camp System* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 19.

¹³ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 5., Jakobson, *Origins*, 19.

¹⁴ Barnes, 16.

¹⁵ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 5.

having removed the incapable ones, the incorrigible “resister”) to put them to *new state service*.”¹⁶

The Bolsheviks “viewed themselves as engineers reforming raw human material.”¹⁷ In this respect, not all prisoners were equal. According to class theory, the common criminals were the “proletariat” of the prison system, true Soviets whose crimes “arose only in response to the devaluation of labor under repressive capitalist control.”¹⁸ The Soviet government referred to this class as the “socially friendly” or “social allies.” They believed that the social allies would benefit from their re-educative efforts far more than the “class enemies.”¹⁹ During the creation and expansion of the penal system, however, the Soviet government publicly maintained that the re-education and reformation of the prisoner, no matter their background, was possible, and this re-educative mission was the reason that their prisons were superior to those of the West.²⁰

The Early Soviet Penal System (1918-1929)

After the 1917 February Revolution, the Provisional Government inherited the extensive Tsarist penal system. Almost immediately, it released more than half of the Tsar’s prisoners, while, in the provinces, waves of mobs released prisoners in local facilities on a massive scale. The penal system changed hands again after the 1917 October Revolution, when the People’s Commissariat of Justice disbanded the Provisional Government’s prison agencies and replaced

¹⁶ Vladimir Il’ich Lenin, *Collected works of V.I. Lenin*, trans. Moissaye J. Olgin, vol. 21, ed. Alexander Trachtenberg (New York: International Publishers, 1932), Book 2, 32.

¹⁷ Barnes, 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 87.

¹⁹ Solzhenitsyn, 2: 434.

²⁰ See Fyodor Mucholsky, *Gulag Boss*, trans. Deborah Kaple (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011),

them with their own, at which point the Soviet regime quickly began to purge the “class enemies.”²¹ In 1917, Lenin passed an edict for the “merciless suppression of attempts at anarchy on the part of drunkards, hooligans, counterrevolutionaries, and other persons.”²² In January of 1918, he followed it up with an exhortation for the country to unite in “purging the Russian land of all kinds of harmful insects.”²³ In response, local revolutionary tribunals, made up of “random supporters of the Revolution” convicted “class enemies” of the regime – bankers, merchants and other “speculators,” and former Tsarist officials.²⁴

The Bolsheviks also began arresting their political opponents; at first, the police organs sought out members of the Constitutional Democratic Party, which had connections with the former Provisional Government. Then, in 1918, they arrested members of the left-leaning parties – the Left and Right Socialist Revolutionaries, the Mensheviks, and the Anarchists.²⁵ The Bolshevik regime filled up its prisons as quickly as the Provisional Government had emptied them, but they were poorly staffed, disorganized, and overcrowded.²⁶ For example, in 1917, the Petrograd prison was under such disorder that, according to one former Soviet official, “the only people who didn’t escape were those who were too lazy.”²⁷ In 1918, the Soviet government decided to entrust its most dangerous prisoners – the class enemies and political opponents – to a

²¹ Galina M. Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism* trans. Carol Flath, ed. Donald J. Raleigh (Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 7-11.

²² Lenin, *Sobrannye Sochineniya (Collected Works)*, fifth edition, 35:68, quoted in Solzhenitsyn, 1:27.

²³ Lenin, *Sobrannye Sochineniya*, 35:204, quoted in Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag*, 1:27.

²⁴ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 5-6.

²⁵ Solzhenitsyn, 1:26-30.

²⁶ Jakobson, 3.

²⁷ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 7-8.

parallel penal system run by the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combatting Counterrevolution and Sabotage, or Cheka.²⁸

The first recorded instructions about forced labor for prisoners came from the Central Penal Department of the People's Commissariat in July 1918, when they passed the "Temporary Instructions on Deprivation of Freedom." This stated that "those deprived of freedom who are capable of labor must be recruited for physical work on a compulsory basis."²⁹ On April 15, 1919, the Central Executive Committee passed a decree that established forced labor camps designed to hold "class enemies" sentenced by Cheka, the Revolutionary Tribunals, or the People's Courts. A second, more detailed decree on May 17, 1919, defined that the camps were supposed to be self-sufficient, with the administrators' wages and camp maintenance paid by a portion of the prisoners' wages. It also stated that there should be a forced labor camp, capable of holding at least three hundred people, established at the outskirts of every provincial capital.³⁰ By the end of 1919, there were twenty-one camps in Russia: within a year, there were five times that many.³¹

The People's Commissariat of Justice controlled prisons, agricultural colonies, and juvenile institutions, which held the non-serious offenders - the common criminals. Meanwhile, Cheka controlled the special prisons and camps. In 1922, the regime decided to transfer the Commissariat of Justice's prisons, camps and colonies to the Commissariat of Internal Affairs, or

²⁸ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 7-8.

²⁹ Solzhenitsyn, 2:14-15.

³⁰ James Bunyan, *The Origin of Forced Labor in the Soviet State* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 72-75.

³¹ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 9.

the NKVD.³² Cheka, renamed GPU (State Political Administration), was a subsidiary of the NKVD, but it retained full control of its special facilities. In 1923, the Council of People's Commissars, or Sovnarkom, placed the GPU under its own jurisdiction, making it and its camps systems "not subject to general legislation" and keeping its operations secret from the public.³³ The NKVD operated alongside GPU camps until 1929, running the "general places of incarceration" such as "prisons, corrective labor colonies, and transit points."³⁴

The Early Political Prisoners

The Cheka/GPU's special prisons and camps held two categories of prisoners in the beginning. The first was "counterrevolutionaries," which included White Guards, priests, former Czarist officials, and members of the "bourgeois" political parties, such as the Constitutional Democrats, and anyone else considered especially dangerous to the regime. The second was political opponents, mostly members of the leftist parties, including the Mensheviks, the Left and Right Socialist Revolutionaries, and the Anarchists.³⁵ These were the political prisoners, until the 1930s, when the regime redefined this term.

The political prisoners were especially challenging to the prison administrators, because, as determined members of leftist political parties, many of them had spent time in the Tsarist prison system for attacking the Tsarist government and promoting their "dangerous" political ideas about the future of the Russian state. Under the Tsar, political prisoners received special

³² Ivanova, 12-17., Jakobson, 142.

³³ Ibid, 17.

³⁴ Ibid, 24.

³⁵ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 12-13.

treatment: they had special rations, they could walk unrestricted in the prison yard during the day, and they could have reading and writing material at all times. They received courtesy and respect from the Tsarist jailers, and they expected the same treatment from the Soviet regime. Moreover, the political prisoners' experience in Tsarist prisons taught them how to make such demands. They knew how to communicate by knocking messages on the cell walls. They knew the effectiveness of hunger strikes and of electing a spokesperson from each cell to make demands and carry out negotiations.³⁶

The political prisoners used all the tools at their disposal to keep their “political regime,” while the prison administration worked just as hard to take it away. One such prisoner, Bertha Babina-Nevskaya, recalled that she and her fellow political prisoners “raised objections over the slightest pretext. We demanded extra trips to the bathhouse, more exercise time, visits - things we knew were out of the question.”³⁷ The political prisoners' demands and negotiation tactics were annoying to the prison directors, but the real danger was their ability to get in contact with the outside world. Most of the non-Bolshevik parties had émigré branches who could cause international uproar on behalf of their imprisoned members. The Soviet regime was concerned about the bad publicity in the West because many of the early Bolsheviks had lived in exile, and “were sensitive to the opinions of their old international comrades.” They were also worried that the bad press reports would hinder the anticipated proletariat revolution in Europe. In the spring of 1923, the Cheka, now renamed OGPU (Joint State Political Administration), found a solution:

³⁶ Solzhenitsyn, 1:460-466.

³⁷ Simeon Vilensky, ed., *Till My Tale is Told: Women's Memoirs of the Gulag* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 99-109.

they moved the political prisoners to an island in the far north called Solovetsky, which, when the sea froze during the arctic winter months, was totally inaccessible to the outside world.³⁸

Solovetsky: "The First Camp of the GULAG"

Solovetsky was part of a chain of islands in the White Sea, and home to a community of monks. The Soviet government confiscated the monastery complex and gave it to the OGPU as the site for a permanent labor camp. In 1923, the OGPU began transferring prisoners to Solovetsky – both “counterrevolutionaries” and political prisoners.³⁹ The political prisoners received full political treatment until December, when the sea froze and cut off the island from the rest of the world. Then, the Solovetsky chief began to take away their political “privileges” in waves. They tried protests and hunger strikes, but, they were no longer able to wield the threat of publicity, and so, ultimately, the camp administrators won. By 1925, the former political prisoners lived in the same conditions as all the other prisoners.⁴⁰

The camp system on Solovetsky expanded rapidly. It began in 1923 with a few hundred prisoners in a number of monasteries, but by 1925, there were around six thousand of them, in nine separate camps, each of which the administration further divided into labor battalions.⁴¹ Most of these prisoners were “counterrevolutionaries,” until 1926, when the OGPU began receiving large numbers of common criminals to the camp.⁴² By 1925, the prisoners worked in a variety of occupations: forestry, farming, fishing, and brick-making.⁴³

³⁸ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 13-17.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 20-21.

⁴⁰ Solzhenitsyn, 1:461-466.

⁴¹ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 22-23.

⁴² Solzhenitsyn, 2:34, 43.

⁴³ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 33.

During its expansion, Solovetsky and its nearby camps, known as the “camps of special significance,” or SLON, were supposed to be self-sufficient corrective labor camps, but their policies and practices did not indicate that they prioritized economic efficiency or prisoner re-education. The SLON camp bosses and guards had almost unlimited power over the prisoners and very little direct supervision by the OGPU. The unofficial motto was, “here there is no Soviet authority, only Solovetsky authority.” They tortured prisoners at whim, put them to heavy labor for days at a time with no respite, or ordered them to do meaningless tasks, such as moving “huge quantities of snow from one place to another,” or jumping “off bridges into rivers whenever a guard shouted ‘Dolphin!’” There were also mass executions, seemingly at random. Anne Applebaum estimated that “from a quarter to one half of the prisoners may have died of typhus, starvation, and other epidemics every year.”⁴⁴ It is little wonder that by 1925 the SLON camps proved to be unprofitable, and the Soviet government recognized “the need to make better use of prisoners.”⁴⁵

Solovetsky’s solution came from an unlikely source: a former Solovetsky prisoner named Naftaly Aronovich Frenkel. A merchant from Haifa, Palestine, Frenkel was arrested in 1923 for illegally crossing the borders, sentenced to ten years in Solovetsky. By 1924, the SLON administration petitioned for his release, describing him as “an exceptionally talented...rare and responsible worker.” In 1925, he organized and ran the Economic-Commercial department of SLON. There, he took advantage of the camp’s large, unpaid workforce, and outbid civilian forestry companies to cut wood and build roads near the camps. Frenkel’s goal was to make the

⁴⁴ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 22-24.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 30.

camp more efficient. He terminated everything in the camps that did not “contribute to the camp’s economic productivity.” He ended the lighter Solovetsky industries, such as farming, or selling furs. He removed various “re-educational” facilities, including the camp’s newspaper, and he limited the prisoners’ participation in the camp theater and museum. He even minimized the random beatings and torments imposed on the prisoners, because administration now prioritized the prisoners’ “work capability.”⁴⁶

The most notorious reform during this time was the new food distribution system. Historians disagree as to whether or not Frenkel himself invented it, but he definitely implemented it in order to promote prisoner productivity. The authorities divided all the prisoners of SLON into three categories: heavy workers, light workers, and invalids. They gave each group tasks that seemed appropriate to their abilities, and then set norms for each task. The prisoners who fulfilled their norms received a full meal, but those who only filled a fraction of the norms received a corresponding fraction of the meal. This system sent the weakest prisoners quickly to their deaths, because they entered a vicious circle: malnutrition weakened the prisoners, so they filled less of the norms, and received even less food, until they perished. In the 1930’s, this system became a standard in all the camps.⁴⁷ The SLON never actually became self-sufficient, even after Frenkel’s directions, but compared to the other prisons and camps, it was enormously successful, which made it an attractive model for the rest of the prison system.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 34-37.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 36-37.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 41-44.

The New Political Prisoners

By 1925, the SLON administration no longer recognized members of former political parties as political prisoners, worthy of special privileges.⁴⁹ In 1926, the Soviet government published a new criminal code, the most significant portion of which was Article 58, which addressed “crimes against the State.” As Solzhenitsyn put it: “In all truth, there is no step, thought, action, or lack of action under the heavens which could not be punished by the heavy hand of Article 58.”⁵⁰ Between 1925 and 1929, the division of prisoners changed; they went from A) political prisoners and B) “counterrevolutionaries,” to A) common criminals and B) everybody else. By the 1930s, the administration referred to both the former “counterrevolutionaries” and the new prisoners sentenced under Article 58 of the Criminal Code as political prisoners.⁵¹ During the early period of the prison camps, from the 1920s to the early 1930s, there was not a significant difference in the treatment of political prisoners and criminals. Much of the prisoners’ treatment still depended on the camp chiefs, who did not have much guidance from the higher camp administration. This would soon change.

The Camp System Expands (1930-1940)

In 1929, Stalin became the undisputed head of the government and implemented his “Revolution from Above.” He established a new Five-Year Plan of rapid industrialization, and accelerated the pace of forced collectivization in the countryside. Both policies generated a flood of prisoners – peasants who resisted collectivization, and “wreckers” whom the government

⁴⁹ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 37.

⁵⁰ Solzhenitsyn, 1:60-67.

⁵¹ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 280-295.

blamed for industry failures. These arrests placed terrible strain on the regular penal system run by the NKVD, prompting Politburo to set up a commission to solve this problem. They suggested integrating the ordinary and special camp systems, following the SLON model, and putting it under the control of the OGPU.⁵² In 1934, the government reorganized the OGPU into the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) and gave the NKVD control of all the OGPU labor camps and colonies, as well as the few that were still under the control of the People's Commissariat of Justice.⁵³ The NKVD created a separate department to run the camps, the Main Camp Administration - *Glavnoe Upravleni Lagerei*, or GULAG.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, prisoners poured into these OGPU camps so quickly that the administration struggled to find occupations for their new arrivals. In 1930, Politburo handed them a solution: the creation of a canal between the White and the Baltic Sea. In 1931-1933, the OGPU established new labor camps, organized in the Solovetsky manner, and poured its manpower into building the canal. Elsewhere, it continued its lumbering operations on a large scale, and began gold mining, which became an equally important operation for the GULAG. The OGPU also established camps, on a smaller scale, which focused on coal mining, oil drilling, agriculture, construction, and creating consumer goods. There was also a branch of the GULAG that employed convict engineers in design laboratories.⁵⁵

During this period of rapid expansion, the prisoners lived in poor conditions. The administration was ill-equipped to handle the large numbers of incoming prisoners, and often put

⁵² Applebaum, *Gulag*, 44-49.

⁵³ Khlevniuk, 84-85.

⁵⁴ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 48-50.

⁵⁵ Khlevniuk, 22-32., Applebaum, *Gulag*, 62-66.

them in unfinished camps, a circumstance that continued into the 1940's. The prisoners were underfed, overworked, and prone to typhus, tuberculosis, and scurvy.⁵⁶ In 1932, a severe famine struck, a partial result of Stalin's forced collectivization, which drastically drove up the death rates of the camp inmates, which the administration tried to counter by releasing all disabled, chronically ill, and dying prisoners.⁵⁷

After the influx of prisoners and rapid expansion of the early 1930s, the camp system became a little more stable and more organized. The administration established better oversight on the individual camps, but as a result, the camp regime became more uniform and more difficult, especially for the political prisoners, who began to lose the small "privileges" they once possessed. As Solzhenitsyn described it,

...The camp regime was made stricter and tightened up. And the many cracks that were discovered via which *freedom* could still observe the archipelago. All those ties were now broken off, and the cracks filled in...an iron curtain descended around the archipelago.⁵⁸

For example, the administration strengthened the camp perimeter and guard systems, further reduced the camps' re-educational activities, restricted the number of visitors permitted to the camps, and stopped offering to reduce the prisoner's sentence in return for over-fulfilling their work norms.⁵⁹

The Great Terror

These changes in the camp regime coincided with a series of purges that pushed more and more prisoners into the camps and colonies. In 1935, the police organs, under Stalin's

⁵⁶ Khlevniuk, 37.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 68-78.

⁵⁸ Solzhenitsyn, 2:124-125.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 2:122.

orders, eliminated the “former people” – all those connected, in any way, to the old regime. They also carried out a campaign to reduce the crime rate by arresting “criminals and lumpen elements” and those who did not have internal passports. The regime also began to purge border zones, primarily in Western Ukraine, the Leningrad province, and Karelia. It also undertook a small-scale purge of the party in 1935, with 15,218 “enemies” arrested.⁶⁰

Stalin’s purges intensified in 1936 and reached their peak in 1937-1938, years which later became known as “the Great Terror.” It began with the trials, and executions, of Stalin’s political rivals for “counterrevolutionary” activities, and the persecution of their families, friends, and associates. They purged the army and defense industry, and then “former kulaks, criminals, and anti-Soviet elements.”⁶¹ These “anti-Soviet elements” were, in large part, members of the communist party. The Politburo gave every province, territory and republic a quota for arrests and executions.⁶² The purges pushed an ever-increasing number of men, women, and children into the camps. In 1934, there were an average of 620,000 prisoners in the labor camps; by 1939, there were 1,340,000.⁶³

To cope with the rising number of inmates, the Politburo ordered the GULAG to create new camps; these were very hastily constructed and underfunded, and during the punishing winter months they were lethal. In addition, the Politburo ordered the administration to shoot more than 10,000 “active counterrevolutionaries” in the camps.⁶⁴ The mortality rates reached a

⁶⁰ Khlevniuk, 88-90.

⁶¹ Ibid, 145.

⁶² Ibid, 146.

⁶³ Ibid, 307.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 170-172.

high only surpassed by those during the famine of 1933. The administration created the camps to hold 57,000-60,000 prisoners, but by 1938 the number of prisoners exceeded this limit by 150,000, and this number would have been higher if not for the high death rate in the camps. Moreover, the general chaos of the camps, the lack of supplies, largely due to mismanagement and theft, and the poor health of the new arrivals, prevented the camps from even fulfilling the new projects that the Politburo had assigned them.⁶⁵

Beria's Reforms

In November of 1938, the Politburo issued orders to stop the Great Terror, with a final purge of the NKVD, for whom they blamed the “excesses” carried out in the two previous years. Stalin removed Nikolai Yezhov, his devoted subordinate and main organizer of the Terror, and replaced him with Lavrenty Beria as head of the GULAG. Beria followed Stalin’s new policy – “To restore Socialist legality” – by purging the NKVD and reviewing the verdicts passed in the previous two years. As a result, they released about 223,622 the prisoners, out of about 1,340,000, most of which were criminals, rather than political prisoners.⁶⁶

Beria wanted to address the problem of low productivity in the camps and assessed that it was due to the prisoners’ poor living conditions and the lack of proper supplies. In his concern for the camp’s economic progress, he established both policies that both helped and hurt the prisoners. He managed to increase the budget for the prisoners’ food and clothing, but he also completely ended the system of early release and established harsher punishments for the

⁶⁵ Khlevniuk, 178-185.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 195, 307.

“wreckers” and those who refused to work.⁶⁷ By 1939, the GULAG was barely beginning to recover from the pressure of the Great Terror when the German threat became a reality and the Soviet Union began preparing for war.

At this point, the GULAG was “one of the largest economic entities in the country,” and the government entrusted it with construction projects of military and strategic importance.⁶⁸ These included massive railroad construction, coal mining, and hydrotechnical projects. The GULAG administrators constantly struggled to provide enough manpower to fulfill the ever-increasing demands made by the Politburo. They responded with brutal exploitation of the prisoners.⁶⁹ Although Beria increased the budget for prisoners’ supplies, their living conditions remained very poor. In the first place, by the time the money or goods passed through the hands of all the intermediaries a much smaller percentage actually reached the prisoners.⁷⁰ In the second place, they had to start every new project ordered by the Politburo from scratch - the prisoners, after enduring a long and difficult transit, had to build the barracks themselves after working a full eleven or twelve hour day. Many of the established camps would get rid of their sick and disabled by sending them to these new work sites, which were absolutely lethal. Even healthy workers “often died or became invalids because of the brutal treatment” in these newly-established camps.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Khlevniuk, 205-206.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 237.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 246.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 208.

⁷¹ Ibid, 251-252.

War and the Aftermath (1941-1956)

On June 22, 1941, the Soviet Union entered World War II when Germany attacked its borders. Wartime policies affected everyone in the Soviet Union, including those in the GULAG. Although the labor camps were of economic importance, the government also perceived them as a liability. They feared that the politically unstable inmates – the political prisoners, and especially anyone with German origin – might rise up and side with the Germans, if the opportunity presented itself. This was, by most accounts, a miscalculation. The memoirists recalled that most of the inmates experienced a fervor of patriotism and affection for their country, despite the cruelties they experienced at its hands.⁷² The GULAG administration put those with German origin in tighter security, and indefinitely postponed the release of any political prisoners who had served out their sentences. They also cut the camps off from all contact with the outside world, including access to radios, letters, packages, and visitors.⁷³

The chronic food shortages that affected all of the Soviet Union during the war struck the GULAG very severely. The mortality levels of 1942 and 1943 were the highest in the GULAG's history. Malnutrition, however, was not the only reason for these death rates. When German troops advanced into Russian territory, the NKVD had to evacuate prisons and camps in order to keep “dangerous political prisoners” out of the German hands. They usually did not have sufficient means of transportation, and made the prisoners march long distances. The guards killed those who were too weak to continue walking.⁷⁴

⁷² Applebaum, *Gulag*, 448-449.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 411-414.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 416-419.

Post-war: A New Social Order in the Camps

When the war ended in 1945, the prisoners had high hopes of a general amnesty, especially when the authorities released large numbers of women who were pregnant or had small children to ease the strain on the camps' resources. Their hopes came to nothing. Much of the Red Army had seen, for the first time, the high standard of living in the West, which was even visible in the war-torn countries that they occupied. Stalin feared the possible consequences of this and was determined to not to lose control over the population. In 1946 he strengthened the NKVD, and split it into two branches: the Ministry of Internal Affairs continued to run the GULAG while the MGB, later KGB, controlled counter-intelligence.

The GULAG continued to expand. During and after the war, the regime sent many non-Russian prisoners to the GULAG. These were former elites, military members, or politically suspicious members of the occupied territories – Poland, the Baltics, Belorussia, and Moldavia – and later, it included suspicious groups in the countries that became part of the Eastern Bloc – Hungary, Romania, and Austria. The GULAG also received enemy soldiers, for, although there was a separate prisoner of war camp system, the NKVD sometimes sent prisoners of war directly into the GULAG camps.⁷⁵

After the war ended, the regime sent its own soldiers to the GULAG. Soviet prisoners of war often went from a German prison camp to Soviet one, because the fact that they had allowed the enemy to capture them and that they managed to survive the German POW camps was suspicious.⁷⁶ In 1948, the authorities began to re-arrest former prisoners, caught up in the Great

⁷⁵ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 421-435.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 435-437.

Terror, who had just finished their ten year sentences. In Magadan, former political prisoners realized that the authorities were re-arresting them in alphabetic order. Many of these re-arrests eventually ended up in exile colonies. With the influx of former and foreign prisoners, the GULAG reached its highest ever camp population in 1953, at 1,727,970 prisoners.⁷⁷

Although the administration did not enact the positive changes the prisoners had anticipated, life in the GULAG nevertheless began to change. Since the 1930s, the common criminals, with the tacit support of the administration, had dominated the political prisoners. Now there were new types of political prisoners - no longer the intellectuals and peasants arrested in the 1930's, but "former Red Army soldiers, Polish Home Army officers, Ukrainian and Baltic partisans." These men and women were bolder, had more experience in handling their enemies, and many, facing sentences up to twenty-five years, had nothing to lose.⁷⁸

The new political prisoners fought back against the criminals. They were not always successful, but enough so that they disrupted the status quo. The administration feared that these political prisoners would redirect their energy and begin to fight against the administration, and so in 1948 they created new, high-security camps for the most dangerous political prisoners. These *katorga lagpunkts* resembled more traditional concentration camps; the prisoners wore uniforms with numbers, the windows had bars, the barracks were locked at night, and the prisoners could engage in only manual labor. The new camps backfired for the administration:

⁷⁷ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 461-464., J. O. Pohl, *The Stalinist Penal System* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1997), 11.

⁷⁸ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 465-466.

they had totally separated the most dangerous political prisoners from the criminals, and so they were free to turn all their attention to fight with the administration.⁷⁹

In the regular camps, where there were still a few political prisoners left, the administration also acted to diminish the criminals' power. Many criminals adhered to the thieves' code, which forbade working for the government in any capacity, and that included working in the camps. In the past, the authorities turned a blind eye to these "refusers," because they were still helping to subdue the political prisoners. Now this was no longer the case; most of the political prisoners were in the high-security camps, and so the criminals who refused to work were becoming burdens to the camps. The administration responded by using promises and threats to pressure criminals into collaborating with the camp authorities. Those who abandoned their law were called *suki*, or "bitches," and they banded together, with the administration's approval, to harass, intimidate, and frequently kill the criminals who remained loyal to the thieves' code. The struggle between the two groups became known as the "bitches' war;" it spread across all of the camps in brutal violence. It is difficult to determine who won. In some camps, the *suki* had the upper hand, whereas on others, the traditional thieves had control. By the dissolution of the GULAG, the infighting effectively wiped out the thieves' brotherhood all together.⁸⁰

The GULAG administration had tried to tighten security and make the camps more efficient after the war, but their actions made the problems worse. The criminals engaged in a bloody war that spun out of their control. The political prisoners, meanwhile, used their

⁷⁹ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 467.

⁸⁰ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 469-471, Serguei Cheloukhine, "The Roots of Russian Organized Crime," *Crime, Law, Social Change* 50, no. 4 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-008-9117-5>.

newfound confidence and teamwork to protest the conditions of their high-security camps. They led an armed uprising in the winter of 1949-1950, and led hunger strikes and work strikes in different regions for the next two years.

By 1952, it was clear to the government that the GULAG was not, and never would be, profitable. That year, the state had to subsidize the GULAG for “2.3 billion rubles, more than sixteen percent of the state’s entire budgetary allocations.” The biggest problem was that the costs to maintain the camps were very high, but the prisoners were far less productive than free workers, so the profits of their labor would never exceed the costs of the camp’s maintenance. In 1950, an official sent by the Beria to examine the camps acknowledged that, at the very least, “the price of maintaining prisoners...far exceeded the costs of paying ordinary free workers.” The actions of the political prisoners and the factions of the “bitches’ war” drove up these costs, because they required more guards and more elaborate security measures. Nevertheless, Stalin showed no inclination to close the GULAG. On the contrary, in 1952 and 1953, he began to select new groups to occupy the prison camps: the Georgian communist elite and the Soviet Jews. Then, on March 5, 1953, Stalin died.⁸¹

The Dissolution of the GULAG

Stalin’s death brought radical changes to the GULAG. The new government leaders knew that the GULAG was inefficient and a drain on state resources. Beria immediately ordered the release of all prisoners with sentences of less than five years, pregnant women or those with small children, and everyone under eighteen, which totaled to about one million people. After the

⁸¹ Applebaum. *Gulag*, 472-475.

collective leadership ousted him from power, they ceased to make significant changes to the GUALG. The remaining prisoners expected amnesty and release; angry, they led a series of strikes in 1953 and 1954, which the authorities had to put down with police and army troops.⁸² The strikes were not, in themselves, successful, but, ultimately, they forced the government to act. In July 1954, the Central Committee eased restrictions, shortened the workday, and closed the high-security camps. Nikita Khrushchev set up a committee to review every prisoner's case, and it slowly began authorizing early releases.⁸³

In 1956, Khrushchev rapidly accelerated the process of release with his "secret speech," in which he denounced the cult of Stalin and the mass arrests during the Great Terror. The speech shocked the Soviet Union, and forced his fellow leaders and party members to confront the realities of the GULAG. By the next year, the government dissolved the GULAG, and dismantled some of its largest camps. The penal system now constituted of special, isolated prisoners for especially dangerous criminals run by the Ministry of Justice, while minor criminals carried out their sentences in prison colonies in their native regions. The Soviet penal system never dropped forced labor altogether, or ceased to imprison political prisoners, but it never again reached the magnitude of the Stalinist GULAG.⁸⁴

Conclusion

In 1918, the Bolshevik ideology gave birth to the first labor camps that evolved into a massive political and economic machine which finally ground to a halt in 1956. GULAG

⁸² Applebaum, *Gulag*, 489-505.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 506-508.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 508-510, 528.

historians are generally at a consensus about the origins of the forced labor camps under Lenin, but they are less certain as to Stalin's true intentions when he oversaw the expansion of Lenin's prison camps into the massive and deadly GULAG. Some suggested that he deliberately imprisoned innocent people for economic reasons, noting that Stalin was dedicated to the Soviet Union's rapid industrialization, and he took personal interest in the GULAG and its projects.⁸⁵ However, the regime arrested many unsuitable prisoners for efficient labor, such as women, children, and invalids. Moreover, they executed many "enemies of the state," which made it unlikely that they arrested people purely as a means of cheap labor.

If Stalin's paranoia sent millions of prisoners to be "re-educated" and released back into society, why were the camps so deadly? Steven Barnes argues that death and re-education in the camps were not contradictions. The Bolsheviks believed that the "class enemy" – the political prisoners – "must not be allowed to spread its harmful influence to society at large, and therefore had to be isolated from society until such time as it was reformed or destroyed."⁸⁶ Thus prisoners had to prove that they were capable of reforming and reentering Soviet society by working hard, and surviving. This relationship between "violence and transformation,"⁸⁷ between the easily reformed "social allies" and the hardened "class enemies" that drove the GULAG, was a crucial element to understanding the administration's attitude and policies toward the political prisoners and the common criminals in the camps, as discussed in the next chapter.

⁸⁵ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 54-57.

⁸⁶ Barnes, 14-15.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 15.

CHAPTER TWO: THE CRIMINALS AND THE ADMINISTRATION

The roots of the antagonism between the criminals and political prisoners lay in the way that the GULAG administration perceived and treated both parties. This chapter explores the connection between the administration and the criminals. There are no verifiable memoirs written by criminals in the GULAG, so the first half of the chapter relies on secondary sources and some political memoirs to describe the criminals in the GULAG, their customs and behaviors. It also identifies the theories and policies carried out by the GULAG administration that enhanced the criminals' power and privilege in the camps. The second half of the chapter deliberates if and why the administration deliberately empowered the criminals at the expense of the political prisoners by analyzing memoirs written by political prisoners, as well as two valuable testimonies left by GULAG personnel – one camp chief, and one guard. As the first chapter demonstrated, the camp system changed significantly between 1918 and 1956. This and the succeeding chapter will glance at the earliest years of the prison camps and then focus on the time period 1934-1950, directly before the Great Terror to just after the end of World War II, when the criminals exerted the most control over the camps.

Political Prisoners, *Bytoviki*, and *Blatnye*

By the 1930s, the GULAG held two basic categories of prisoners: political prisoners and regular criminals. The political prisoners included all those whom the judicial organs sentenced under Article 58 of the 1926 Criminal Code, which prosecuted “counterrevolutionary crimes,” such as treason, espionage, terror, diversion, wrecking, anti-Soviet speech, and having a “treasonous” family member. The criminals, on the other hand, included those men and women

who received sentences for “non-political” crimes. Among the criminals, there were two distinct subgroups. The first were the *bytoviki*, who received sentences for minor crimes and who were not habitual criminals. Many *bytoviki* were peasants or workers who committed such crimes as “stealing a single rubber boot” (six year sentence), or “stealing three bottles of wine” (seven year sentence), and similar offenses.⁸⁸ The second group were the *blatnye*, also called *urki*, who were professional criminals, convicted for crimes such as theft, prostitution, banditism, murder, speculation, marauding, military crimes, and “official malfeasance and economic crimes.” The distinction between the *bytoviki* and the *blatnye* was “sociological rather than legal,” so there are no official statistics about the ratio of *bytoviki* to *blatnye* in the GULAG.⁸⁹

The majority of the prisoners in the GULAG were common criminals, that is, *bytoviki* and *blatnye*. Before the Great Terror, political prisoners made up a mere twelve to eighteen percent of the GULAG population. By 1939, they rose to thirty-five percent, and this percentage remained more or less steady until the Soviet Union entered the Second World War. At that point, the Soviet authorities released many non-political prisoners early and sent them to the battlefield, thus raising the percentage of political prisoners in the camps. It peaked at fifty-nine percent in 1946, but it dropped consistently in the following years, because after the war had ended, many habitual criminals re-entered the system.⁹⁰ There was also an influx of soldiers; the judicial organs sentenced some, like Solzhenitsyn, under Article 58, but sentenced others, like the memoirist Janusz Bardach, under a “criminal” article of the code.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 293.

⁸⁹ Pohl, *The Stalinist Penal System*, 20.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 22.

⁹¹ Solzhenitsyn, 1:277-280., Janusz Bardach and Kathleen Gleeson, *Man is Wolf to Man : Surviving the Gulag* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 167.

The Society of the Vory-v-zakone and The Criminal Code

Many of the professional criminals belonged to a wide-spread, powerful society that operated in and outside of the GULAG. It included thieves, swindlers, counterfeiters, and some prostitutes, but it excluded violent “gangsters.” The elite, or inner circle, of the professional criminals' society were the *vory-v-zakone*, translated as “thieves-in-law.”⁹² This society had its roots in thieves’ *arteli*, or guilds, which formed in the mid-nineteenth century. These guilds consisted of thieves in the same line of business, who united and elected a leader from amongst themselves.

The Soviet penal system helped turn these guilds into a national, unified organization, because the camps and prisons brought the professional criminals into much more frequent contact with each other. This helped the thieves develop a single identity and a set code of values. The administration’s tendency to transfer inmates between prisons and camps frequently, “allowed not only repeated interaction, but also the spread of information...[which] was necessary in order to inform the prison population about new entries into the vory brotherhood, check reputations, expose frauds, and monitor convicts’ transfers.”⁹³ The scale of the camp system helped the newly-unified *vory* society spread across the country, its members spreading from camp to camp and onward into the surrounding cities and countryside.

The *vory* had a strict code of behavior. They were supposed to support each other, help each other, and share all they had with each other. The Code forbade them to use violence against one another without express permission from the *skhodka*, the *vory* court. It also forbade

⁹² Serguei Cheloukhine, “The Roots of Russian Organized Crime,” *Crime, Law, Social Change* 50 (2008): 357-362.

⁹³ Frederico Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 164-165.

them to work for the government in any way; that included working in a factory or state-owned industry, fighting in the army, and most importantly, working at a corrective labor camp.⁹⁴ In the early seventeenth century, the criminal underworld in Russia began to develop its own traditions and morals, which became the basis for this code of conduct. Serguei Cheloukhine suggests that the professional criminals turned these traditions and morals into a well-developed ideology in the late eighteenth century, when the Tsarist government imprisoned more and more political dissidents. The interaction between the ideological dissidents and the criminals may have “enriched the underworld with new moralistic values.”⁹⁵

The *vory-v-zakone* was an elite society that heavily influenced the regular *blatnye*. Most *blatnye* aspired to become *vory* one day, so they faithfully followed the same code of behavior. For this reason, it was difficult for outsiders to distinguish the *vory* from the ordinary *blatnye* – many sources, including memoirs by political prisoners, used these terms interchangeably.⁹⁶ Author Mikhail Dyomin, who spent some time as a train thief, compared the society of the *blatnye* to the Communist Party, because both had “the same kind of solidarity and unquestioning submission to regulations.”⁹⁷ To continue with this analogy, the *vory-v-zakone* were like the Central Committee; the party’s elite, whose positions granted them both power and prestige.

⁹⁴ Varese, *Mafia*, 150-152.

⁹⁵ Cheloukhine, “Roots Organized Crime,” 358.

⁹⁶ Federico Varese, “The Society of the Vory-v-zakone, 1930s-1950s,” *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 4 (1998): 517.

⁹⁷ Mikhail Dyomin, *The Day is Born of Darkness*, trans. Tony Kahn (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 46.

While the distinguishing between *blatnye* and *vory* may have been difficult, it was easy for the population to identify professional criminals in general. Both the men and women had tattoos, with a wide variety of designs, such as angels praying around a crucifix,⁹⁸ portraits of Stalin, a tribute to the *blatnye*'s mother, or erotic images.⁹⁹ These tattoos were functional as well as decorative: to those who understood the symbolism, the tattoos held clues about the wearer's status, sexual orientation, previous crimes and prison terms. The criminals severely punished those among their ranks who had tattoos that were inappropriate to their status in the fraternity.¹⁰⁰ The men wore distinct personal fashions, such as keeping the nail of the little finger very long, putting bronze crowns on healthy teeth, and wearing aluminum crosses around their necks.¹⁰¹ The *blatnye* also used their own slang, to the extent that outsiders saw it as a different language, "its grammatical structure being Russian, but with a different vocabulary."¹⁰² Scholars estimate that this language developed as a combination of sailor's slang, Yiddish, and Romany.¹⁰³ The camp administration and non-*blatnye* referred to it as the "thieves' speech," but use of this slang became widespread in the GULAG, by both the political prisoners and the camp guards.¹⁰⁴

The tattoos and the slang were the two main *blatnye* identifiers, but they also developed other signs and rituals for this purpose. Alexander Dolgun recalled such a ritual in *An American in the Gulag*. He befriended some members of the *blatnye* in his first cell, who advised him that,

⁹⁸ Varese, *Mafia*, 146.

⁹⁹ Solzhenitsyn, 2:441., Alexander Dolgun, *An American in the Gulag* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. , 1975), 160.

¹⁰⁰ Cheloukhine, 361.

¹⁰¹ Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), 6-7.

¹⁰² Varese, *Russian Mafia*, 146.

¹⁰³ Varese, "The Society of the Vory," 516.

¹⁰⁴ Solzhenitsyn, 2:530-531.

if the guards transfer him to a different cell, he should find and step on a white handkerchief lying next to the latrine barrel. Shortly afterwards, the transfer took place. The guards took the new prisoners and sent them, one by one, into their new cells. Dolgun, waiting in line to enter his cell, observed that near the urine barrel “there was a gleaming white handkerchief spread out, exactly in the path of anyone walking into the cell.” The political prisoners entering before him naturally side-stepped it, but Dolgun “carefully wiped [his] feet on the handkerchief” as he entered. Immediately, three or four of the *blatnye* in the cell ran up to him saying, “Welcome, brother, sit down, we’ll get you some tea and then you can tell us your story.”¹⁰⁵

Reeducation and the Criminals

Lenin believed that crime was a consequence of capitalism, and it would eventually die out in his communist society. Until then, prison was a place of reeducation, and a means of reforming the capitalists and the victims of capitalism until they were fit to re-enter Soviet society. Lenin signaled his dedication to re-education in July 1918, when his government established special agencies, the Distributive Commissions, to provide their prisoners with cultural and political education, as well as some technical training.¹⁰⁶ In theory, all the prisoners were capable of reformation. Nevertheless, from the beginning, the regime divided up its prisoners, not according to the severity of their crimes, but according to the likelihood of their reformation. They considered regular criminals as the “proletariat” of the GULAG. They were close to the working class, that is, “socially friendly,” and so they had “the highest potential to earn their way back to Soviet society.” The political prisoners, “counterrevolutionaries,” and

¹⁰⁵ Dolgun, *An American in the Gulag*, 159-60.

¹⁰⁶ Jakobson, *Origins*, 3-5, 19.

“former people” represented the “bourgeoisie” of the camps; they were naturally hostile to the workers’ regime, and so they had the least potential to return to Soviet society.¹⁰⁷

From the late 1920s to the early 1930s, the GULAG’s rhetoric of re-education was at its strongest.¹⁰⁸ The Cultural-Education Department replaced the earlier Distributive Commissions, and organized theatrical performances, printed camp newspapers, and gave political lectures in all the camps.¹⁰⁹ The Department, however, directed its activities primarily toward the “socially friendly,” and the camp chiefs followed suit. In 1931, the GULAG chief Kogan wrote that re-education in the camp had two goals: “a) to achieve full class stratification of the prisoners and with the help of the strata socially close to us to carry out the necessary measures, and b) to correct and politically educate the socially close element.”¹¹⁰ Similarly, the deputy chief of the Karlag camps wrote in 1932 that the camps must educate the prisoners but, “in the first order, the layer socially close to the working class.”¹¹¹

The criminals also received special privileges which corresponded to their status as “socially friendly.” An order issued at Belomor declared: “All criminals coming under article 35 of the Code, all social miscreants and women, were to receive the best and most humane treatment.”¹¹² Criminals generally received lighter sentences and were eligible for early release. Those who “exhibited exemplary behavior in camp” could take a “wide array of positions within

¹⁰⁷ Barnes, 58.

¹⁰⁸ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 231-232.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 232-234.

¹¹⁰ Barnes, 57, citing AOTsPSI, f. Karkaga, sv.2, d.44, 1. 3.

¹¹¹ Barnes, 87, citing AOTsPSI, f. Karlaga, sv. 3, d. 55, 1. 3.

¹¹² Barnes, 87, citing Gorky, Auerbach, and Firin, *Belomor*, 342.

the camp, including administrative positions and armed camp guards.”¹¹³ Dmitri Likhachev, a political prisoner in Solovetsky in the late 1920s described this distinction between prisoners:

“In those distant days the population of the camp was divided into the “socially near” and the “ka-ery” (the counterrevolutionaries – prisoners caught under Article 58; the word *kontrik* didn’t yet exist). The ‘socially near’ were given every advantage. They could live outside the monastery walls, take the best duties, and were even recruited into the secret police.”¹¹⁴

Their special position in camp and the re-education rhetoric reinforced the idea that the criminal classes were redeemable, and superior to the political prisoners. A former thief, recalling his time in the GULAG, reflected this sentiment, saying:

I was even proud that although a thief I was not a traitor and betrayer. On every convenient occasion they tried to teach us thieves that we were not lost to our Motherland, that even if we were profligate sons, we were nevertheless sons. But there was no place for ‘Fascists’¹¹⁵ on this earth.¹¹⁶

The Division between the Politicals and the Criminals Deepens

As the labor camps grew and developed from 1926 to 1934, the rhetoric of reeducation focused on the criminal classes, but it did not completely reject the political prisoners. A GPU officer, speaking at Belemor, gave a speech to the criminals in which he mentioned that the political prisoners were secondary targets for reeducation, saying: “The road for your return to your factory or kolhoz¹¹⁷ before your terms expire is not closed, provided you show us here that you work loyally and honestly and will help us take care of and re-educate the counter-

¹¹³ Barnes, 88.

¹¹⁴ Dmitri S. Likhachev, *Reflections on the Russian Soul* (New York: Central European University Press, 2000), 161.

¹¹⁵ “Fascists” was another term for the political prisoners, used during and after World War Two.

¹¹⁶ Solzhenitsyn, 1:190.

¹¹⁷ Collective farm.

revolutionaries.”¹¹⁸ At the White Sea Canal camps, most of the propaganda concerned the reformation of the criminal classes, but there was still some that addressed the possibility of “reforging” a political. Gorky’s *The Canal Named For Stalin* focused on criminals, but it featured a few “political converts,” including a “former wrecker” and “a working class ex-saboteur,” both of whom found the error of their former ways through honest labor.¹¹⁹

Similarly, in these early years of the GULAG, the administration did not completely deny the political prisoners the privileges granted to criminals. Dmitri Likhachev, a prisoner at Solovetsky in the early 1930s acknowledged that while there were criminals in good positions in Solovetsky, there were privileged political prisoners too:

The authorities realized that thieves and bandits couldn’t really be trusted: they were the very ones who would steal, murder, deceive and disrupt discipline. So there was still a small group who enjoyed a higher standard of living than the rest....To this group of prisoners belonged those who were there under ‘official clauses’ (for example, secret agents whose cover was blown and who’d been charged with ‘divulging State secrets’), foreign currency speculators, embezzlers, etc.¹²⁰

Likhachev himself experienced some privileges that would be unthinkable, ten years later, for someone in his position. Arrested and sentenced under Article 58 for possession of anti-Soviet writing, Likhachev spent a few years in manual labor at Solovetsky, but, remarkably, he received permission to leave for the mainland in 1931 and work as a book keeper at one of the camps connected to the White Sea Canal.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Barnes, 88, citing Gorky, Auerbach, and Firin, *Belomor*, 53.

¹¹⁹ Applebaum, 68.

¹²⁰ Likhachev, 161.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 178-181.

After 1934, the GULAG administration began to institute system-wide changes that created a more oppressive regime for its political prisoners. They scaled back the few “educational” activities for the political prisoners and tightened camp security. In April 1935, the People’s Commissar of the Interior sent Order no. 00159 to the GULAG camp leaders, reminding them that:

The NKVD corrective labor camps hold a large number of extremely dangerous counterrevolutionaries: spies, terrorists, and other anti-Soviet and anti-Party elements, who are bitter enemies of the Soviet regime with nothing to lose and who are always ready for the most intense counterrevolutionary action.¹²²

The order listed actions that the camp leaders must undertake to secure their camps, and it focused on increasing the surveillance of the political prisoners.¹²³ In 1936, the administration ordered the removal of all political prisoners from positions in the Culture-Education Department’s activities, such as working in the camp theater, or running the camp newspaper.¹²⁴ In 1937, it issued orders to remove political prisoners from “administrative and managerial positions” (excepting foremen, taskmasters, and supervisors). They called for heightened security, the cession of unescorted movements by the political prisoners, and more serious punishments for minor violations of camp order.¹²⁵

While the GULAG administration systematically stripped the political prisoners of the last vestiges of freedom, the criminals retained all their former privileges. Solzhenitsyn noted

¹²² Khlevniuk, 98.

¹²³ Ibid, 98.

¹²⁴ Barnes, 67.

¹²⁵ Khlevniuk, 171.

that while the administration made many changes to the political prisoner's life in the camp, it retained its tradition of empowering and favoring the "socially friendly:"

There was only one of its new acquisitions of the recent past that Gulag did not part with: the encouragement of the hoodlums, the thieves (*blatnye*). Even more consistently than before, the thieves were given all the "commanding heights" in the camp. Even more consistently than before, the thieves were egged on against the 58's, permitted to plunder them without any obstacles, to beat, to choke.¹²⁶

As the political prisoners lost status in the labor camps, the criminals kept their former privileges, thus deepening the division between the two. According to Solzhenitsyn, these administrative decisions that further empowered one group and restricted the other from 1926 to 1934, resulted in the beginning of "that ten-year period of the thieves' most flagrant debauches, and the most intense oppression of the politicals."¹²⁷

Despite the widespread changes in the camps, the GULAG administration continued to insist that they were dedicated to prisoner reform. Fyodor Mochulsky, a former GULAG camp chief, described a conversation he held in the late 1940s with the deputy director of the NKVD, who presented the official narrative about the camps, saying:

In capitalist counties...prisoners just rot in jail. No matter what their sentences were, they were never given the possibility to be reeducated, because this kind of training could only be done through honest labor. The capitalist prisoners simply sit in their cells for several years, and then they are let out when their time is up, and they go back into society being the same criminals they were when they were arrested....In the USSR we do not let our prisoners languish in prisons. We send them to special camps that we have created, so that they can be reformed through productive labor.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Solzhenitsyn, 2:126.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 1:506.

¹²⁸ Fyodor Vasilevich Mucholsky, *Gulag Boss*, trans. Deborah Kaple (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11.

The NKVD official neglected to mention one crucial aspect about the camps: the prisoners either reformed or died. There was no space for failure. As Steven Barnes argued in *Death and Redemption*, the prisoners in the GULAG “had to prove their capacity for redemption” through the quality of their labor. By the late 1930s, the cultural and educational activities were minor aspects of the re-education process, for “labor was not only the means but also the measure of an inmate’s reform.”¹²⁹ Labor reformed the prisoner, and so the “socially friendly” required the least amount of “productive labor,” while the political prisoners required the most. By designating the types of work permitted to the political prisoners and to common criminals, the GULAG administration ensured that the heaviest labor went to the political prisoners, who needed it the most.

Privileged Positions in the GULAG: The Trusties

The GULAG administration accorded various privileges to criminals. In general, they received better treatment from the guards. They could make purchases at the camp commissary,¹³⁰ and receive visitors, but most importantly, they could avoid general work. In the 1930s, the GULAG administration established a detailed system that assigned prisoners certain types of jobs according to their social origin and physical health.¹³¹ There were three categories of jobs in the camp: heavy labor, or general work, light labor, and privileged positions. By 1937, the administration forbade “counterrevolutionaries” to occupy any of the privileged positions, and those convicted under the more serious terms of Article 58, such as terrorism or “betrayal of

¹²⁹ Barnes, 15-17.

¹³⁰ Shalamov, 80.

¹³¹ Applebaum, 179.

the Motherland,” could only perform general work.¹³² The general work was deadly – strenuous physical activity, very long hours, and poor working conditions. Almost anyone who survived the GULAG had, for at least some of his sentence, worked in a “privileged position” as a “trusty.”¹³³

A “trusty” job was any one that was not general labor. Members of the OGPU held the leadership positions, and free Soviet citizens became guards. The camp chiefs assigned all other aspects of running the camp to the inmates. The “lowest class” of trusties were the cook’s helpers, laundresses, etc. – those who had to work hard, but indoors, and who received better rations. Next there were the “work trusties” – technicians, superintendents, planners, etc. who had to leave the camp to work. They had better food and living conditions, and a degree of power over “the work, the feeding, and the life of the sloggers.”¹³⁴ Finally, there were the “compound trusties” - the cooks, barbers, medical assistants and so on. They had power over the resources of the camp; they could take, or give to their friends, extra food and supplies.¹³⁵ The camp administration also hired guards from the prisoners, mostly in the 1920s and early 1930s.¹³⁶

Although the GULAG administration barred the “counterrevolutionaries” from these positions of safety and power, many individual camp leaders assigned political prisoners to fill these positions because they were generally better-educated and more capable than the “socially friendly.” Varlam Shalamov described this phenomenon, saying:

¹³² Solzhenitsyn, 2:255., Applebaum, 364.

¹³³ Solzhenitsyn, 2:251.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 2:254. “Slogger” was slang for a heavy laborer.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 2:252-254.

¹³⁶ Applebaum, 257.

The political prisoners...managed to get a position intended for civilians (there were no civilians) or common criminals (common criminals didn't prize these 'privileged jobs' since they could always find that type of work, and therefore they frequently got drunk and worse). Staff positions were filled by persons sentenced under Article 58 of the Criminal Code and they did their work well.¹³⁷

The GULAG administration frequently sent commissions to ensure that all the prisoners were working in the correct fields. As soon as the commission arrived, "a wave of the chief's white hand would send off the 58's to *general work* without hesitation or regrets."¹³⁸ Then, after the commission left, new political prisoners would eventually fill these "trusty" jobs until the next commission arrived. This was an agonizing process for the political prisoners involved, when their "temporary well-being painstakingly built up over months was shattered to bits in one fell day" and when, to their resentment, "only the nonpolitical offenders could enjoy their trusty situation serenely."¹³⁹

Nevertheless, this practice continued throughout all the GULAG camps. Shalamov argued that it was necessary to put these educated politicals in trusty positions for the camps to operate successfully, saying:

The worst camp heads, those who had the least experience, would conscientiously carry out the orders of their superiors, and not permit persons condemned under Article 58 to work with any instrument other than the pick and wheelbarrow, the saw and the axe. Such camp heads were the least successful. Such camp heads were quickly fired.¹⁴⁰

Having a "trusty" job was the prisoner's key to surviving the GULAG. Although the political prisoners had unofficial access to the "trusty" jobs, getting one was hard, and losing it eventually

¹³⁷ Shalamov, 222-223.

¹³⁸ Solzhenitsyn, 2:255.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 2:255.

¹⁴⁰ Shalamov, 223.

was certain. The GULAG administration primarily empowered the criminal classes by giving them guaranteed access to these life-saving positions.

Theft and Violence among Prisoners

In addition to their access to the “trusty” jobs, the *blatnye* also benefitted from the administration’s very lenient attitude toward their activities; in other words, they could rob, harass, and assault the political prisoners with impunity. The professional criminals began this demoralizing process the moment they came into contact with political prisoners after arrest - during transportation from the prison cells to the labor camps. Solzhenitsyn described this experience, saying:

When you were jammed into a Stolypin compartment¹⁴¹, you expected that here, too, you would encounter only colleagues in misfortune. All your enemies and oppressors remained on *the other* side of the bars, and you certainly did not expect them on *this* side....An emissary of the ugly snout descends...and this little demon unties your bag and rifles your pockets – not tentatively, but treating them like his very own. From that moment, nothing that belongs to you is yours any longer.¹⁴²

Much of the violence committed by the *blatnye* occurred during the robbery process, or during card games. Card games were the *blatnye*’s favorite form of entertainment, and once they ran out of their own possessions to wager, they would wager someone else’s. Shalamov wrote about such an incident: the thief Naumov was losing heavily in a card game, and he turned to the political prisoners in the barracks to find something to wager. He demanded that Shalamov’s companion, Garkunov, hand over his wool sweater, which was “the last package from his wife

¹⁴¹ “Stolypin” cars were railroad cars that transported prisoners.

¹⁴² Solzhenitsyn, 1:501-502.

before he was sent off to Siberia.” Garkunov refused, and the two men began fighting. Naumov stabbed and killed him, and then “tore off his undershirt and pulled the sweater off his head...The game was over.”¹⁴³

To the political prisoners, this theft and violence was constant, senseless, and cruel. Worse still, the GULAG administration tolerated it, and the guards rarely interfered. Gustav Herling recalled an incident in his camp, where a group of *blatnye* overpowered and raped a young woman at night in the middle of the camp, and once she managed to scream for help, “a sleepy voice called from the nearest watch-tower: ‘Come, come, boys, what are you doing? Have you no shame?’” That was all. The gang simply moved her to a more discreet position, and continued their assault.¹⁴⁴

The “Honest Thieves” and the “Bitches”

The thieves’ law absolutely forbade its members to work for the government in any way. This includes performing hard labor in the camp, but also taking a job as a trusty. The *blatnye* community ostracized, and, if possible, punished those among their ranks who became trusties, naming them *suki*, or “bitches.” Those who remained true to the criminal code called themselves the “honest thieves.” Although these trusty jobs were theirs for the taking, as socially friendly elements, and would provide them with certain comfort in the camp, the thieves-in-law insisted on holding to their principles, for, as former thief Mikhail Dyomin put it:

The convicts that (worked in the camp) were called “dummies,” and with good cause. Once a person decided to latch himself on to a warm spot, he involuntarily started playing

¹⁴³ Shalamov, 10.

¹⁴⁴ Gustav Herling, *A World Apart*, trans. Andrzej Ciozkosz (New York: Arbor House, 1986), 28-29.

up to the authorities in every way possible. From there it was just a short step to betraying one's own kind (openly or on the sly) and cooperating actively with the Cheka.¹⁴⁵

There were a few exceptions to the rule. The Criminal Code permitted the *blatnye* to be brigadiers – men or women who oversaw their assigned work brigade. Technically, this was not a trusty position, but it carried certain privileges.¹⁴⁶ Dyomin adds that, in the 1940s, the thieves-in-law amended the Code by saying that, “in cases of extreme need” the thieves could become “team leaders and barbers.”¹⁴⁷

The brigadier supervised other men's work, but did not have to work himself, so this was an acceptable position for the “honest thieves.” The other “honest thieves” simply refused to work. Solzhenitsyn recalled that, at his first camp, the chief appointed him as a brigadier because of his military background. He was in charge of “a group of thieves who just a bit earlier had almost cut the throat of the camp chief.”¹⁴⁸ When guards brought them to work at the clay pit, they simply “lay down in the clay pit in a sheltered spot...and lay sunning themselves.” When Solzhenitsyn's replacement came and tried to order them about, “they chased him, and in a low spot in the clay pit knocked him down and smashed his kidneys with a crowbar.”¹⁴⁹ Thieves in a mixed brigade would adhere to the code by stealing some of the other prisoners' work output – timber, earth, or coal, counted in cubic yards – and pretend it was their own in order to receive

¹⁴⁵ Dyomin, *The Day is Born of Darkness*, 215.

¹⁴⁶ Varese, *Russian Mafia*, 151.

¹⁴⁷ Dyomin, 215.

¹⁴⁸ Solzhenitsyn, 2:177.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 2:177.

full rations, for the GULAG administration created a system in which they fed the prisoners according to how much “cubage” they produced during the day.¹⁵⁰

Theories on the Source of the Criminals’ Power

The *blatnye* wreaked havoc on the political prisoner’s lives in the GULAG. They got away with this behavior because the GULAG authorities, from the upper administration to the regular guards, permitted it. The political prisoners offer a few theories as to how and why this happened. Solzhenitsyn believed that, from the start, the Soviet leaders intended to use the theory of the “socially friendly” and the “socially dangerous” to empower the common criminals and persecute the political prisoners. They put the idea of the “socially friendly” into policy in the early years of the prison camps, and over a short time the boundaries between the political prisoners and criminal evolved, until the criminals became an extension of the guards, or in his words, “the rear ends of the bluecaps.”¹⁵¹ Solzhenitsyn emphasized that this system began as deliberate discrimination, but quickly evolved into a means of using the criminals as an extra level of control over the political prisoners:

It was by no means the least significant of our literary figures¹⁵² who determined that the thieves were our allies in the building of communism. This was set forth in textbooks on Soviet corrective labor policy...in dissertations and scientific essays on camp management, and in the most practical way of all – in the regulations on which the high-ranking camp officials were trained...When this elegant theory came down to earth in the camps, here is what emerged from it: The most inveterate and hardened thieves were

¹⁵⁰ Solzhenitsyn, 2:436-437.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 1:503., “bluecaps” was slang for members of the NKVD/OGPU.

¹⁵² Meaning Lenin.

given unbridled power of the islands of the Archipelago¹⁵³... The thieves became just like an internal camp police, camp storm troopers.”¹⁵⁴

He added that, “in the places where the thieves were not given such power, they were all, on the basis of the same class theory, very much favored.”¹⁵⁵

Solzhenitsyn also argued that the GULAG administration empowered the *blatnye* and turned them into an “internal camp police” as a logical extension of the “socially friendly” dogma, but also out of self-interest:

It was quieter and easier for the chiefs that way: not to tire their arms (with beatings) or their throats, not to get involved in details, and even not to appear in the camp compound. And it was much better for the business of oppression; the thieves carried it out much more brazenly, much more brutally, and without the least fear of responsibility before the law.¹⁵⁶

The guards also acted out of self-interest. When the convoy guards received newly-sentenced prisoners, still in possession of a few elements of their previous life, they would “systematically mix thieves and politicals in each compartment...not through lack of space for them elsewhere and not through haste, but out of greed.” The thieves would then “strip the beavers¹⁵⁷ of everything, and then these possessions migrated into the suitcases of the convoy.”¹⁵⁸ Alexander Dolgun witnessed the same phenomenon. On transit, the guards put him and a few other political prisoners in an *urki*- filled cell, where the *urki*

¹⁵³ Solzhenitsyn, 2:234-235.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 2:126.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 2:436.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 2:436.

¹⁵⁷ Slang for rich prisoner.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 1:507.

...simply knocked the poor fellows down, and while one or two held the victim, others stripped off his clothes and searched his person...Shortly the cell door was unlocked, and a senior officer came in with two or three guards. He shouted, "This is terrible! There has been a terrible mistake!...Get these political prisoners out of here, you fools!"...The guards smirked at this. One political, bolder than the others, said, "What about getting our stuff back, then?" But the officer just kept on...as if he had not heard...As the door was closing on them, the officer stuck his head back into the cell and winked at the *urki*.¹⁵⁹

The camp guards also benefitted from this collaboration with the thieves. One thief related to Alexander Dolgun that "We can get the guards to sell the stuff we liberate from new arrivals, and we split with them, and they buy us food and tobacco in town and make sure we have what we need."¹⁶⁰

Other memoirists agreed with Solzhenitsyn, but believed that GULAG administration used criminals to control the political prisoners, not out of convenience, but out of perceived necessity. Janusz Bardach suggested this in his memoir, saying:

In 1935, criminals accounted for more than 50 percent of the prisoners in the Kolyma labor camps. However, the mass arrests of 1937-1939 radically changed the composition of the camp; political prisoners now made up more than 90 percent of the camp population. In the early 1930s, a shortage of guards forced the camp commanders to use criminals in that capacity, and the precedent remained in place. Criminals now ruled over the political prisoners; they could be counted on to intimidate, harass, and brutalize as severely as the NKVD did.¹⁶¹

Bardach's figures here were incorrect. In 1935, about sixteen percent of the prisoners were political, so eighty-four percent were criminals (this number includes both professional criminals and the non-professional, or "every-day life" criminals). By 1939, only about thirty-five percent

¹⁵⁹ Dolgun, 161.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 148.

¹⁶¹ Bardach, 200-201.

of the prisoners were politicals, nowhere near the 90% that Bardach quoted. However, the population of the GULAG itself rose rapidly during this period. From 1935 to 1939, the political prisoners went from 118,256 to 454,432.¹⁶² At the same time, the official rhetoric about the evils and dangers of the “enemies of the people” intensified. In the years after 1935, the political prisoners became more dangerous and more numerous in the administration’s eyes. To them, it may have felt that politicals were ninety percent of the prison population. The year 1935, according to Solzhenitsyn, also began the decade of the “thieves’ most flagrant debauches and most intense oppression of the politicals.”¹⁶³ It is likely that this occurred because the administration, fearing the rapid influx of political prisoners, permitted or encouraged more extreme behavior from the criminals.

The GULAG administration may have empowered the criminals in order to subdue the political prisoners who were more “dangerous” to the State, but Varlam Shalamov suggested that the guards and the administration simply put up with the criminals because they were afraid of them. “The working man is afraid to complain” about the thieves, he says, “for he sees that the criminals are stronger than the camp authorities.”¹⁶⁴ He continued that “the young peasant who has become a prisoner sees that in this hell only the criminals live comparatively well, that they are important, that the all-powerful camp administrators fear them.”¹⁶⁵ Gustav Herling’s account of his life in camp echoed this view:

No guard would have dared to show himself inside the barracks after dark, even when the horrible moans and cries of political prisoners who were being slowly murdered were

¹⁶² Pohl, 22.

¹⁶³ Solzhenitsyn, 1:506.

¹⁶⁴ Shalamov, 411.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 413.

heard all over camp; he could never be certain that a billhook would not appear from behind one of the barrack corners and split his head open.¹⁶⁶

The *blatnye*'s greatest weapon and most powerful strength was its unity. They would refuse to work together, as a group, and no foreman or camp leader could move them. They would team up to rob and assault the political prisoners. If a political prisoner retaliated, they had each other's backs. For example, when Janusz Bardach accused an *urki* of trying to steal his wallet, the *urki* retaliated by accusing Bardach of the same thing. Then, Bardach recalled, "his buddies jumped me and took the wallet, but no one came to my aid...For the next few days they stole my bread, beat me, spat on me."¹⁶⁷ In his memoir, Alexander Dolgun identified this coherence as the reason for the criminal's power in camp:

The *urki* come to prison ready-equipped, if I can use those words, for survival. They have a code of law that binds them together. They understand each other's way of thinking...They are a crude, hateful, antisocial gang...but they hang together and that makes them strong.¹⁶⁸

The Administration's Perspective

So why did the GULAG administration empower the criminals and allow them to terrorize the political prisoners? Solzhenitsyn and Dyomin suggested that the GULAG administration used the theory of the "socially friendly" as a deliberate tool to subdue the "socially dangerous," out of necessity, or convenience, or both. Shalamov, Herling, and Dolgun focused on the fact that the administration feared the criminals, who owed their power in the camps to the administration's policies and to their own unity, and who had gotten out of the

¹⁶⁶ Herling, 22.

¹⁶⁷ Bardach, 221.

¹⁶⁸ Dolgun, 110.

administration's control. Two memoirs, one by Fyodor Mucholsky,¹⁶⁹ a camp chief in the 1940s, and the other a diary left by Ivan Chistyakov¹⁷⁰, a member of the red army who worked as a camp guard in the late 1930s, provide a new perspective on the relationship between the GULAG administration and the *blatnye*.

Mucholsky's memoir supports the theory that the GULAG administration empowered the criminal classes, using the "socially friendly" rhetoric, because it believed that it was either necessary or convenient to use the criminals to control the political prisoners. Chistyakov's diary and official documents also attest that, in theory, the administration wanted to curb violence toward prisoners and between prisoners. Both testimonies indicate that the prisoners' treatment in the camps was in the hands of the individual camp chiefs and guards, who received little supervision or support from the upper administration. In these circumstances, it was easy for the guards to protect and support the thieves, in return for a share in the stolen goods. It was easy for the guards to look the other way when violence broke out, and avoid getting hurt themselves. It was even easy for the thieves to become so dangerous in the camps that the administration feared to tangle with them. And finally it was easy for the camp chiefs to keep the ever-more treacherous political prisoners in line by handing that responsibility over to the criminals.

Both memoirs confirmed that the upper levels of the GULAG administration put heavy emphasis on the re-educative nature of the camps. When Mucholsky first joined the GULAG

¹⁶⁹ Mucholsky, *Gulag Boss*.

¹⁷⁰ Ivan Chistyakov, *The Day Will Pass Away: The Diary of a Gulag Prison Guard, 1935-1936*, trans. Arch Tait, ed. Irina Shcherbakova (New York: Pegasus Books, 2017).

NKVD, he received a lecture from the deputy director of cadres about the “great and honorable mission” of the GULAG, who explained that:

The Soviet government sets itself the goal of giving each convicted person the opportunity to atone for his guilt to society by letting him do some honest labor for the common good....We send them to special camps we have created, so that they can be reformed through productive labor.¹⁷¹

The deputy does not mention the idea of the “socially friendly” and the “socially dangerous.” However, he warned Mucholsky not to be too friendly with the prisoners, for “above all, these are criminals, and some of them are very smart. They will all insist that they are not guilty. Many will ask you to help them qualify for early release.” Then, he continued his lecture by cautioning Mucholsky to remember that these prisoners “are still Soviet people. And when they have done their time, they get back all their rights as Soviet citizens. Therefore, you can count on their patriotism and their high level of awareness.”¹⁷² This is some conflicting advice: you are here to re-educate the prisoners, do not trust the prisoners, but also you can count on the prisoners. It is possible that he was alluding to two types of prisoners; the “very smart” ones who insist they are not guilty (politicals) and the patriotic “Soviet people” (criminals).

Mucholsky first mentioned the distinction between political prisoners and criminals when he recalled that “a camp-wide directive went to all the bosses, asking them to select some nonpolitical prisoners (that is, criminals)¹⁷³ who were strong and healthy” to be sent to a new unit for a special camp project. He reasoned that,

¹⁷¹ Mucholsky, *Gulag Boss*, 11.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁷³ Mucholsky put this phrase into parenthesis, not me.

The Camp Administration could not risk using a large number of “political prisoners” from the camps for this work. The politicals were not trustworthy, nor were they very healthy, as a rule. And they did not have the experience of surviving the severe conditions of the north that many of the nonpoliticals had.¹⁷⁴

In this incident, the Camp Administration demonstrated that they trusted the criminal prisoners more, and that the criminals lived better than the political prisoners. When his superiors sent Mucholsky to a strict-regime camp, which held mostly political prisoners, he stated that “they warned me to be very careful with them, since many of them were very smart people, including professors, scientists, and other well-known figures in science and culture. All of them were embittered toward soviet power, and at any moment they could initiate a provocation.”¹⁷⁵

Mucholsky, as a camp boss, seemed to have an ambivalent attitude toward both kinds of prisoners. The “hardened criminals” tested and exasperated him by their refusal to work. In the end, he managed to cut a deal with the *blatnye* leader, who, in return, persuaded his men to create a work party and fill the required work norms.¹⁷⁶ The political prisoners also distressed him because they took advantage of the Basmachi prisoners who increased the average output of each work brigade. Mucholsky divided these groups into their own brigades, forcing the political prisoners to work harder. He explained that,

The intelligentsia was especially skillful at using these people for its own interests...But once they understood that they could no longer exploit the strong but semiliterate inhabitants of the unit, they saw that in order to survive, they had to adjust to the new reality...I did what I could to make it possible for them to produce no less than 100 percent of the norm.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Mucholsky, 50.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 65.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 55-57.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 67-69.

At the end of his memoir, though, Mochulsky wrote that he was distressed by the different way that the administration treated political prisoners and criminals in the camps, asking:

Why did the Camp Administration give out-and-out criminals (such as thieves, killers, big-time bribe-takers, and rapists) all kinds of privileges in comparison to the politicals in the camp?...They were given opportunities to work for the Camp Administration, to get easy jobs, and to receive reduced sentences. Why, when these people were actually the more dangerous elements for society? In the presence of the security platoon on the outside, these criminals ran the camp on the inside, by terrorizing, and subordinating the other prisoners to themselves.¹⁷⁸

Perhaps significantly, Mucholsky did not describe any violent incidents between political prisoners and criminals in his memoir, but, in his career as a camp chief, he generally ran new camps, created in the 1940's, that held all political prisoners, all criminals, or all prisoners-of-war. Mucholsky continued to say that, "the Camp Administration knew this was going on, and instead of putting a stop to it, let it serve its own greedy interests."¹⁷⁹ Thus, he believed that the GULAG administration deliberately allowed and encouraged the criminals' activity in the camps. He did not specify what these "greedy interests" were; he could have been referring to the extra level of ease and security over the political prisoners that the criminals provided.

To complicate the issue, official documents make it clear that, in theory, criminal violence and abuse was not acceptable in the camps. A memorandum by A.I. Akulov to Stalin in 1934 described crimes committed by the administration, saying

These cases also demonstrate the administration's failure to take necessary measures to nip in the bud the spread of banditry in the camps....A group of prisoners beat up and robbed prisoners for four months in a row, and no measures were taken against them. As

¹⁷⁸ Mucholsky, 170-171.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 171.

a result, prisoners who become victims of robbery are often left completely vulnerable and defenseless.¹⁸⁰

Another memorandum written by a Lieutenant of State Security in 1939 complained about “the systematic beatings of prisoners by heads of the camp sections, armed guards, and inmates employed in the low-level camp administration” – that is, the “trusties.” The same memorandum noted that “gangsters and criminal elements undermine camp discipline and terrorize the rest of the prisoners. At the same time, the fight against crime and against violators of the camp regimen is very weak.”¹⁸¹ There was, however, a deep disconnect between what the upper-level administration wanted, and what the lower-level administrators actually did. This was because the upper-level orders were often inconvenient or impractical to carry out, and the camp chiefs could ignore them because they received very little direct supervision from their superiors.

Mucholsky frequently described this lack of supervision or even helpful guidance from the higher administrators. When he began his career in the GULAG, he was supposed to be a foreman, but, for lack of employees, the administration made him both foreman and boss in several different camps, which meant that he made all the decisions.¹⁸² Frequently, he made decisions that benefitted the prisoners, like building barracks in an empty campsite instead of devoting all the prisoners’ time to building rail line, and feeding the upper administration “tufta” or fake work output numbers until the barracks were complete.¹⁸³ He used “tufta” several times to help make the prisoners’ lives easier, and the administration only caught him once, because

¹⁸⁰ Khlevniuk, 103, citing GARF, f. R-8131, op. 37, d. 28, ll. 29-32.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 229-233, citing GARF, f. R-9414, op. 4, d. 12, ll. 24-38.

¹⁸² Mucholsky, 45.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 32-35.

someone had informed on him.¹⁸⁴ When dealing with the criminals, Mucholsky was practically helpless. His superiors did not offer advice – in fact, he suspected that they sent him to these difficult criminal-only camps out of spite, because they were jealous about the praise he had received for his successes in his previous camps.¹⁸⁵ Mucholsky ultimately had to collaborate with the uncooperative criminals, because he ran out of options: in their unity, determination, and easy use of violence, the criminals had the upper hand in the camp.

The guards also received little support from their authorities. Chistyakov frequently mentioned the difficulty of such a situation, saying, “All they do is swear at us, punish us: the commissioner, the political advisor, the company commander, the Head of the Third Section... Who is there to advise, support, and explain? Nobody.... That’s what the Cheka call leadership.”¹⁸⁶ And again, “You don’t know what you’re supposed to do, how you’re supposed to do it or why. Sometimes, you find you’ve apparently done the right thing, and then the next time you do exactly the same and you’re told it’s completely wrong.”¹⁸⁷

Chistyakov indicated that he felt trapped in his job and persecuted by the Third Section, the OGPU unit that monitored the guards’ and the prisoners’ behavior. He mentioned the violence between prisoners, but explained that the guards did not try to stop it because they both feared that they themselves will get hurt or receive a reprimand from the Third Section. He

¹⁸⁴ Mucholsky, 70-74.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 53.

¹⁸⁶ Chistyakov, 38.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 37.

described a fight between women who were “beating the former shock worker¹⁸⁸ to death,” and remarked that the guards would not intervene, explaining:

We are not allowed to use firearms within the phalanx...If we waded in there will be a riot...You just get these riots. The devil knows but the Third Section doesn't. They'll come down on us and bang us up whether or not the use of firearms was justified...Well, what the hell. Let the prisoners get on with beating each other up. Why should we get blood on our hands?¹⁸⁹

At another point, he wrote that a prisoner attempted to attack one of the guards with a knife, remarking: “You just have to put up with it, you may be fuming but your job is to re-educate them, after all, and the law doesn't say you can swear at them. Besides, there is no law protecting us. Even if they punch you, you are supposed to show understanding.”¹⁹⁰

Chistyakov demonstrated that the guards knew that they were supposed to avoid bloodshed, but the system in which they worked made it easier for them to “let the prisoners get on with beating each other up” rather than intervene. They felt that the administration did not adequately protect them from the prisoners and prioritized the prisoners' welfare over the soldiers. Chistyakov noted sarcastically that, “living conditions, educational recreation, diet and other matters have come under discussion. Don't worry, no need to be incredulous, they're not worried about us, they're worried about the *zeks*.”¹⁹¹ Moreover, he demonstrated that the harshness of the job, the uncomfortable working conditions, and the all-around brutality sucked the guards in to the system, deadening them to the plight of the prisoners. “I have to admit,”

¹⁸⁸ “Shock workers” were prisoners who overfulfilled their work norms, and as a prize, they received better food and accommodations, and even qualified for early release. The GULAG administration ended this program in the mid-1930s.

¹⁸⁹ Chistyakov, 21.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 173.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 125.

Chistyakov confessed, “I am growing into BAM. Imperceptibly the environment, the way of doing things, the life are sucking me in.”¹⁹²

Conclusion

Lenin laid the foundation for the empowerment of the criminals when he both insisted that the purpose of the camps was re-education, and claimed that the criminal elements were “socially friendly” as opposed to the political prisoners, who were “socially hostile.” For a while, the regime deemed these prisoners so different that they occupied separate camps. After the introduction of the first criminals to the NKVD labor camps in 1926 to the official creation of the GULAG in 1934, the administration fostered the development of a strong, unified *blatnye* society, and empowered it to dominate and distress the political prisoners by offering it the coveted “trusty” jobs and ignoring its violence toward the other prisoners.

It is difficult to determine if the GULAG administration intended this from the start. The political prisoners suggested two main theories: first, that the administration created policies beneficial to the “socially friendly” because they wanted to use the criminals to subdue the political prisoners, out of perceived necessity or simply out of convenience, and second, that the administration empowered the criminals because of Lenin’s “socially friendly” theory, but they quickly escaped their control.

Mucholsky and Chistyakov’s testimonies, though valuable, could support either, or both, theories. Mucholsky clearly states that “these criminals ran the camp on the inside by terrorizing,

¹⁹² Chistyakov, 26.

and subordinating the other prisoners to themselves. Camp Administration knew this was going on, and instead of putting a stop to it, let it serve its own greedy interests.”¹⁹³ This was the only time in his memoir that he specifically addressed this idea, and that way he phrased it suggests that this was not official GULAG policy, but a shameful development that the camp administration decided to put to its advantage, which supports the theory that this was not an intentional policy. Mucholsky, however, was only a low-level camp boss, and, as Chistyakov frequently noted, the lower level administration received little information and support from the upper-level administration. It is possible that the higher-ups pursued this policy of subduing the politicals without disclosing it in full to their subordinates. Nevertheless, these memoirs do verify one fact: by the 1940s, the criminals were slipping out of the administration’s control, and within a decade, it would take steps to subdue them by pitting them against each other in a vicious battle for power.

¹⁹³ Mucholsky, 171.

CHAPTER THREE: THE CRIMINALS AND THE POLITICAL PRISONERS

The professional criminals made a deep impression on the political prisoners. The men and women in the camps experienced life with the criminals differently, but both expressed a range of emotions towards the criminals, from anger and disgust to more positive emotions. The first section of this chapter explores the views of those political prisoners who held the criminals in the most contempt, and the reasons behind their sentiments. The second section of the chapter addresses the female political prisoners' experiences, which differed from their male counterparts because, while the men interacted mostly with the male *blatnye*, the women had to adjust to life among both male and female *blatnye*, which brought its own set of challenges. The final section focuses on a few political prisoners who formed friendships with some members of the criminal class, what they learned about them, and how this affected their perception of the criminals in general.

"The Criminals Are Not Human"

Many of the memoirists regarded the *blatnye* with violent animosity. They frequently used animal metaphors and racially charged language to describe the criminals, and to emphasize, directly and indirectly, their depravity and inhumanity. Solzhenitsyn frequently used such rhetoric. In one example, he vividly described a typical prisoner's first contact with the criminals, which often took place during transit. He set the scene in a crowded train car; the weary political prisoners shuffle on board and find places to sit in the lower bunks when...

Suddenly you lift your eyes...and up there you see three or four – oh, no, not faces! They aren't monkey muzzles either, because monkeys' muzzles are much, much decenter and

more thoughtful! ... You see cruel, loathsome snouts up there, wearing expressions of greed and mockery. Each one of them looks like a spider gloating over a fly.¹⁹⁴

Solzhenitsyn later added: “They are not people. This has become clear to you in one moment. The only thing to be done with them is to *beat* them, to beat them without wasting any time or flapping your tongue.”¹⁹⁵ Eugenia Ginzburg’s description of the *blatnye* resembled Solzhenitsyn’s; in her first meeting with the female criminals, she recalled that,

When the mongrel horde surged down upon us, with their tattooed, half-naked bodies and grimacing, apelike faces, my first thought was that we had been abandoned to the mercy of a crowd of raving lunatics.... The fetid air reverberated to their shrieks, their fantastic obscenities, their caterwauling and peals of laughter.¹⁹⁶

Ginzburg wrote that “the professional criminals are beyond the bounds of humanity,”¹⁹⁷ and that “to me they were as alien and incomprehensible as, say, the crocodiles of the Nile.”¹⁹⁸ Shalamov echoed this sentiment, saying simply: “The criminals are not human.”¹⁹⁹

The political prisoners had many reasons to dislike the criminals. At the most basic level, they were angry that the *blatnye* had easy access to life-saving jobs and goods, and that they frequently robbed and assaulted their less privileged comrades. For many prisoners, this was enough to create a lasting resentment. Gustav Herling is an example of such a prisoner. He, too, used the “subhuman” rhetoric in his memoir, describing one *blatnye* as “a gorilla with a flat Mongolian face”²⁰⁰ and later, said that the *blatnye* were “never... disturbed by the slightest

¹⁹⁴ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 1:501.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 1:502.

¹⁹⁶ Evgeniia Ginzburg, *Journey into the whirlwind* (San Diego: Harcourt Inc, 1995), 253-54.

¹⁹⁷ Evgeniia Ginzburg, *Within the whirlwind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 12.

¹⁹⁸ Ginzberg, *Within the Whirlwind*, 55.

¹⁹⁹ Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, 411.

²⁰⁰ Herling, *A World Apart*, 17.

symptoms of human feeling.”²⁰¹ When he discussed the criminals in his memoir, he focused on their many privileges in the camp and their violence toward the political prisoners. He remarked that “the *urka* is an institution in the labor camp, the most important person after the commander of the guard,” and “the measure of his importance in the labour camp is not only the amount of years which he has spent wandering from one camp to another, and the seriousness of his offense, but... frequently even the murder of ‘byelorutchki’, as political prisoners are called.”²⁰²

In their memoirs, various political prisoners demonstrated that they had motives other than fear and resentment for hating the criminals. Solzhenitsyn, and likely many others, suffered from a sense of betrayal. They expected that the prison guards, interrogators, and camp chiefs would cause them much grief, for the prisoners “never confused them with human beings, but have seen them merely as an insolent branch of the service.”²⁰³ The recently-arrested political prisoners, however, expected the fellow prisoners to be on their side. Solzhenitsyn described the experience:

When you were jammed into a Stolypin compartment,²⁰⁴ you expected that here, too, you would encounter only colleagues in misfortune. All your enemies and oppressors remained on *the other* side of the bars, and you certainly did not expect to find them on *this* side ... The new prisoner wanted to consider himself a political – in other words, on the side of the people – while the state was against the people. At that point he was unexpectedly assaulted from behind and both sides by quick-fingered devils of some kind, and all the categories go mixed up, and clarity shattered into fragments.²⁰⁵

²⁰¹ Herling, 31.

²⁰² Ibid, 11.

²⁰³ Solzhenitsyn, 1:501.

²⁰⁴ A train car that transports prisoners from prison to the labor camps.

²⁰⁵ Sozhenitsyn, 1: 501, 503-504.

The political prisoners, who underwent trials and tortures in their prison cells and then received lengthy sentences for crimes they did not commit, found the presence of enemies behind the bars a great and unexpected blow. Many memoirists wrote with great detail about their first encounters with the *blatnye* because it was such a traumatic event to find “oppressors on this side of the bars.”

Some political prisoners focused on the physical and mental injuries inflicted by the criminals, while others, like Varlam Shalamov, found their moral influence the most disturbing. The criminals rejected basic morals and energetically followed an alternative code of behavior, which Solzhenitsyn summed up in three principles:

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.)²⁰⁶

Shalamov argued that “hundreds of thousands of people who have been in the camps are permanently seduced by the ideology of these criminals and have ceased to be people,”²⁰⁷ for the political prisoners who survived the camps learned that:

It is possible to commit base acts – and live.
It is possible to lie – and live.
It is possible to give a promise and not fulfill that promise – and live...
In a camp a human being learns sloth, deception, and viciousness.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Solzhenitsyn, 2:428. The format of “[beat]” is true to the cited text. The translator noted that Solzhenitsyn added the brackets because the original phrase is “If they're not fucking you...”.

²⁰⁷ Shalamov, 411.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 412.

He argued that this ideology captivated the non-criminals in two different ways. The peasants, or other petty criminals in the camps, gravitated toward this lifestyle because they see that “in this hell only the criminals live comparatively well.” They reasoned that the criminals have found the key to camp life and “only by imitating them will [the peasant] tread the path that will save his life.”²⁰⁹

The intellectual convict, on the other hand, “is crushed by the camp. Everything he values is ground into the dust.” The intellectual loses his morals and values, and as a result, “he can persuade himself of anything, attach himself to either side in a quarrel.” Terrified, and broken in spirit, the intellectual also looks to the criminal world for salvation. He “sees in the criminal world ‘teachers of life’, fighters for the ‘people’s rights’.”²¹⁰ Shalamov emphasized that this transformation is permanent, and the criminal ideology spreads even to the free-workers who come to the far north – “No one who has worked in the camps ever returns to the mainland. He would be worthless there, for he has grown accustomed to a ‘rich’, carefree life.”²¹¹ Although the brutality of the camp atmosphere and the demoralization of imprisonment contributed to the phenomenon, Shalamov was adamant that “the criminal world, the habitual criminals whose tastes and habits are reflected in the total life-pattern of Kolyma²¹², are mainly responsible for this corruption of the human soul.”²¹³

²⁰⁹ Shalamov, 413.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 413.

²¹¹ Ibid, 414.

²¹² Kolyma was one of the most deadly and most notorious branches of the GULAG.

²¹³ Shalamov, 414.

The Women's Experiences

The female political prisoners had a slightly different experience with the *blatnye* than their male counterparts, because the women were vulnerable to violence from all the criminals, while, with the rare exceptions, the men only experienced exploitation and violence at the hands of other men. In respect to the male members of the *blatnye*, sexual violence was the female prisoners' greatest concern. The male political prisoners, however, also had reason to fear sexual violence. In view of the taboo connected to homosexuality, the male memoirists rarely spoke about it. Most of them also kept silence on the topic of homosexual rape, although there are enough accounts to confirm that it did happen in the camps.²¹⁴ Shalamov claimed that "almost all the professional criminals were homosexuals. When no women were at hand, they seduced and infected other men – most often by threatening them with a knife, less frequently in exchange for 'rags' (clothing) or bread."²¹⁵ Janusch Bardach confirmed this when he described, in his memoir, a scene in the bathhouse in which an older *blatnye* openly raped a younger male prisoner²¹⁶ while the others looked on, some excitedly watching and others unwilling or unable to help. Bardach reflected here that, "I could be forced to lie on a bench in this or in another bathhouse and be repeatedly raped not by my oppressors – whom I considered to be the NKVD guards – but by my fellow prisoners. For the first time I realized how vulnerable I was."²¹⁷

Because of the reluctance to discuss the subject, one cannot say for certain that the women suffered from sexual violence more than the men, but they discussed the topic more

²¹⁴ Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 312.

²¹⁵ Shalamov, 422.

²¹⁶ Bardach did not specify if the younger prisoner was a criminal or a political prisoner.

²¹⁷ Bardach and Gleeson, 125.

openly. Rape was a common incident in the camps, and, according to the memoirs, its perpetrators were most frequently members of the *blatnye*, simply because they outnumbered the regular camp personnel – the bosses and the guards. Camp regulations forbade “intimacy” between camp personnel and prisoners, and between the prisoners themselves. Memoirists like Ginzberg and Solzhenitsyn described consensual sexual relationships between political prisoners which, in some cases, blossomed into life-long romances, but these relationships felt the brunt of camp regulations - if the camp guards caught two political prisoners “cohabiting” as they called it, they separated them and sent the offenders to the punishment block.²¹⁸ On the other hand, the camp chiefs, guards, and criminals, for whom camp regulations rarely applied, often got away with sexual relationships and sexual violence. The camps system even developed its own slang for gang rape – “streetcar”²¹⁹ and “the Kolyma tram.”²²⁰

While rape was a real concern for the female prisoners, so was sexual exploitation, which was much more common. Women very often received propositions from camp chiefs, guards, and the trusties, who were usually members of the *blatnye*, in exchange for a little food, or some warmer clothes, or a better job in camp.²²¹ Gustav Herling recalled the story of a former opera singer who arrived in his camp and who “was desired by Vanya, the short *urka* in charge of her brigade.” She rejected his advances, and so he assigned her to very heavy work; naturally, she could not fill the norms, and so, according to the camps’ system of feeding the prisoners in proportion to the work they accomplished, she received very little food. She fell sick, “but the

²¹⁸ Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*. Solzhenitsyn, 2:238-239.

²¹⁹ Solzhenitsyn, 2:234.

²²⁰ Anne Applebaum, *Gulag Voices: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 46.

²²¹ *Ibid*, *Gulag : A History*, 310.

medical orderly was a friend of Vanya's and would not free her from work." After two weeks of this treatment, she chose to prioritize her survival, and agreed to Vanya's demands.²²² This was a very common type of exploitation, in which the criminals in trusty positions used their power to drive a women to choose between prostitution and death.

The female political prisoners lived and worked in close proximity to the female members of the *blatnye*, which created a different set a challenges. The female *blatnye* were usually thieves or prostitutes, and they often entered the criminal life through the influence of their male family members who were thieves themselves. Shalamov described one such woman he had met in camp; Nastya Arxarova, "a typist from the Kurgansk Oblast," whose older brother was a well-known burglar in the area. Nastya became involved with her brother's affairs and hid stolen merchandise for him, for which she spent three months in jail. This sentence "angered and hardened her, and she became part of the criminal world."²²³

The female thieves commanded greater respect from their male counterparts than the prostitutes, but, in general, women "by no means enjoyed equal rights with the men of the criminal world."²²⁴ The men did not permit them to participate in the *vory-v-zakone's* courts of law, and they had special rules to follow in the criminal's code of conduct. Among these was "the time-honored tradition [which] permits the leader of the gang to select the best prostitute (among the female *blatnye*) as his temporary wife." If the leader dies or is arrested, "she will be

²²² Herling, 135-136.

²²³ Shalamov, 425.

²²⁴ Ibid, 419.

told who her new owner is to be – the master of her life and her death, her fate, her money, her actions, her body.”²²⁵ If the woman resisted, the *blatnye* retaliated with speed and violence.

In Nastya Arxarova’s case, her brother’s status among the criminal world protected her for a while, but when she left their hometown, “the leader of the local mob in the first town she came to made her his wife.” After he was arrested, “Nastya’s next owner exercised his rights to her.” She tried to resist, but “she was threatened with a knife, and her resistance ceased,” and the cycle continued. Nastya often came to the camp hospital, carrying out commissions for the *blatnye*, which is likely where Shalamov met her. He wrote that “she cried a lot – either because it was in her nature or because her own fate, the tragic fate of a twenty-year-old girl, terrified her.”²²⁶

While there may have been many female *blatnye* in the GULAG who mourned their fate like Nastya, the political prisoners did not see this side of them. They saw women who seemed wild and depraved, and who frequently intimidated, harassed, and robbed them. Like their male counterparts, the female *blatnye* also had access to the easiest jobs, and received lenient treatment from the camp authorities, so their actions toward the political prisoners largely went unpunished. Maria Norciszek recalled that

These women were so terrible, that even the guards yielded to them. Once there was such an incident that two of them played cards to determine who would gouge out the other’s eyes and at the end of the game straight away, without any scruples, carried it through. They stole everything they could; I didn’t take off my boots for six weeks so they couldn’t steal them.²²⁷

²²⁵ Shalamov, 419-420.

²²⁶ Ibid, 426.

²²⁷ Jehanne Gheith and Katherine Jolluck, *Gulag Voices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 209.

The female memoirists largely focused on the trials of living with individuals who constantly shocked and disgusted them. They described the female *blatnye* in terms such as “shamelessly degenerate,”²²⁸ “barely human,”²²⁹ “appalling creatures, the dregs of the criminal world: murderers, sadists, and experts at every kind of sexual perversion.”²³⁰ To demonstrate the difficulty of life with the criminals, Maria Norciszek reported this lurid detail:

It was not possible to go to the toilet alone, only in fives. Those women were infected with various venereal diseases and during baths smeared us with their infected secretions. Their exploits were generally beyond description. The camp authorities looked on all of this indifferently.²³¹

She concluded that “those women...in the most shameless way made our lives disgusting and hopeless.”²³² Ginzberg echoed this sentiment:

Never should I be able to put up living among common criminals....At times I even started to reproach myself. I needed to try more often to remember just what had reduced them to such degradation....What was uppermost was a feeling of anguish – not for them, but for myself – that by some devilish conjuration I was condemned to a form of torture more fearful than starvation or disease, to the torture of life among subhuman creatures.²³³

The memoirists also discussed lesbian relationships among the prisoners; it was not as restricted a subject as homosexuality, but enough so there are very few mentions of relationships between female political prisoners.²³⁴ Rather, many memoirists focused on voluntary relationships among the female *blatnye*, which, to many, was just another sign of their depravity.

²²⁸ Gheith and Jolluck, 209

²²⁹ Vilensky, *Till My Tale is Told: Women's Memoirs of the Gulag*, 267.

²³⁰ Ginzberg, *Into the Whirlwind*, 253.

²³¹ Gheith and Jolluck, 209.

²³² *Ibid*, 208.

²³³ Ginzberg, *Within the Whirlwind*, 55-56.

²³⁴ Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 313.

They also described episodes of female sexual violence toward the political prisoners. Maria Norcizek described how, in all-female prison cells, the female criminals “started to have shameless orgies only to spoil the young girls.”²³⁵ Fyodor Mochulsky, a former camp boss, mentioned that he had met a young girl in his camp who told him that, after her arrest, the guards put her in a woman’s cell where, at night, several women held her down and violated her with “a little bag filled tightly with buckwheat groats in the shape of a male member” while “the other women nearby were afraid to get involved and did not react to what was going on.”²³⁶

Overall, the women who spoke most vehemently about the criminals feared and detested them for the same reasons as the male political prisoners. They certainly felt betrayed by the presence of enemies behind bars, they were angry at the frequent theft, and feared violence at the hands of both the male and female members of the *blatnye*. While male memoirists focused on the criminals’ violence and immorality, the female memoirists placed greater emphasis on the mental and emotional difficulty of living next to and under the control of such companions.

Under the Criminals’ Protection

Not all the prisoners shunned the *blatnye*. A number of political prisoners attempted to join their ranks, or found protection from individual members of the *blatnye* against the other criminals. The camp slang for non-criminals who fell in with the *blatnye* was “half-breeds”²³⁷ or “semicolored”.²³⁸ This was a survival tactic, but some political prisoners saw this as a sign of

²³⁵ Gheith and Jolluck, 208.

²³⁶ Mucholsky, *Gulag Boss*, 148-49.

²³⁷ Solzhenitsyn, 2:190.

²³⁸ Dolgun, *An American in the Gulag*, 156.

moral degeneration among their fellow prisoners. Shalamov demonstrated such an attitude when he told the story of a humiliating meeting between two former cell mates, Andreev and Captain Schneider. Captain Schneider was a former member of the Comintern, “an expert on Goethe and an educated Marxist theoretician” with whom Andreev used to have “intense conversations...during the long prison nights.” When Andreev saw his old friend again in the labor camps, he was overjoyed, but Schnieder’s dull blue eyes showed no recognition of Andreev.” Captain Schneider had joined “a throng of sycophants” around the *blatnye* leader Senechka, who were “eager to perform any service in exchange for a piece of bread or a bowl of soup.” Shalamov emphasized how utterly degrading he saw such a role when he described this exchange between Captain Schneider and the *blatnye* Senechka:

‘Ah, captain,’ came Senechka’s tenor voice with a languid tone. ‘I can’t fall asleep without you...’

‘Right away, I’m coming,’ Schneider said hurriedly.

He climbed up on the shelf, folded back the edge of the blanket, sat down, and put his hand under the blanket to scratch Senechka’s heels.²³⁹

Shalamov’s portrait of the transformed Schneider showed his deep disapproval of the political prisoners who choose to join the *blatnye*, especially those who took humiliating roles. He ascribed it to cowardice, declaring: “A blow can transform an intellectual into the obedient servant of a petty crook.”²⁴⁰

Subservience was not the only way to receive favors or protection from the *blatnye*. The criminals widely sought out political prisoners who could sing or tell stories for their

²³⁹ Shalamov, 160-161.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 413.

entertainment. This was a more acceptable role among political prisoners, because it placed the entertainer and the criminal audience on a more equal footing. Shalamov, however, maintained that this was self-delusion on the political's part; he accused the storyteller, who believed that he was "enlightening" the criminals, that he just "could not bring himself to admit that he would simply be fed, receive an extra bowl of soup – not for carrying out the slop pail but for a different, a more noble labor. But was it so noble? After all it was more like scratching a thief's dirty heels than enlightenment."²⁴¹

Other political prisoners did not see it this way. In their memoirs, both Alexander Dolgun and Janusz Bardach recalled telling stories to the *blatnye*, in an open manner which suggests that they felt no shame at being entertainers.²⁴² Dolgun and Bardach are unique among the political prisoners because they managed to establish strong, positive relationships with members of the *blatnye* while in the GULAG. They earned these individuals' respect and protection, both from other *blatnye* and from the administrators, and as a result, these memoirists viewed the criminals with a much friendlier, more sympathetic eye.

Alexander Dolgun and Janusz Bardach

Alexander Dolgun was born to American parents working in Moscow, and had worked at the American Embassy prior to his arrest. In the prison cells, Dolgun had a fortuitous encounter with a political prisoner who had already been in the camps, who warned him about the *blatnye*. When he first encountered the criminals in a transit camp, he was mentally prepared to take action. When two thieves tried to steal his pants, which were in rather good condition, Dolgun

²⁴¹ Shalamov, 91.

²⁴² Bardach and Gleeson, 105-106., Dolgun, 139-161.

responded by summoning all his strength – he had very little after months of torture – and punched one of them in the face. The two *blatnye* prepared to respond in kind, but they stopped at the command of their chief, called Valentin Intelligent, who cried, “Off!...Lay off, now. This man is a *dukharik!*” Dolgun explained that “*Dukh* is the word for ‘soul’ but it means pretty much the same, in this context, as the English word ‘guts’.”²⁴³

Dolgun referred to Valentine as a *pakhan*, which was “underworld slang for ‘the chief.’” Dolgun explained that “in rank and authority, this guy has the status of a robber king...To meet such a distinguished, high class *urka* is a very rare event.” After Valentin ascertained that Dolgun could tell stories, he placed him under his protection. He ordered his men to bring Dolgun food, and give him a place to sleep so that he could regain his strength. While he remained in the transit camp, Dolgun stayed with Valentine’s men, telling stories lifted from plots from American films in return for extra rations, provided to Valentine by one of the “trusties” in charge of distributing food.

Dolgun demonstrated that he did not like the majority of the *blatnye* with whom he spent time in the transit camps. He described them as “*shobla yobla*, the lowest of the *urki*, or criminal class. They were very nasty-looking guys.” Later, he remarked that they were “surly, treacherous thugs...illiterate and subhuman.”²⁴⁴ When the guards transferred him, he used Valentine’s advice to befriend the *blatnye* in his next cell by pretending to be one of them, but his opinion of these *urki* remained the same: he wrote, “I wondered how long I could keep up the deception. I

²⁴³ Dolgun, 139-140.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 139, 142-143.

certainly was in no way a brother to these disgusting hoodlums.”²⁴⁵ Dolgun, however, liked and admired Valentine Intelligent, who “stood out among them like a diamond.” Valentine was thirty-eight years old, over six feet tall and broad-shouldered, with “immensely keen hearing and sharp eyes.” He was a safe-cracker which “put him in the top of his professional class,” and he ruled the cell “like a feudal duke.” The other *blatnye* in the cell had “absolute respect” for his authority; for example, when Dolgun was ready to begin his story telling, Valentine informed his “deputy” that he wanted silence. The deputy “jumped up on the top bunk and whistled sharply through two fingers. The chatter in the cell died down quickly. The deputy called out, ‘The *pakhan* is speaking.’”²⁴⁶

Dolgun wrote that Valentine “was a civilized and intelligent criminal;” he described him as “a subtle and fascinating talker, an exact and relevant advisor, and a loyal friend.” Valentine had confided to Dolgun that parents had both been professors and Party members, who “got caught up in some plot or other,” and whom the government shot for treason, when he was about eight or ten years old. After his parents’ arrest, the government agents placed Valentine in an orphanage, which he quickly escaped. Alone on the streets, he eventually joined the criminal gangs. Valentine claimed that, counting the orphanage, he had spent almost twenty years in prison. When Dolgun replied, “But isn’t that a terrible life?” Valentine responded:

I miss my women. And wine. I miss wine a great deal. But you can see that I live very well in prison. It never lasts very long. And when I get out there is no way that I can have the women and the wine and the good suits unless I live my life with the *urki*... Can you imagine me working in an office?... That’s the real slave labor.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Dolgun, 160.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 140-147.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 152.

Valentine was true to his word when he said that prison “never lasts long” for him. Before the administration was able to ship him away from mainland transit camp to some remote labor camp, he successfully engineered an escape with two of his closest *blatnye* companions.²⁴⁸

Dolgun spent little time with the *blatnye* after this episode in the transit camps – he found other non-*blatnye* friends and protectors during his time in the GULAG.

Compared to Dolgun, Janusz Bardach developed a much stronger relationship with the *blatnye*, because he liked and befriended several individuals from the criminal class, and spent much more time with them in the camps than Dolgun did. Bardach was a Polish Jew, drafted into the Red Army during the Second World War, and sentenced to ten years in camp for “wartime treason”. Bardach did not receive a sentence under Article 58, and so, technically, he was not a political prisoner.²⁴⁹ Nevertheless, he identified with the political prisoners,²⁵⁰ the administration saw him as “politically unreliable,”²⁵¹ and the *blatnye* perceived him as a political prisoner as well.²⁵²

Bardach’s first encounter with the *blatnye* was unusual because it was fairly amicable. It occurred on a prison train carrying military prisoners and about twenty thieves. Bardach struck up a conversation with the thieves because “they were more congenial than the military prisoners, and [he] began to spend most of the days with them.” He recalled that “they wanted to hear in great detail about my life in Poland; in turn, they told me about the different labor

²⁴⁸ Dolgun, 156.

²⁴⁹ Bardach and Gleeson, 167.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 237.

²⁵¹ Ibid, 246.

²⁵² Ibid, 211; Bardach wrote that his work partner, a pickpocket, “loved to mock and insult the politicals in the brigade, and he considered me one of them because of my friendship with Vadim (a political).”

camps.”²⁵³ Bardach had a more acrimonious encounter later when he accused a group of thieves of cheating in a game of blackjack. He took a swing at the leader and refused to surrender his boots and pants, which he had lost in the game. The *blatnye* easily overpowered him and took their winnings, but later in the day, the *pakhan* of the group, a bank robber named Pockmarked, pulled him aside and, referring to the card game incident, said: “Those young thugs worked you over pretty well... You looked like a sissy sitting in your underwear, but you took it like a man... You’re hard inside – I like that.”²⁵⁴

Pockmarked then pressed him for details about “the life of capitalists” and Bardach obliged, embellishing his stories and capturing the attention of all the *blatnye* in the cell. In return, Bardach was “well rewarded with food” and when they parted ways, Pockmarked assured him that “if you do get into trouble, use my name. The criminals know who I am, and it might help you.” Bardach recalled that “I felt confident and secure, feelings I’d thought were gone forever. Pockmarked’s name was a ticket to security in the *urka* world, and my talent as a storyteller was as valuable as any tool or weapon.”²⁵⁵

Shortly afterward, the authorities sent Bardach to a transit camp where he became an orderly in the hospital. There, he made friends with one of his patients, a young thief named Jora, who had come to the hospital after a brutal beating by one of his fellow prisoners. Bardach described Jora, saying:

²⁵³ Bardach and Gleeson, 105-106.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 148-151.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 151-154.

He looked to me like a nice Jewish boy from a well-to-do Moscow family. With his guitar, red jacket, and ruffled shirt, he made the impression that he was on vacation, not in prison...Underneath his cool, controlled behavior, I could tell Jora was scared.²⁵⁶

Jora explained that he used to run a small suitcase-stealing ring that operated at the railroad stations in Moscow. Another group of thieves led by a man named Arcady, however, also began the same operation in his territory. Jora explained, “At first I tried to make peace with Arcady and his people, but they didn’t want to share anything. They were older and more experienced. Fights broke out, and we landed in Butyrki prison.”²⁵⁷ The turf war continued in the transit camp; Arcady’s gang beat up Jora severely, and after he recovered, Jora retaliated by decapitating Arcady’s right-hand man with an ax. At that point, the authorities scheduled Jora and Bardach to ship out from their transit camp to Kolyma. As the prisoners were waiting to board, Arcady’s men struck back and stabbed both Jora and Bardach in the backs.

Jora’s wounds were the more severe of the two, so once Bardach boarded the ship, he went to get Jora some medical help, assisted by a *blatnye* leader named Igor, who knew Jora well. After this, Igor and his men welcomed Bardach into their group as “Jora’s Polish friend.”²⁵⁸ During the long boat ride, Bardach came to know Igor’s men quite well. He found that they were fascinated by his descriptions of the geography around Kolyma, by the stories he told, and by his information about life in Poland. He wrote that, “I was surprised by their genuine interest and by the sudden absence of arrogance, vulgarity, and bravado.” Bardach became particularly close to

²⁵⁶ Bardach and Gleeson, 178.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 178.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 186.

one of Igor's men, "a tall blond youth with a sweet face and engaging smile," named Pieta. He wrote that:

I had spotted Pieta the first day I joined Igor's group. His affiliation with the underworld was evident in his tattoos, vocabulary, and behavior. But the civility of his expressions and gestures, his dreamy eyes and tears, suggested something soft and cultured in him.²⁵⁹

Pieta was an orphan. He explained that, "I never knew my parents...I grew up with other kids on the beaches in the Crimea and in Odessa. Some older kids took care of me. They taught me to steal and beg."

Shalamov wrote that the criminals had a "cult of the mother:" she "the one woman whose honor is not only protected from any attacks but who is even put on a high pedestal." He argued that their demeaning attitude toward women, and especially women among their ranks, negated this professed respect for motherhood, claiming that "the mother cult is a peculiar smokescreen used to conceal the hideous criminal world...No criminal has ever sent so much as a kopeck to his mother or made any attempt to help her on his own."²⁶⁰ Pieta, however, had a true attachment to the idea of motherhood. He confided to Bardach that,

I wish I had a mother somewhere, someplace, to write letters to and maybe see sometimes. I try to remember her, but my earliest memory is of lying on the beach in the sun...I don't really care about girls. I've had plenty of them. But I dream about my mother.²⁶¹

Bardach felt a special connection to Pieta, writing that, "The fact that he confided in me made me want to be his friend, something that didn't happen every day."

²⁵⁹ Bardach and Gleeson, 189-190.

²⁶⁰ Shalamov, 427-429.

²⁶¹ Bardach and Gleeson, 190.

Bardach never completely fit in with the *blatnye*, as an outsider, and a foreigner at that.

He wrote:

I felt out of place hanging around with criminals. Their only conversations were about crimes they had committed in the past, crimes they intended to commit in the future, women, booze, and food. But I was pleased that they had accepted me and let me stay with them during the journey. They liked having a foreigner among them. In spite of their arrogance and self-centeredness, they craved to know more about the outside world.²⁶²

Bardach's relationship with the criminals wasn't always good – he described one incident in which a couple of thieves accused him of stealing from them, and “for the next few days they stole my bread, beat me, spat on me.”²⁶³ In general, though, Bardach “came to feel very comfortable with the *urkas*,” more so than with the other political prisoners. He explained that “I never tried to be like them, but I understood them and shared my life and knowledge with them.”²⁶⁴

Bardach and Dolgun's unique insight into the lives of the *blatnye* helps humanize these professional criminals, to an extent. They could be loyal friends to those whom they liked. They loved stories and were very inquisitive about the world outside of Russia. Of the few who revealed aspects about their past, Valentine Intelligent, Peita, and someone that Bardach simply described as “a pimple-faced boy,”²⁶⁵ were all orphans, and there were likely many more *blatnye* with this background. Many children in Soviet Russia had, as Solzhenitsyn put it, “been orphaned by the Civil War, by its famine, by social disorganization, the execution of their parents, or the death of the latter at the front.”²⁶⁶ The government tried to collect them and place

²⁶² Bardach and Gleeson, 190.

²⁶³ Ibid, 221.

²⁶⁴ Ibid, 237.

²⁶⁵ Ibid, 188.

²⁶⁶ Solzhenitsyn, 2:447.

them in orphanages and colonies for juveniles. Applebaum noted that these facilities were “vastly overcrowded, dirty, understaffed, and often lethal.” Many children, like Valentine, ran away, and once on the streets, “they fell very quickly in the criminal netherworld.”²⁶⁷ The criminal life gave them a way to survive and its brotherhood gave them family.

While most political prisoners referred to the criminals as one large, homogenous group, Bardach and Dolgun’s testimony highlighted that there were many smaller sub-groups within the criminal fraternity, each with their own leader, or *pakhan*, and that there was a wide variety of individuals within these groups. They described the strict hierarchy between the group leader and the *shobla yobla*, as Dolgun called them. The *pakhan* had a great deal of authority over his men, and it is possible that the different groups were more or less violent toward the other prisoners depending on the personality of their leader. Bardach described an incident regarding the leader Igor on the ship to Kolyma that supports this idea. He wrote that there were both men and women on the ship, in different cells. One night, some *blatnye* that he had never seen before came and had an agitated discussion with Igor; they were planning to break through a weak wall to get to the women, but Igor refused to participate. As Bardach and the other *blatnye* in Igor’s cell watched a brutal mass rape unfold, Igor remarked: “Those aren’t men, they’re animals. Violent brutes. My men here, we’re criminals, but we aren’t killers. I’ve never raped a woman. Never raised a fist at a woman.”²⁶⁸ Although, to the political prisoners, the criminals seemed universally violent and depraved, this shows that some rejected the extreme violence and denounced it in their peers.

²⁶⁷ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 325-327.

²⁶⁸ Bardach and Gleeson, 192.

“Fear and Haughtiness”

Despite the diversity of criminals and political prisoners in the camps, Bardach and Dolgun were the only political prisoners mentioned in the memoirs that established mutually beneficial relationships with members of the *blatnye*. The memoirs show that there were some political prisoners, other than Bardach and Dolgun, who befriended a few individuals from the criminal class, but, unlike the former, they retained a bad impression of the criminals as a whole. For example, Jehanne Gheith, interviewing GULAG survivor Giuli Tsvirko, noted that “when Tsvirko talks about individual criminals, she is sympathetic to them, but when she refers to them as a group, she is antagonistic.” Tsvirko spoke harshly about the criminals in her interview, but also recalled that she had given a *blatnye* girl a piece of soap, because, she explained, “this girl REALLY needed to wash.” Soap was very difficult to obtain in the GULAG, so this was a very generous gift.²⁶⁹

Eugenia Ginzburg also reflected this attitude about the criminals. She spoke vehemently against the criminals in her memoirs, but she also related two positive incidents concerning them. She wrote that when she was cleaning a guest house in the camp, alongside a group of female *blatnye*, one of them, “a kindly woman called Elvirka” gave Ginzburg her own galoshes because the mop water would have ruined Ginzburg’s thin shoes. Ginzburg described her *blatnye* cleaning companions as “peaceable and even friendly,” for they took pity on her and showed her tricks to finish her work quickly.²⁷⁰ Ginzburg also mentioned that, during a long forced march between camps in the cold of winter, her escort, a professional criminal, took pity on her and her

²⁶⁹ Gheith and Jolluck, 96-97.

²⁷⁰ Ginzburg, *Into the Whirlwind*, 374-375.

flimsy shoes and acquired a sturdy pair of boots for her, which undoubtedly saved her feet from frost burn.²⁷¹ The negative incidents with the criminals, however, far outnumbered the positive ones in her memoirs. Many of the political prisoners - Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov, and Herling, to name a few - recorded only negative experiences with the criminals. They were unwilling or unable to forge a friendship with any of them.

Bardach argued that the political prisoners failed in this respect because “most of the politicals were afraid of the *urkas* or looked down on them. The *urkas* smelled their fear and despised their haughtiness.”²⁷² Bardach addressed two key elements in the criminal/political relationship. Perhaps, if more prisoners overcame their fear and stood up to the *blatnye*, like Bardach and Dolgun, they would have had greater success in their interactions with the criminals. This, however, was very difficult for the newly-incarcerated prisoners. Solzhenitsyn explained that:

To strike out boldly, a person has to feel that his rear is defended, that he has support on both his flanks, that there is solid earth beneath his feet. All these conditions were absent for the Article 58's. Having passed through the meat grinder of political interrogation, the human being was physically crushed in body....His soul was crushed too...Gun-shy now and for a good long time to come of any and every kind of collaboration or unification, the pseudo politicals were not prepared to unite even against the thieves.²⁷³

“Haughtiness” was Bardach’s second charge. It is possible that there was a class element involved in the tension between the politicals and the criminals. Many of the political prisoners, and especially those who later wrote memoirs, were intellectuals, party members, and

²⁷¹ Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, 96-98.

²⁷² Bardach and Gleeson, 237.

²⁷³ Solzhenitsyn, 1:504.

professionals of some sort; though officially in a “classless” society, they were socially and financially middle class, while the *blatnye*, as “common criminals,” represented the lowest class of Soviet society. The dehumanizing language that the political prisoners used, as well as their descriptions of the *blatnye* which heavily emphasized their tattoos, vulgar slang, and frequent use of profanities, give a sense that these memoirists saw the criminals as beneath them, intellectually, morally, and socially. Even Alexander Dolgun demonstrated this attitude; he disliked all the other criminals except Valentine Intelligent, because he was different than the others – in Dolgun’s own words, “civilized and intelligent.”²⁷⁴ This “haughtiness” may have both prevented political prisoners from even attempting to befriend the criminals, and further alienate the criminals from the “haughty” political prisoners.

Conclusion

The political prisoners demonstrated a wide range of attitudes toward the criminals. Some completely denied their humanity, their attitudes informed by the sentiments of fear, resentment, moral outrage, and possibly class prejudice. The women in the camps were especially vulnerable to abuse because they had to contend with both male and female *blatnye*, and so, aside from a few isolated incidents, their opinion of the criminals was overwhelmingly negative. Nevertheless, some political prisoners tried to join the criminals, or at least cultivate a good relationships with them, as a way of surviving the camps. Alexander Dolgun and Janusz Bardach in particular stand out in this respect because they developed strong friendships with members of the *blatnye*.

²⁷⁴ Dolgun, 140.

Bardach and Dolgun's unique position among the *blatnye* gave them valuable insight into the lives of this elusive group. They frequently witnessed the criminals' theft and violence toward their fellow political prisoners, but among their "protectors" they also saw curiosity about the outside world, a harsh and difficult past, and, in Pieta's case, vulnerability and regret. There are no verifiable memoirs that show a criminal's point of view in regard to their behavior toward the political prisoners. It is possible that they received direct pressure from the GULAG administration to oppress the political prisoners, and it is equally possible that they pursued this behavior simply for their own benefit. There may even have been pressure on the *blatnye* to behave this way from their *blatnye* superiors – the *pakhans* or the *vory-v-zakone*. Both Dolgun and Bardach's memoirs demonstrate the intense hierarchy among the *blatnye* groups: in both cases, the cell leaders offered these political prisoners their friendship. Their subordinates may not have had that liberty, for fear of their superiors' disapproval.

There are many variables that could have influenced the behavior among the political prisoners and the criminals. It is possible that more political prisoners could have established friendships with the criminals, had their fear and "haughtiness" not prevented them. There was, however, no one formula or circumstance that guaranteed that an individual from the *blatnye* would offer a hand of friendship to a political prisoner. For example, Alexander Dolgun fought back when a few thieves tried to take his pants, and their leader responded with admiration for his "guts,"²⁷⁵ whereas when Shalamov's friend resisted a thief's effort to take his shirt, the thief killed him.²⁷⁶ Ultimately, the political prisoners' relationship with the criminals depended on the individuals

²⁷⁵ Dolgun, 139-140.

²⁷⁶ Shalamov, 10.

involved and the circumstances of their interactions, but the brutal nature of the camp system and the administration's empowerment of the criminals made it more likely that the relationship between the two types of prisoners would be acrimonious.

CONCLUSION

The conflict between the political prisoners and the criminals in the GULAG became a defining characteristic of the labor camps and prisons during the Stalinist era. The roots of this phenomenon lay in the early Bolshevik theories about prisoners and incarceration. Lenin's belief that the "socially friendly" prisoners would be more responsive to re-education in the labor camps shaped the way that the GULAG administration perceived and treated both classes of prisoners. As the penal system developed and expanded from 1918 to 1934, the administration pursued a series of policies which increasingly favored the criminals and put them in a position of power over the political prisoners until the 1950s.

The majority of the memoirists expressed fear and hatred for the criminals, and spoke more vehemently of them than of the guards and camp chiefs whom they also saw on a daily basis. Their fear and hatred stemmed not only from anger at the frequent theft and violence, but also from a sense of betrayal by those who should have been their friends and supporters behind the bars, as well as shock and disgust at a lifestyle they considered immoral and degenerate. The women, especially, struggled to adjust to life with the criminal women who, they believed, lacked common decency and morals. Two of the memoirists, however, managed to establish friendships with individuals from the criminal class, which granted them rare insight into the lives of members of the *blatnye*. Their memoirs counteracted the view held by many political prisoners that the *blatnye* was a homogenous and violent group; their descriptions of the various criminals whom they befriended emphasized that the *blatnye* included a wide variety of individuals with different backgrounds, different reasons for becoming criminals and joining the fraternity, and different attitudes towards violence and toward the political prisoners.

How and why the violence between the prisoners occurred are interrelated questions. To answer them, this paper looked at both the administration and the prisoners themselves. The administration's effort to collect criminals into its "re-educative" camps fostered the creation of a strong, unified *vory-v-zakone* that could effectively bully politicals and administrators alike. Meanwhile, the political prisoners, many of them intellectuals and moderately successful professionals, found their unexpected arrests, brutal interrogations, and astonishingly long prison sentences so demoralizing that they became easy targets for anyone who wanted to take advantage of them.

The administration's policies favoring the criminals certainly resulted in their significant power over the political prisoners, but there is some debate as to whether or not this was a result that the administration intended. The memoirists presented two main theories. The first is that the criminals grew in power because of the administration's early policies, but by the 1930s and 1940s they had gotten out of their control. The second suggests that the administration deliberately empowered the criminals in order to establish an extra level of control over the more numerous and dangerous political prisoners, either out of perceived necessity or convenience. This theory has precedent in the Nazi labor camps. There, the authorities encouraged the non-Jewish inmates (usually political prisoners and criminals) to fight one another for the privileged positions in the camps – a "divide and rule" tactic that pitted the prisoners against one another, while simultaneously recruiting these "better" prisoners to oppress the more "dangerous" prisoners in the camps.²⁷⁷ It is possible that the Soviet regime followed the same logic as the

²⁷⁷ Beyrau, "Camp Worlds and Forced Labor," in *The Soviet Gulag*, 232-233., Donald Niewk, *The Holocaust: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011), 117-122.

Nazis and deliberately sowed violence and discord among the prisoners to weaken and oppress the most dangerous enemies of their regime.

Mucholsky and Chistyakov's memoirs could support either theory. Neither men reported that they received any special instructions from their superiors regarding the treatment of criminals as opposed to political prisoners. Mucholsky addressed this question the most directly when he noted that the camp administration gave the criminals "all kinds of privileges in comparison to the politicals," and that the camp administration knew that the criminals were terrorizing the camps, but "instead of stopping it, let it serve its own greedy interests."²⁷⁸ This suggests that he believed that the administrators allowed and encouraged the criminals' behavior as a way to control the other prisoners, but it also shows that he believed that this was a shameful development in the camps rather than an intentional GULAG policy.

Both memoirs also indicated that the administration struggled to control the criminals during the height of their power. Chistyakov frequently noted that the guards did not intervene in any episodes of violence between prisoners because they did not want to get hurt, and Mucholsky demonstrated that he and the other camp chiefs were practically helpless if the criminals decided to be uncooperative. Additionally, documents collected by Khlevniuk in *The History of the Gulag* demonstrated that the main administration disapproved of the unchecked violence of the criminals and demanded that the camp chiefs address it.

The conflict between the criminals and the political prisoners is an element in the GULAG historiography which historians have not fully addressed. I suggest two interrelated

²⁷⁸ Mucholsky, 170-171.

avenues that would benefit from additional research. The first is the criminals themselves; as this paper demonstrated, much of the information about criminals in the GULAG came from the political prisoners who believed that the criminals were worse than the camp guards. Dolgun and Bardach's memoirs, however, suggest that the criminals behaved with more complexity toward the political prisoners than the dominate narrative indicates. The criminals were an integral part of the GULAG experience and victims of the Soviet regime in their own right, and I believe that more in-depth research into their backgrounds and their experiences in the camps will add to the analysis of the conflict between the two groups of prisoners.

The second avenue is the administrations' intentions regarding the criminals. In *Gulag: A History*, Applebaum indicates that she supports theory that the administration deliberately empowered the criminals, but she does not go into her reasoning in great detail.²⁷⁹ The other GULAG historians that mention the criminals (Barnes, Khlevniuk, Dobson) avoid passing judgement about the administration's intentions entirely. I believe that with access to the former Soviet archives and the untranslated memoirs, one may establish if the early penal administration truly intended to elevate the criminals at the expense of the political prisoners, or if this was an unexpected and undesired development. A definite answer regarding these theories would significantly add to the debate about the true purpose of the GULAG; for example, if the administration did empower the criminals deliberately to control the political prisoners, it suggests that they established the GULAG as a place of destruction, but if the alternative theory proved to be true, it suggests that they intended the GULAG to be more of a place of re-

²⁷⁹ Applebaum, *Gulag*, 283.

education or reformation. On a broader scale, I believe that a deeper understanding of the conflict between the political prisoners and the criminals, and the extent of the administration's participation, will contribute to our understanding of how people behave in intense and life-threatening situations, like life in the Soviet GULAG.

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