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## Voice of Silence: Women Inmates' Perspective on Sexual Violence in the Soviet Gulag, 1936-1956

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Voice of Silence: Women Inmates' Perspective on Sexual Violence in the Soviet Gulag,  
1936-1956

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies & Language and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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В страшные годы ежовщины я провела семнадцать месяцев в тюремных очередях в Ленинграде. Как-то раз кто-то «опознал» меня. Тогда стоящая за мной женщина с голубыми губами, которая, конечно, никогда в жизни не слыхала моего имени, очнулась от свойственного нам всем оцепенения и спросила меня на ухо (там все говорили шепотом):

– А это вы можете описать?

И я сказала:

– Могу.

Тогда что-то вроде улыбки скользнуло по тому, что некогда было ее лицом.

In the frightening years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months in the Leningrad prison queues. Once, someone somehow 'identified' me. Then a woman with pale blue lips standing behind me, who, of course, had never heard my name in her life, woke up from the stupor common to us all and whispered in my ear (everyone spoke in whispers there):

— 'And can you describe *this*'?

And I said:

— 'I can.'

Then something vaguely like a smile flashed across what once had been her face.

Anna Akhmatova, "Requiem"

April 1, 1957 Leningrad

## Introduction

### Power Hierarchies of the Soviet State and Women's Gulag Experiences

In the 1920-50s, the Soviet state created a network of forced labor camps to alleviate the challenges and failures of Stalin's industrialization plan. In doing so, it enslaved, oppressed, and psychologically traumatized a large portion of the Soviet population.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the Soviet State's reliance on punitive labor as well as figuring out the role of concentration camps in shaping the nation's "collective memory" requires deconstructing the historical narratives produced by the regime and its survivors. The atrocities committed throughout the twentieth century maimed the Soviet and Post-Soviet population, resulting in generations of survivors dealing with the trauma of Stalinist repressions. Gulag survivors were conditioned by the regime to repress their past experiences to avoid the besmirching of the "glorious" Socialist past. The resulting psychological pressure led to social and political repercussions in modern-day Russia. Putin rules by fear; he restricts speech, press, and public gatherings; and, most saliently for this work, he has overseen a surge in domestic violence. There is a serious debate on among historians whether

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<sup>1</sup> Steven A. Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 16.

his authoritarian leadership is totalitarian in nature, as well as mimicking Stalinist tactics.<sup>2</sup> The unwillingness of Russia's government to take ownership and analyze its historical past resulted in the truncation of the mourning process. Basically, the government succeeded in preventing the population of the Soviet Union and its successors from fully remediating the damage done.<sup>3</sup> Only a handful of people had broken the silence around the trauma they experienced in the Gulag. By sharing their personal stories and accounts of political terror overall, these survivors documented the Soviet past with courage and compassion. They preserved the facts about the psychological and physical impact of the Gulag incarceration. From their memoirs, essays, drawings, and poems, we learn about their debilitating labor, ill health, torture, and sexual abuse in the Stalinist labor camps. We also learn about the strength of Soviet men and women in the society that brutally oppressed human rights and used state violence to scare the population into submission and suppress dissent.

There were approximately 400 fully functioning camps during the Gulag's existence.<sup>4</sup> An estimated 18 million people went through the Gulag and an additional 6 or 7 million were inter-

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<sup>2</sup> One emblematic example is a court case against a group of young people arrested on terrorism charges. These 18 individuals were part of leftist organizations. Many cases included anonymized "secret witnesses' and allegedly rigged evidence," alleged torture, and unfair trials. From, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/12/russia-harsh-verdicts-controversial-terrorism-cases#> (Date of Access, April 22, 2020); also seen in Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017); In 2017, Putin's government passed a law that *de*-criminalized domestic abuse in Russia. From <https://www.dw.com/ru/почему-в-декриминализации-домашнего-насилия-в-рф-нет-ничего-хорошего/a-48852876> (Date of Access, April 22, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning : Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*, (Stanford University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, 190.

nally exiled; further, an estimated 800,000 people were sentenced to death by the Soviet state.<sup>5</sup> The Gulag went through three different transformations: its initial stage was a re-educational labor camp; in the late 1930s, it became a punishment camp that aimed to destroy its inmates; and after Stalin's death in 1953, it shifted back towards being a punitive labor camp.<sup>6</sup> Women made up less than half of the population throughout the Gulag's entire history. Varying degrees of percentages are reported, though the consensus is that the female population was 5% – 25% of the total number of Gulag inmates (that is, anywhere between 900,000 – 4.5 million women).<sup>7</sup> This is one of the reasons why women's voices do not resonate as much as men in documenting the Gulag experience. Their Gulag trauma is not as widely talked about in the general/Russian/international public even though they experienced harrowing and, possibly, more lethal incarceration and labor punishment in the Gulag.

My goal is to re-orient public understanding by analyzing written accounts of several women survivors of the Stalinist Gulag, with a specific focus on sexual trauma. I take seriously women's ability to contextualize and write about their own traumatic experiences, and work comparatively in my reading of the women's varied accounts and across different objects of trauma, such as the impact of forced labor, enduring inhumane working conditions, and the loss of social status, family, and health. The overall goal of this project is to compare that experience of the forced labor to the sexual trauma women Gulag inmates endured under the Stalinist

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<sup>5</sup> Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, (Doubleday, 2003), 20-21, 30.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson T. Bell, "Sex, Pregnancy, and Power in the Late Stalinist Gulag," in *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 24, no. 2 (2015): 206-208.



regime. Breaking through their silence puts Gulag life with all its suffering, injustice, and male dominance, in perspective.

In order to truly grasp women's sexual trauma experiences, one must be fully immersed themselves in the rhetoric women used around other, non-sexual types of trauma. Victims of sexual violence constituted a majority of the Gulag population: both men and women suffered from sexual assaults or were forced to trade sexual or other services for food. That said, women's voices acknowledging that pain is rarely heard. Frequently, women survivors of the Gulag documented their everyday camp experiences, such as working endless hours out in the cold or starving, rather frankly. Telling the story of rape or sexual abuse, on the contrary, was hard for them. I aim to discover these hard truths. My approach is comparative: I analyze sexual trauma by juxtaposing it with the trauma from overall life in the Gulag. This method allows me to make visible the gaps in sexual trauma narratives while juxtaposing the patchy accounts with the complexity of victims' total experience.

In Gulag memoirs overall, there exists a clear line between the reticent nature of victims' acknowledgment of sexual trauma and their more willing accounts of arrests, inhumane labor, and loss of health. The main reason for this is a response to rape as a taboo subject in traditional societies. In spite of the "revolutionary" spirit of Bolshevism and its alleged "brutally honest" rhetoric, Soviet women belonged to a society based on rather puritanical attitude to sexual relations. Most likely, former Gulag inmates were shunned for speaking about the intrinsically feminine types of suffering they endured in the camps or they were mistrusted for their revelations of the sexual violence.

Since the majority of sexual violence is mentioned in women inmates' documentary works only obliquely, I take a more nuanced approach to deconstruct their narratives and allow for better comprehension of such documentary evidence. I pay a lot of attention to their silence.

In the words of the historian of Russia Catherine Merridale, "forgetting, the obverse of memory, is also important. A person's silences are often as important as the tale they choose to tell, but by their nature they will never advertise themselves."<sup>8</sup> Other Gulag historians, scholars of cultural trauma, and psychologists often emphasize the importance of victims' silences. A group's silence is associated with forgetting, or a type of cultural amnesia.<sup>9</sup> It creates a culture that believes in the absence of violence. The actual silence cannot be fully explained, although historians can deduce it comes from social stigma, shame, or embarrassment. The research surrounding sexual violence, not only in the Gulag but also in the Nazi concentration camps, is restricted by women's self-silencing: "[the women's] silence was further reinforced by the attitude of the researchers, who could not, or perhaps for various reasons did not want to, ask directly about sexual abuse," Holocaust historian Katarzyna Person said.<sup>10</sup> Person quoted Joan Ringelheim's reflection on her own experience as an interviewer of sexual assault victims: "I believe that we avoid listening to stories we do not want to hear."<sup>11</sup> Ignoring is normal and can be at-

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<sup>8</sup> Catherine Merridale. "Soviet Memories: Patriotism and Trauma," in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, edited by Radstone Susanah and Schwarz Bill, New York: Fordham University, (2010): 378.

<sup>9</sup> Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Chana Teeger, "Unpacking the Unspoken: Silence in Collective Memory and Forgetting" *Social Forces* 88, no. 3 (2010): 1103-122.

<sup>10</sup> Katarzyna Person, "Sexual Violence during the Holocaust: The Case of Forced Prostitution in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Shofar* 33, no. 2 (2015): 103-21.

<sup>11</sup> Person, "Sexual Violence during the Holocaust: The Case of Forced Prostitution in the Warsaw Ghetto," 103-21.

tributed to a plethora of sources, but it is, more specifically, normal human response to the topic of trauma. That said, when scholars are unwilling to probe further, they contribute to the proliferation of the silence that needs to be broken.

The silence on sexual trauma reinforces the global patriarchal perspective that sexual violence is not *as* present as people claim.<sup>12</sup> The inmate's silence on sexual violence needs thoughtful research in order to expose the "stories of horrendous atrocities" committed in concentration camps and well beyond.<sup>13</sup> This silence is not restricted to the healing of individuals – it also heals cultures. Exploring the aftermath of cultural trauma in *In Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Herman, writes: "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims."<sup>14</sup> Herman also insists that restrictive nature of talking about sexual violence not only impedes women from healing, but also restricts the cultures from doing the same. This failed cultural mourning, in turn, generates new victims: their descendants or witnesses. The new generations fall victim to the erasure of mass graves, ignoring the generational fear, and painfully processing their deceased family member's unprocessed post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Person, "Sexual Violence," 103-21.

<sup>13</sup> Person, "Sexual Violence," 103-21.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: the aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997 [1992]), 1; see also, Björn Krondorfer, "Unsettling Empathy: Intercultural Dialogue in the Aftermath of Historical and Cultural Trauma," in *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition: A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory*, edited by Gobodo-Madikizela Pumla, (Opladen; Berlin; Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2016), 90-112.

<sup>15</sup> Ekind, *Warped Mourning*.

Manipulating truth and ignoring trauma, as Russian intellectual historian Alexander Etkind suggests, leads to “warped mourning.”<sup>16</sup> Etkind cites Holocaust historian Dan Diner, who writes: “nations can preserve memory while some other social groups, such as classes, cannot... German guilt and Jewish mourning have been passed down through generations, while Soviet crimes vanished from memory.”<sup>17</sup> Diner arrives at this conclusion because, in the case of German society, citizens speak about the crimes of their totalitarian regimes on both global and local scales. This conversation allows them to mourn collectively and move past their national and cultural trauma. Conversely, in the Russian Federation, the Soviet regime’s abuse of individuals and whole classes (bourgeoisie, intelligentsia, clergy, and aristocracy were collectively targeted by the Bolsheviks in the 1920-50s) is silenced even now by the government. On a personal, individual level, there exists an inherited fear that represses the historical truth. The fear of Soviet violence is sourced from its vertical power system because that system valued silence over speaking up. More importantly, this fear imposes an order on the types of trauma about which people can speak. While arrests and political persecution are more widely acknowledged, sexual trauma is frequently omitted — often times by the writer themselves.

In order to explain the taboo against vocalizing sexual trauma, we must explore the role of women documenting their Gulag experience. We can partially understand the personal and societal silencing of a woman’s sexual violence by taking note of the camp’s vertical hierarchical power structure. Gherardo Colombo, an Italian judge whose focus is on political corruption, defines a vertical society as multi-layered organization of relationships within a social group based

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<sup>16</sup> Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, 3-4.

<sup>17</sup> Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, 39.

on people's ability to survive. Those who have skills and are in favor are at the top, whereas those who are unskilled outsiders are at the bottom.<sup>18</sup> Colombo continues by describing how Lenin's view of a proletarian revolution inherently creates a class-based vertical society: "[Lenin] claimed that '...The suppression of the proletarian state, namely the suppression of any state, is not possible except through an 'eradication' even of the people who oppose it.'" Seeing that the state administration and guards (i.e. people who are part of the higher ideological class and, frequently, Party Members) ran the camps, the strong vertical hierarchical power structure in the Gulag becomes apparent. This hierarchy is also visible in camp ideology, distribution of work assignments, rationing of resources, and sexual relationships described in this project.

The idea of egalitarianism is among the key tenets of Soviet ideology; Lenin and Stalin's government insisted on destroying the old vertical hierarchy and bringing rights to the "middle cadres"<sup>19</sup> and to the oppressed. The Soviet Union's emphasis on egalitarianism proved to be inherently hypocritical not only for the female population but for every class except those in comfortable positions in the Party. During the Russian revolution, the Bolsheviks' main goal was to abolish the Russian class system. In doing so, the Bolsheviks created a new system founded on allegiance to the State ideology— that of "Communism." This new class hierarchy "contained three major social classes: peasants, workers, and state-party bureaucracy."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Gherardo Colombo, Elisabetta Zoni, and René Foqué, "The Vertical Society," in *On Rules*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 51-52.

<sup>19</sup> Stalin referred to the middle cadres as the bulk of the "true" Soviet communists. From Georgi Dimitrov, and Banac Ivo, *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov: 1933-1949* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 62.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Mayer. "The Collapse of Soviet Communism: A Class Dynamics Interpretation," *Social Forces* 80, no. 3 (2002), 761.

The state-party bureaucrats stood at the top of the hierarchy, while the peasant class position remained the same as it was before the revolution. The peasant class comprised the overwhelming majority of the population, yet they were excluded from all political decision-making. Before the revolution, state bureaucrats did not lead particularly luxurious lifestyles— far from it. Yet during the Bolshevik's reign, their roles gained importance. With their newfound status, came perks that were previously associated with the aristocrats of a bygone era. For example, Lenin's and Stalin's households were set up in a very fancy Moscow neighborhood called Gorki. Their apartments were decorated with "dark portraits of proud generals and of smiling, Empire ladies in enormous white frames with gold incrustations, glistening candelabra" – remnants of the bygone era the party leaders vowed to destroy.<sup>21</sup> For the party bureaucrats, there was a complete class switch. The old Bolshevik's promise of the abolition of hierarchy became futile. They destroyed the old upper class and then put themselves on top. Eventually, every stratum of the Soviet society inherited this muddled hierarchical system. This included the concentration camps, where members of the former upper and middle classes were often inmates, placed at the very bottom of the camp hierarchy, while the formerly oppressed workers and peasants, served as guards and camp administrators, thus occupying the top position on the Gulag social ladder.

Most of the evidence for this project is drawn from four women, whose testimonies shed light on the painful trauma of the Gulag's labor and sexual abuse: Tamara Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, Eugenia Ginzburg's *Journey into the Whirlwind* and *Within the Whirlwind*, Eu-

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<sup>21</sup> Michael S. Ginsburg, "Stalin" *Prairie Schooner* 8, no. 1 (1934): 1-6.

frosinia Kersnovskaya's notebooks, and Elena Glinka's essay "Kolyma Tram."<sup>22</sup> Each of these women experienced sexual violence during their time in the Gulag, but they speak about it differently. Glinka and Petkevich's accounts appear more straightforward and less euphemistic. The contrasting approaches to each telling about the Gulag past stem from the authors' social and cultural backgrounds as well as from their different personal perspectives. Tamara Petkevich lived in Saint Petersburg, belonged to the working class, and was an aspiring dressmaker. She was arrested for reading writers like Akhmatova and Pasternak, as well as for being a child of a political prisoner.<sup>23</sup> During her time in the Gulag, she became a famous Gulag actress. As for Eugenia Ginzburg, she was arrested for being part of a "terrorism organization."<sup>24</sup> She belonged to the class of party bureaucrats and very much enjoyed the privileges that status afforded. In the first part of her memoir, she spoke about her servants, such as her children's nurse,<sup>25</sup> and her husband's ability to give her gifts of fancy new dresses to wear to their "lavish dinners";<sup>26</sup> she also lived in a nice apartment and had her own private space.<sup>27</sup> Beyond a devoted Soviet woman, Ginzburg in fact lived for her love of the Soviet cause. Therefore, her arrest shocked her, remov-

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<sup>22</sup> Petkevich incarcerated: 1937- 1950, Published: 1993; Ginzburg incarcerated: 1934-1949, Exile: 1949-1955, Published: 1967; Kersnovskaya incarcerated: 1940-1952, her diary is published in pieces from 1990 till the book version comes out in 2000-2001; Glinka incarcerated: 1950-1956, published: 1989.

<sup>23</sup> Tamara Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, (Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 55.

<sup>24</sup> Eugenia Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, (A Harvest Book, HB 304. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 50.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

ing her from a place of entitlement. Eufrosinia Kersnovskaya, on the other hand, was the daughter of farmers. After the revolution, she and her family were oppressed former landowners. Kersnovskaya was exiled to Siberia in 1941 and worked in a logging barrack. She tried to escape, walking more than 900 miles in the Siberian Taiga, to then be caught, tried, and served to ten more years in the camps.<sup>28</sup> Finally, Elena Glinka studied engineering in Saint Petersburg when she was falsely arrested in 1950. In 1956, she was returned to Saint Petersburg where she continued her studies as an engineer.<sup>29</sup>

These women's accounts of their time in the Gulag differ in tone, style, and expression of their experiences. Their backgrounds help readers understand their perspective of the Gulag and their trauma. For example, the reader can easily understand why it took Ginzburg much longer to reconcile with the power hierarchy in the Gulag, the place she considered an aberration of the Soviet mode of existence, rather than its rule. Kersnovskaya used the imagery that she had grown up with in the countryside, that of Russian *lubok* (лубок).<sup>30</sup> *Lubok* showed much more violence and trauma in their depictions of folklore or religious tales. Kersnovskaya talks more openly about her experiences than the other women. Journaling through and after the Gulag could have allowed her to go through the mourning process. Elena Glinka was part of the academic world where her detailed and shocking story would have led to her being ostracized. That said, memoirists have contributed a very valuable body of facts for Gulag historians to analyze.

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<sup>28</sup> Eufrosinia Kersnovskaya, <http://www.gulag.su/about/index.php?eng=1&page=0> (Date of Access: April 22, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> *Gulag Voices: An Anthology*, edited by Applebaum Anne, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2011), 39.

<sup>30</sup> Russian etchings or drawings about literature, folklore, or religious stories. They date back to the 17th and 18th century.



In the following project, I will present the women's experiences in relation to one another, including the many types of Gulag-induced trauma, using their own words. I will also use examples of forced labor traumas to show the sexual violence within, thus trying to break the women inmates' silence. Within their silence, there is meaning. I will not be trying to fill the void, but I will draw attention to it, in an attempt to understand its impact upon the post-Soviet society.

## Chapter One

### Documenting the Whirlwind:

#### Trauma in the Life of Women Inmates of the Gulag, 1936-1956

##### 1.

#### Women in the Gulag: A Soviet Tragedy

The creation of the Gulag was a response to two major issues within the government: the decree “On Party Unity” and the Grain Crisis. In the beginning of the 1920s, the decree “On Party Unity” was passed by the Communist Party Congress.<sup>31</sup> This document manifested the anxious debate around counter-opinions within the party which would eventually lead to the adoption of state terror as the primary means of controlling Soviet society. The decree “On Party Unity” may be seen as the foundational document of the Gulag, because it implied severe punishment or execution for those who espoused different ideas. This decree forbid disagreement with party policy. Any kind of political dissent would soon be categorized in accordance with the penal article 58. “Article 58” metonymically became the legal name for political prisoners.<sup>32</sup> On top of the decree, Stalin’s economic policy developed in response to a struggling Russian economy. Stalin started to enforce punishment for those citizens who refused to follow the new economic agenda. Lenin’s government instituted NEP in order to allow some individuals to create

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<sup>31</sup> Robert V. Daniels, *A Documentary History of Communism in Russia: From Lenin to Gorbachev*, (Burlington: University Press of New England, 1993), 109.

<sup>32</sup> Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, 80.

and produce the much-needed consumer goods to help the economy. The party then used NEP to try and get the economy back on its feet by allowing a small capitalist market.<sup>33</sup> NEP relied on small scale farmers for grain production.<sup>34</sup> Severe state-controlled requisitions of grain and livestock resulted in peasants' resistance, and in the impoverishment of entire regions. Furthermore, the 1928 Grain Crisis put a serious strain on the rest of the economy, starving millions of people and compromising Stalin's quick fix for economic growth.<sup>35</sup> The creation of the Gulag, in 1929, was the ultimate response to the challenges of a government unable to mastermind a quick transition from agrarian economy to that of an industrial state. In establishing the penal labor system, Stalin determined not only to punish inmates for their subversive political activities (that included peasant saboteurs protesting the foundation of collective farms and NEPmen refusing to have their business assets centralized), but to further exploit and profit from them through their forced labor in the Gulag.<sup>36</sup>

The labor load that Stalin put on the backs of his people was much too heavy to carry. On the "mainland," men and women had to fulfill the same work quotas every day. The same requirement was carried over to the penal labor system. The goal here is not to compare trauma on the basis of gender, but rather to highlight women inmates' experiences. The entire imprisoned workforce suffered from dreadful living conditions, enormous production norms and the

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<sup>33</sup> NEP is the New Economic Plan allowing some capitalism, in small forms, in order to let the economy grow and get stronger.

<sup>34</sup> Daniels, *A Documentary History of Communism in Russia: From Lenin to Gorbachev*, 114.

<sup>35</sup> Daniels, 159.

<sup>36</sup> Golfo Alexopoulos, "Exploitation: "Labor Utilization" In *Illness and Inhumanity in Stalin's Gulag*, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2017), 209.

cruelty of the guards who were in charge of forcing inmates to fulfill their work requirements. That being said, there is an argument to be made that the women's camp experience was inherently more dangerous than the men's due to the physiological and psychological factors that are specific to the female body. Lack of facilities for maintaining hygiene, no medical treatment for women-specific illnesses, labor norms that did not recognize their physical strength in comparison to that of men, rape and molestation by the guards and other inmates, their physical exposure (nakedness) and sexually transmitted diseases are among the facts of daily life that exacerbated an already difficult existence in the camps.<sup>37</sup>

One such example of pain specific to the female body was to suffer “a prolapse of the uterus from having to lift excessive loads.”<sup>38</sup> According to Eugenia Ginzburg, it was “commonplace — rather like catching a cold.”<sup>39</sup> Women also dealt with various emotional responses to their traumas, such as processing the fact that they had endured sexual violence, mourning forced parting with their families, and/or grieving over the loss of children born at home or in the Gulag. The deterioration of their health and physical attractiveness due to unrelenting work and harsh living conditions further paid a toll on their psychological wellbeing and physical health.

Labor within the Gulag system was tied to the ever-changing Soviet ideology. One of the major pillars of Soviet ideology was work. Showing weakness or a lack of desire for work was a crime. The communist party was the “workers’ party;” its goal was the advancement of Communism by means of a collective effort, human sacrifices notwithstanding personal desires. There-

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<sup>37</sup> Cathy A. Frierson, and Semen S. Vilensky, *Children of the Gulag*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Eugenia Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 34.

<sup>39</sup> Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, 34.

fore, exhausted inmates could be seen as committing a crime. Since labor was the only corrective path for a criminal to take, the Gulag administration enforced the demand for productive work by hanging hand-painted slogans all over the camps. Describing her experience of arrest and penal servitude, Ginzburg notes one banner on a camp wall, stating: “Our selfless labor will restore us to the family of the workers.”<sup>40</sup> For Ginzburg, this slogan was especially torturous to read, because her internment in the Gulag led to her separation from her husband and two children. Moreover, Ginzburg never lost her connection and beliefs of the Communist Party, therefore she did not need to restore her faith.

A prisoner’s re-education in the Gulag was fueled by the State’s propaganda, but the actual *re-education* of a prisoner was not as simple as the State believed. Following the propaganda in thought and deed was not enough for women inmates due to their jobs causing them to deal with trauma which lead to this disassociation. A woman’s job in the camp was to paint the very slogans on the walls which insulted them and mocked their experience. This is why they chose to ignore the regime’s propaganda, concentrating on their own suffering instead. According to Anne Applebaum, “This job, very easy by camp standards, certainly saved [an inmate’s] health and possibly her life... ‘I wrote them very quickly, and technically very well, but I absolutely forgot everything that I wrote. It was some kind of self-defense mechanism.’”<sup>41</sup> The inmate’s awareness of her own “forgetting” shows her self-awareness. Many other women did not have this privilege. Disassociation is one of the first self-defense mechanisms of trauma survival. What is fascinating about this example of disassociation is the woman’s ability to forget what seemed wrong

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<sup>40</sup> Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, 24.

<sup>41</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 237-238.

and abusive to her. Another example of disassociation was ideological, rather than the psychological example above. It was enforced on the inmates: “Constantly addressed as ‘enemies’ and explicitly forbidden to call one another ‘comrade,’ and forbidden to gaze upon a portrait of Stalin, prisoners were nevertheless expected to work for the glory of the socialist motherland,” Ginzburg writes.<sup>42 43</sup>

The camp administration was using fear to restrict inmates’ ideology. This deeply affected Ginzburg due to her devotion to the Communist Party. When addressed by another inmate as “comrade,” she became very emotional. ““Did I frighten you comrade? You’re crying!”” the other prisoner asked. Ginzburg responded to that in her memoir: “No, I was not crying, but my heart was pounding with excitement. I so wanted her to go on and on calling me ‘comrade.’”<sup>44</sup> Many of the inmates still believed in Soviet ideals, therefore, the camp not allowing inmates to call each other “comrade” was deeply painful to them and a deep, lasting cut to their identity.

Moving into the 1930’s, Stalin had an uphill battle with the economy. By using this penal servitude, he was barely able to keep the economy afloat.<sup>45</sup> Although inmates’ labor did add to the economy, it caused much more pain than economic gain. Gulag labor stripped inmates of their humanity, they were mere cattle to the state. As Russian historian Steven Barnes claims, “at tremendous cost and with low efficiency, by mining gold, copper, and coal; building cities, railroads, canals, and highways; felling trees; and operating vast agricultural enterprises” the econ-

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<sup>42</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 337.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxvii.

<sup>44</sup> Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 279.

<sup>45</sup> Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, 220.

omy was able to survive.<sup>46</sup> Not only that, but inmates were forced to shout the chants: “Five in four!,” meaning completing Stalin’s Five Year Plan in four years.<sup>47</sup> Moving the deadline of the Five Year Plan coerced prisoners into working harder than necessary in order to fulfill an impossible task. By breaking the backs of its citizens, the Soviet State continued to entertain the status of a global superpower. Yet the means were not justifiable by the ends. As we will see in the coming sections, daily life in the Gulag camps utterly destroyed millions of women’s lives.

## 1.2

### Pickax and a Shovel: Women’s Prison Labor, Defined

Women laborers had to endure the Gulag as both a place of hard labor and an environment that failed to recognize their femininity. Hard labor destroyed their minds and bodies. As for women, the stripping of the female attributes was deeply painful because they felt that they had lost a part of their female identity. Lack of medical supplies and basic manufactured goods at remote Gulag camps made self-care and upkeep of personal hygiene difficult or even impossible. In the Far North, with little or no manufactured goods, such as soap and medical supplies provided to the inmates, self-care was nearly impossible. This was especially difficult when all women were expected to be in decent health in order to meet their daily quotas. In view of the limited resources and time, every effort and task a woman undertook was executed with a minimal expenditure of energy. Thus, maintaining personal hygiene through physical acts such as washing

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>47</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 46.

and mending clothes was an added burden at the end of a grueling work day. Nevertheless, taking care of one's body could guarantee survival outdoors when women inmates were performing duties assigned by the Gulag administration. Without a well-dried or mended mitten, for example, the laborer's hands could get frostbitten within an hour; if a woman failed to comb lice out of her hair during night-time hours, she could get sick with typhus and die. Mosquitoes posed a problem as well: for example, people had to deal with a disgusting amount of blood-sucking gnats while working. People wrote about mosquitoes flying up their pants and in their shirts and causing incredible suffering.<sup>48</sup> These distractions were very difficult to ignore since they not only slowed their work day down, but also caused serious pain through the day.

If a woman could secure more food than what was given to her by the administration, she would have a much higher chance of survival. Unspoiled, nutritious food was sparse in the Gulag camps. Due to their lowest status in the camp hierarchy, the political inmates were fed a minimal amount of food compared to both their "criminal" counterparts and the camp guards. The memorialists write about starving in the camps as well as procuring food in addition to what was rationed on a daily basis at the cost of additional labor.<sup>49</sup> An example of this additional labor is Tamara Petkevich who writes about a friend of hers in camp, Natasha, who helps her find mundane jobs around the camp for an "extra half-kilo of bread."<sup>50</sup> Natasha's mundane jobs are not listed, but historians can assume her work was not enjoyable.

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<sup>48</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*. 24.

<sup>49</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 180.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.



If we did not have the first-person narratives from the camp survivors who had to struggle with hunger and fight for every morsel of food, we would get a very different account of food distribution in the Gulag. Documentation by Soviet state officials skews the readers' perspective. As stated in the camp administrator reports stored in government archives, each inmate received a daily ration of 559 grams of bread, 8 grams of sugar, 75 grams of buckwheat, 15 grams of meat, 10 grams of fat, 500 grams of potatoes, and 15 grams of salt.<sup>51</sup> The figures cited are from a report filed in 1944. Yet, as Gulag memoirists make clear, inmates were given much less. Petkevich recounts a moment of this imposed starvation: while escort commanders actively denied food to her and a group of women, a train with army men headed for the "front" started catcalling them. In a rage due to their lack of food, the women started to scream and howl, prompting the soldiers to defend them. The escort commanders tried to shame the soldiers by calling the women criminals, the soldiers did not back down but said they were fighting for their mothers and wives who could be on the train. In turn, this verbal exchange forced the guards to give the women their "entitled rations."<sup>52</sup> This powerful moment is worth noting because not only did the army brigade force the guards to feed the women, but also gave the women their ration of hope. As the soldiers forced the escort commanders to feed the women, they discovered that the escorts had been selling the women's rations to locals.<sup>53</sup> Removal from the Gulag system allowed the army men to see these women as humans not just criminals.

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<sup>51</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 207.

<sup>52</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, pp. 195-196.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

It must be noted that throughout the existence of the Gulag, the amounts on food ration cards would go up and down in response to national adversities such as the Grain Crisis, the Purge, the Great Terror, and World War II.<sup>54</sup> Every political crisis brought on national food shortages, the effects of which were especially felt in the camps. Yet irrespective of any national food shortages, starvation was the most frequent form of punishing the inmates. If an inmate was not fulfilling quotas, the camp administration was *supposed* to give them less bread and no soup; yet if one was over-fulfilling the labor norms, they would receive more.<sup>55</sup> Because the Gulag was supposed to rely on free labor to boost the economy, feeding someone who was too weak meant wasting state resources. To obtain more food, weaker inmates, women in particular, would engage in other work for payment (i.e. “domestic work” or sexual acts).

Personal hygiene is an essential aspect of human life; it lets an individual preserve his or her dignity as well as maintain a basic level of health. In the Gulag, hygiene was permitted only so far as it guaranteed that inmates would not contract illnesses and lose the ability to work. For example, administrators of the camps provided services that removed lice: “All clothing was supposed to be boiled in disinfection units, both entering the camp and then at regular intervals, to destroy all vermin.”<sup>56</sup> Moscow really did want the lice and bedbugs gone, but due to the lack of supplies and organization, even the camp bathhouse was a breeding ground for diseases.<sup>57</sup> Varlam Shalamov writes that “not only was the delousing absolutely useless, no lice [were]

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<sup>54</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 207-210.

<sup>55</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 207-208.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-203.

killed by this disinfection chamber.”<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the re-infestation began right after the cleaning procedure in the bathhouse.

Women, unlike men, also had to worry about their vaginal hygiene as well. With the lack of hot water or any water for washing up, proliferation of sexual violence and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as pregnancy experienced without any gynecological help, maintaining vaginal health was difficult. In the compromised sanitary conditions of the Gulag, any woman could not even dream of a sanitary pad or other items of feminine hygiene.<sup>59</sup> They found alternatives in moss, leaves, and old clothing.<sup>60</sup> The femininity was overlooked by the camp officials because the goods needed to clean a vagina were not seen as necessary.

In the North, the clothing given to both men and women was not designed to keep inmates warm during the winter. Everyone received plain clothes that could protect them only from the moderate cold, while the temperatures in Kolyma and Archangel could drop to subarctic levels. Winter clothing had to be patched up and insulated with extra layers of fabric. This was a task often taken up by women. As for the boots, men and women were given whatever boots were available. Most of the time they wore broken old boots that came in bigger or smaller sizes. Prisoners who lacked shoes resorted to alternative methods: “They made boots out of birch bark, scrapes of fabric, old rubber tires. At best these contraptions were clumsy and difficult to walk in, particularly in deep snow. At worst they leaked, virtually guaranteeing frostbite.”<sup>61</sup> An inmate’s

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<sup>58</sup> Varlam Shalamov and John Glad, *Kolyma Tales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 132.

<sup>59</sup> Almost all women in the Soviet Union did not have the traditional “sanitary pad” but used rolled up cotton balls or pieces of cloth.

<sup>60</sup> Marianna Yarovskaya, *Women of the Gulag* (United States: Mayfilms, 2018).

<sup>61</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 225.

chance of surviving in the camps was heightened if he or she possessed the dexterity and creativity to make something out of nothing. Given that many women were practiced in such handiwork, female inmates occasionally received payment for being able to mend clothing.<sup>62</sup>

In the Gulag, women inmates worked in the Siberian winters and the Caucasian summers. Due to the extreme cold and heat, their clothing played a large role in their survival. Firstly, women were not given brasserie or underwear. Because of that, they suffered both mentally and physically: it was as uncomfortable as it was humiliating to go to work in dirty and rough work clothes worn directly against one's bare skin. The shortage of underwear and items of feminine hygiene deeply affected women who had to deal with menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause. Yet men also suffered: Varlam Shalamov writes in a short story about two men who sneak out to steal the underwear off of a half-buried man because they lacked the basic necessities with which he was buried.<sup>63</sup> As for Ginzburg, she used old fish bones in jail to repair a bra she kept from life at home. In her own words, she wanted to have this last item of underwear not out of necessity, but to maintain her "Eternal Femininity."<sup>64</sup>

Women in the Gulag often write about a loss of femininity due to their shaven heads, skeletal bodies, and frostbite/sunburnt skin. This was cited by Tamara Petkevich, along with Ginzburg. Petkevich writes that the first thing she saw arriving at the burning hot camp Djangi-Djiri was women inmates' disheveled state and drastic nakedness. She describes their "brown parchment-like skin," and explains that the women were "naked from the waist, with shaven

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<sup>62</sup> S. S. Vilenskij, John Crowfoot, and Zajara Veselaja, *Till My Tale Is Told: Women's Memoirs of the Gulag* (London: Virago, 1999), 58.

<sup>63</sup> Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, 13.

<sup>64</sup> Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, 207.

heads and pendulous breasts. Their only clothing was some pathetic, dirty underwear.”<sup>65</sup> Soon Petkevich was also dressed like that, with nothing to protect her skin from the beating sun.<sup>66</sup> Women did not technically need to wear bras during labor, therefore it was not a concern to either the local officials or the state officials. Although, working with exposed breasts is not only difficult while doing manual labor, but is also painful. By ignoring basic feminine needs, the Gulag exploited, destroyed, and disregarded the female body to the point of causing women disassociate from it.

Along with the wreaking of the female body, there was also the emotional trauma of being a mother in camp. Even before an investigation was begun, it was common practice to give forced abortions to pregnant women upon arrest. This was done in order not add to the number of children in the camp.<sup>67</sup> Motherhood and femininity are tied very closely to one another for many women. Even if a woman does not see herself as a mother, she must still experience monthly mensuration, the pains of sexually transmitted diseases, sex, or rape which could and did often lead to pregnancy in the Gulag. These factors can not only be painful but debilitating to someone who much work to survive. Petkevich also cites that “many mamkas, whose children no longer had to be breast-fed, were put on the transport list” and forced to leave their children who otherwise were sent to an orphanage.<sup>68</sup> She continues by documenting a “criminal” inmate who claimed to be pregnant and insisted on not being transported. The inmate ran around the barrack

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<sup>65</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 156.

<sup>66</sup> Petkevich, 155.

<sup>67</sup> Vilenskij, Crowfoot, and Veselaja, *Till My Tale Is Told: Women's Memoirs of the Gulag*, 280.

<sup>68</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 310.

naked until, “five guards wrapped her tightly in a blanket and took her to the punishment block, from where her screams reached us for a long time afterward. No matter whose human cry it might be, it always turned the soul inside out.”<sup>69</sup> Whether she was pregnant or not, the guards still willingly punished a possibly pregnant women by torturing her. Although none of the women write explicitly about such loss of femininity or motherhood, it is apparent to the reader that the exposure, exploitation, and destruction of a woman’s femininity caused a deeply rooted trauma.

On top of the need for hygiene and protections, women also had to endure the unceasing threat of sexual violence, which was made more difficult because of their exposed bodies. Even those for whom bras may have not been necessary wanted them for protection against sexual predation. Women’s bodies were sexualized then as they are now. Therefore, these women were not only working under the impossible living conditions, but they were also forced to do so under the eyes of possible sexual predators, as will be seen in Chapter II.

### 1.3

#### The Perils of Labor in the Gulag

Hard labor included working in the gold or coal mines, felling trees in the taiga, farm work, working in factories (making rope or mixing clay at a brick factory), running power plants, doing construction (such as digging and building canals), and camp upkeep — all of which was

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<sup>69</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 311.

assigned to people with no training and lack of equipment.<sup>70</sup> On top of this, the labor quotas were impossible to fulfill because the actual labor of felling trees, mining, and construction work was beyond physically exhausting. Since the Soviet State proudly proclaimed itself an egalitarian system, its men and women laborers had the same assigned quota. In the environment of the taiga, iron ore mines, unpaved roads, gnat-infested marshes, and other brutal conditions, women underperformed more dramatically. Nevertheless, they had to meet a daily work norm, risking such repercussions as more difficult job assignments, imprisonment, or diminished rations. Most women wrote about their daily anxieties surrounding meeting their daily norm. For example: “we had to strain every nerve,” writes Petkevich, “to get [our] six or seven hundred gram ration.”<sup>71</sup> Since nourishment dictated survival in the Gulag, maintaining a bearable workload was key to staying alive.

The camp was very strict and its functionality was constantly on the guards’ minds. Order was their primary concern. In Shalamov’s account, a man working alone and only meeting 25% of the daily norm earns a sentence for his underperformance; the next evening an officer takes him to the forest and shoots him.<sup>72</sup> An execution for not carrying out one’s labor norm was illegal, yet the camp administration accepted the act. Another example in Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales*, is the short story “Berries.” Here a man is collecting berries and is shot because he stood on the perimeter of the “forbidden zone” even though he had not crossed the line.<sup>73</sup> The officer then

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<sup>70</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 217.

<sup>71</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 177.

<sup>72</sup> Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, 24.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

shot again in the air: “[They] knew what the second shot meant. So did [the officer]. There were supposed to be two shots—the first one a warning.”<sup>74</sup> This adherence to order spilled into exaggerated, inhuman, almost sadistic rules of inmates’ behavior, especially where labor was concerned. Once the inmates arrived at their work location, their workday would last longer than it was possible to endure labor. As for the length of shifts in a day, the summer the days were around fifteen hours a day with a ten-minute smoke break.<sup>75</sup>

As in Shalamov’s examples of the camp guard’s strict adherence to camp functionality, women, too, could be punished for their inability to work as expected. One account outlines exactly this kind of punishment. An inmate named Olga grew up with a tailor as a father, married a professor and became a mother of two children. Digging ditches day-in-and-day-out was not something her body was used to doing. Although it was mentally not a difficult task, the labor was physically exhausting for Olga. The digging lasted for weeks, from six a.m. till nine p.m., and she had to carry out this exhausting load on a minimal food ration.<sup>76</sup> Olga’s lack of skills coupled with the need to fulfill the norms and hunger lead to a near-death experience. Olga said her survival came from her loving family who luckily were not arrested but were able to give her some support by sending parcels, and simple giving her hope from beyond the confines of imprisonment.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, 60.

<sup>75</sup> Vilenskij, Crowfoot, and Veselaja, *Till My Tale Is Told: Women’s Memoirs of the Gulag*, 49.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.



The Stakhanovite<sup>78</sup> movement exacerbated the inmates' plight both because it intensified their labor requirements and gave them false hope. In adopting the Stakhanovite campaign, the government increased daily labor norms irrespective of the fact that women inmates often times never reached such requirements to begin with. According to the camp regulations, those who could catch up with the Stakhanovite movement – i.e. outperform others and achieve a very high production rate – would be released early. Some prisoners truly believed keeping their head down and working hard was the best method to survive. In the second part of her memoir, Ginzburg talks about the presence of this hope in the Gulag: “pale and tremulous though [hope] was, like a flame in the wind, hope flicked within us.”<sup>79</sup> Yet an early release was rarely possible. This sense of false hope ultimately served to harm inmates as they would overwork and exhaust themselves, leaving them more prone to sickness and injury.

Not only did the inmates worry about clothing, hygiene, sexual violence, and food, the also had to worry about a network of professional criminals, called “thieves” who were their fellow inmates. Although through the eyes of the State, everyone was a criminal at the Gulag, it was

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<sup>78</sup> The requirement to work faster originated in the Stakhanovites movement. Stakhanovites was a labor competition that rewarded the hardest workers. The camp administration would give an inmate tallies and other reviews that at the end of the quarter would be evaluated. In the extreme cases, some were freed, had their Party membership given back and their names cleared. From: Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, 71.

<sup>79</sup> Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, 69.

not seen that way by the camp inmates or the guards.<sup>80</sup> Ginzburg stated that she had no interest in describing the other side of the camp hierarchy because the “professional criminals [were] beyond the bounds of humanity.”<sup>81</sup> One example of this is provided by Petkevich. She was assigned to dig a sugar factory foundation: “the clay soil clung to the wheels of the barrows and our pathetic footwear. It took an enormous amount of energy to push a wheelbarrow laden with earth to the top. The norms were high. We had to strain every nerve to earn a six or seven-hundred-gram bread ration.”<sup>82</sup> Not only was Petkevich overworking her body every moment of the day, but she had the added psychological terror from the criminals. As they were working, the criminals sat dozens of yards away playing cards and betting on humans: “By the end of the day, whoever lost the game had to kill the person he’d been playing for. The victim would be stabbed and quickly buried. Relying on the guards’ protection was useless. The guards and the criminals got along very well.”<sup>83</sup> In order to survive in the Gulag, inmates could not rely on the guards.

Another peril of labor in the Gulag was the lack of safety equipment and operational training, guaranteeing injuries. As we learned from Petkevich, who was injured in the Djangi-Djiri camp, it was almost impossible to avoid industrial injuries. The factory in Djangi-Djiri was used for hemp and rope production. Only women worked there: although the labor was so physi-

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<sup>80</sup> ““Women, an inferior being, has been created only to satisfy the criminals animal craving... victim to public beatings... could be inherited by a brother or friend... the prostitute submits to sleeping with her new master.”” The criminal world will not be explained extensively here due to the fact that it is essentially its own field of study and needs lengthy research to explain criminals’ special codes of conduct, sexual relationships, tattoos, and hierarchies. From Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 312.

<sup>81</sup> Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, 12.

<sup>82</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 177.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

cally demanding that it was almost impossible for them, hemp production regardless belonged to the category of women's work because of their traditional role in handling textiles.<sup>84</sup> The hemp was left soaking at the factory for three to four months before it would be processed. As the hemp soaked, “a thick white layer of seething worms appeared on the surface of the water,” Petkevich writes. Vermin led to infestation and illness: “Their emaciated bodies were eaten away by the worms and the stinking water. The stench of the reservoir and a thicket of white worms not only had an appalling effect on people’s hands and legs but also left deep sores on their psyche.”<sup>85</sup> This was one of the most hated types of labor in the Djangi-Djiri camp. It was reserved for political prisoners, since criminal inmates were able to bribe themselves out of it. In addition to their skin getting ruined by the worms, it was common for women to get their arms sucked into the loom, an injury Petkevich herself experienced.<sup>86</sup> Women inmates felt that through their labor, they were not only mangling their environment, but getting mangled themselves.

Most of the time when inmates were hurt, their injuries would go untreated; doctors were scarce, medical resources were limited, and treating minor wounds was seen as wasteful of supplies. Ginzburg describes this in the first part of her memoir, *Journey into the Whirlwind*:

For three days, Galya and I struggled to achieve the impossible. Poor trees, how they must have suffered at being mangled by our inexperienced hands... but the most terrifying moment was when the tree was at last on the point of falling, only we didn't know which way. Once Galya got hit on the head, but the medical orderly refused even to put iodine on the cut, saying ‘Ah! That’s an old trick! Trying to get exempted out of the first day, are you?’<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, 92.

<sup>85</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 160.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>87</sup> Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 405.

Felling trees posed many difficulties because of the heavy lifting, sawing, and likelihood of getting struck by falling timber. Inmates in dire need of rest from felling trees had been known to cut off their hand or foot.<sup>88</sup> Had a camp doctor not seen Ginzburg as a valuable nurse, Ginzburg would have most likely perished from performing labor for which she was not trained nor physically fit. That said, Ginzburg's early camp experience with Galya seemed to leave a mark on her mind and psyche. Her trauma from her labor is seen in how hard she worked as a nurse among tree felling brigades to take care of each person every night. She also writes about being a nurse during a very cold winter in Kolyma and using medical supplies as sources of inmates' nourishment. She did not believe in keeping medicine from those in pain as her colleagues had. Although Ginzburg was cautious in dispensing medicine and vitamins, she would give fish oil to those nearing death, termed "goners", who had no chance of getting extra nutrition.<sup>89</sup> After experiencing many misfortunes, including the cruelty of guards and nurses, she became a very attentive medical practitioner. Ginzburg and her daily work partner compared their daily existence to death. Ginzburg writes how "[her] feet seemed to weigh a ton; [her] knees buckled under [her] as if they were made of cotton wool."<sup>90</sup> It is only natural for the body to develop boils and for legs to stop working when one has to crush rocks or cut trees in negative fifty degrees. Ginzburg herself did not get enough medical attention. Having experienced hard labor firsthand, she truly understood the pain of her suffering counterparts. In turn, she gave inmates better care when she could and had enough resources to do so.

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<sup>88</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 23.

<sup>89</sup> Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, 37.

<sup>90</sup> Vilenskij, Crowfoot, and Veselaja, *Till My Tale Is Told: Women's Memoirs of the Gulag*, 58.

In the 1940s, is when the purpose of the camps truly shifted. At this time “arose a system of punishment camps, whose purpose was not primarily economic but punitive.”<sup>91</sup> They were closer to extermination camps. Rather than slowly killing inmates with labor, the guards were more willing to kill them right away. However, even before the new “punitive” system arose, political prisoners were particularly affected by the requirement of performing forced, hard, overwhelmingly harmful labor which could destroy them. Both the “labor” and the “punitive” system did not allow people to be idle. In particular, guards turn camp labor into a punishment by keeping prisoners forever busy even if there was no meaningful job for them to perform:

Everyone without exception was made to do hard labor: old and young alike. What was interesting was that there wasn't any fuss over plans and norms here. They didn't punish you for doing enough or reward you for doing more than your share. They just made you work ten hours straight, till you collapsed. There were so many prisoners that there often wasn't enough work to go around. When this was the case, they thought up Sisyphean tasks for us to do.<sup>92</sup>

Sisyphus senselessly and eternally pushed a boulder up a hill. His labor had no meaning. The Gulag undertook this method of slow torture; not required by industrial norms, meaningless work was instated in order to increase the suffering of a prisoner. Susanna Pechora, for example, was forced to carry buckets of clay back and forth. Her overseer told her: “I don't need your work, I need your suffering.”<sup>93</sup> Meaningless assignments were designed to reform prisoners' ideological perspective on work. The prisoner did not have to work to achieve a goal, but to be occupied with hard tasks that taught him or her about the existence of labor. By allocating pointless but hard assignments, the guards were supposed to teach a “lazy bourgeois” what real proletariat was

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<sup>91</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 221.

<sup>92</sup> Vilenskij, Crowfoot, and Veselaja, *Till My Tale Is Told*, 275.

<sup>93</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 221.

doing all his life, day in and day out. This way, the guards wanted the prisoners to repent for their so-called political crimes. Through their pains, the State believed the prisoners would redeem themselves as Party members.

#### 1.4

##### Home Economy without a Home:

##### Women's Domestic Servitude in the Gulag

In addition to meaningless jobs, inmates were assigned domestic tasks (cleaning, washing clothing, cooking), and long-term assignments that turned them into “domestic” servants of the camp guards. Most domestic tasks were specific to women; the administration of camps needed the most skilled of them – best cooks, talented seamstresses, etc. – to make their own lives more comfortable. When choosing servants, the administration relied on specific ideas of what a “woman servant” was and how much value such an inmate could have in that capacity.<sup>94</sup> This is why women who could no longer do hard labor were selected for domestic work, whereas men were often overlooked for such task assignments. The camp authorities tended to just keep feeding them less (starving them) or simply finishing them off. For example, a woman inmate was transferred to patching up clothing because the camp had destroyed her body through hard labor.<sup>95</sup> Ginzburg writes about her own experience scrubbing floors with a group of criminals.

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<sup>94</sup> Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, 92.

<sup>95</sup> Vilenskij, Crowfoot, and Veselaja, *Till My Tale Is Told: Women's Memoirs of the Gulag*, 58.

This work was assigned to her because she could no longer fell trees; it was also given to women criminals as they often received lighter work assignments. It is important to notice that when the domestic brigade was given a break, the criminals immediately went to guards' rooms to prostitute themselves for extra food, time off, or clothing. Ginzburg alone kept washing the floors.<sup>96</sup>

There are other examples of domestic work in the camps as a type of saving grace for political prisoners who were women. Washing the floors, which Ginzburg did, saved not just her alone but many other women. It was "considered privileged work: women's work, done inside where it is warm."<sup>97</sup> Most women were assigned this type of work in addition to hard labor. A woman's chance of surviving was greatly heightened when assigned "woman's work" such as washing barracks, mending clothing, nursing babies, or nursing the sick. Ginzburg, as has already been mentioned, was saved by becoming a nurse.<sup>98</sup> While working outside with the labor brigades, she found relative respite in her indoor duties looking after children born in the camp. This type of domestic work tended to be a nice change from the labor outdoors for her and other lucky women. They were able to recover from illnesses that they developed when laboring out in the cold and lifting heavy objects. Yet domestic work very easily is turned into sexual servitude, as will be seen in chapter two.

Documentary works by female inmates of the Gulag demonstrate that women's life in Soviet labor camps was extremely hard and often brought them to the the brink of death. Within the Gulag, the female body, mind, and spirit were forced to succumb to the oppressive environ-

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<sup>96</sup> Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 373.

<sup>97</sup> Vilenskij, Crowfoot, and Veselaja, *Till My Tale Is Told*, 54.

<sup>98</sup> Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, 108.

ment, including the specific demands of the all-powerful masculine world (most camp guards and administrators were male). The deterioration of women's bodies and psyche turned them not only into victims of the Gulag, but also into a very specific group oppressed by the State power under Stalin. Women's comparative physical weakness prevented them from meeting their already unrealistic labor quotas; they also suffered from the lack of facilities and resources for maintaining feminine hygiene and staying healthy in the camps. When underperforming at work, they did not receive their full rations and were forced to find other means of survival. The latter would include trading sex for food or smaller work assignments — the kind of Gulag trade system men would utilize to their advantage. In other words, Gulag women often had to choose death or succumb to the male's desires. This creates a very interesting power dynamic in the camp because fear restricted women from speaking. Both Ginzburg and Petkevich write about various types of suffering in the camps, but only one of them includes sexual violence and sexual servitude in her accounts. It is in addressing sexual trauma that Petkevich stands out; she is one of the few female Gulag survivors to write about her and other women's pain from sexual abuse. My second chapter will focus on the first-hand accounts of four women, who mention sexual trauma either directly or ambiguously and who bring to light a deeper understand of the sexual power dynamics in the Gulag. To understand their life and their silence, I feel that, as a historian and a reader, I will need to deconstruct their language and open up their narratives. I want to allow their voices and pain to finally be recognized, thus making it my goal to explore the rhetoric of few words that women perpetuated in the wake of experiencing sexual violence in the Gulag.



## Chapter Two

### The Hidden Voice:

#### Sexual Violence Accounts of Female Gulag Inmates

##### 2.1.

##### Sexual Trauma, Silence, and Survivors' Voices

Soviet personal narrative accounts from 1936 to 1957 provide historians with a glimpse into the traumatic experiences of incarcerated Soviet women who, after their return to the mainland, reluctantly expressed their pain in oral reports, writing, and art. Among their testimonies, it is difficult to find mentions of rape, sexual abuse, and sexual servitude in the concentration camps. Everyday life in the Gulag was not part of Soviet public discourse, let alone topics of sexual violence, until memoirs of survivors began to be published in Russia during the first years of Perestroika. Examples of sexual violence against women inmates remain to be rare in memoirs and personal writing today; not only are they difficult to find, but oftentimes they are complicated to deconstruct. Many women were reticent in their commentary on the topic and their remarks are often short or glossed over. Yet the few women who did speak up about rape and sexual abuse give historians a deeper understanding of life in the Gulag. In this chapter, I will study these women's accounts as texts with complex narrative structures that expose the inmates' suffering while using the tone of emotionlessness and matter-of-factness to obscure the facts of abuse. This process will in turn help us understand the stark discrepancy between the survivors' personal accounts and supplementary knowledge we have about sexual violence against women

in the Gulag. I will draw evidence from two women writers whose testimonies have been analyzed in Chapter One of this project: Tamara Petkevich, the author of *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*<sup>99</sup> and Eugenia Ginzburg, who wrote *Journey into the Whirlwind* and *Within the Whirlwind*.<sup>100</sup> I will also include Eufrosinia Kersnovskaya's notebooks<sup>101</sup> and Elena Glinka's essay "Kolyma Tram," which uncovers sexual violence not mentioned in the other accounts.<sup>102</sup>

Rape on any scale results in traumatizing and dehumanizing a person or a group of people who are the object(s) of sexual violence. It is perpetrated in order to satisfy another's sexual pleasure, but it can also be used as a punishment.<sup>103</sup> Sometimes rape can be used as a weapon of oppression, connected to forced reproduction of an individual or a group. Rape victims have a particularly difficult time healing because their experience is both painful and deeply personal –

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<sup>99</sup> As for Tamara Petkevich, her memoir was first published in Russian in 1993 under the original title of: *Zhizn – sapozhok neparny (Life is an Unpaired Boot)* taken from one of Marina Tsvetaeva's poems. In Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, xi.

<sup>100</sup> Ginzburg tried to be published within the Soviet Union in 1967, although her work was rejected by the state. She managed to get the manuscript smuggled out of the country and had the first part published in 1967. For her actions, she was kicked out of the Soviet Union of Writers. Both the first and second parts of her memoir were not published in Russian till 1990. See, Natasha Kolchevska, "Angels in the Home and at Work: Russian Women in the Khrushchev Years," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3/4 (2005): 120.

<sup>101</sup> Kersnovskaya's work was published in pieces, starting in 1990 and until 2010, first appeared in a few Russian journals, then it was published in German in 1994 and three more times from 2000-2001. Currently, all of her work is available on her website.

<sup>102</sup> Petkevich was incarcerated from 1937- 1950, published: 1993; Ginzburg, incarcerated: 1934-1949; in exile: 1949-1955; published: 1967; Kersnovskaya, incarcerated: 1940-1952; her diary is published in pieces from 1990 till 2010; a book version comes out in 2000-2001; Glinka, incarcerated: 1950-1956, published: 1989.

<sup>103</sup> Keith Burgess-Jackson, "Rape and Persuasive Definition," in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (1995), 450.

it is embarrassing and often socially unacceptable to talk about rape. Therefore, to write *and* publish a trauma narrative takes a particular person who is open enough to share their trauma and who is able to break through personal and societal shame. Rape strips all agencies from the raped individual, but by finding enough strength to share their experiences, survivors can reclaim their voice and autonomy. In patriarchal societies, women in particular are silent about the experience of sexual violence. Usually, when they do come forth with accounts of their sexual trauma, they end up both speaking and reaching a more powerful position in their society, because through their experience of sharing they begin to understand the empowerment of speech, the importance of action against sexual violence, and the role rape plays in the struggle for power.

This struggle stems from men's belief in *their* power over women. Men see the female sex as able to be "forced into submission by rape," and overall as "weak and fragile, and [requiring] protection."<sup>104</sup> The patriarchal authority over the female body is translated, on a broader social scale, into a social value of the "untainted female body."<sup>105</sup> This concept deprives women of any possibility of communicating their experiences of rape because the goal of rape is exactly the opposite: it sullies the female body through violence. Silencing women in the act of divulging their experiences allows the rapist, in control of sexual intercourse in general, to feel immune from punishment. The act of silencing places a person at the top of the social hierarchy.

Gulag women inmates were particularly vulnerable to rape because the camp hierarchy was dominated by males. It was a power structure of male guards, camp administrators, and

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<sup>104</sup> Irina Astashkevich, "Describing the Indescribable: Narratives of Gendered Violence," in *Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921* (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2018), 77-104.

<sup>105</sup> Astashkevich, "Describing the Indescribable: Narratives of Gendered Violence," in *Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921*, 77-104.

camp military personnel, existing within a male-governed, totalitarian governmental system. The line between power struggle and victimization through sex became blurred because women had absolutely no agency — personal or political — in the camp environment. Moreover, they were worked and starved to death. This is why, as we learn from survivors' accounts, one had to say yes to sex in the Gulag due to coercion, starvation, or fear; it could be a matter of life or death. Within the Gulag, any sexual activity usually fell under the category of violence, because the distinctions between yes and no were minimal; an inmate's complex relationship with survival and the Gulag's ban on sexual relations that could be healthy and normal contributed to this dynamic. Most women who reported sexual abuse in the camps did not want to have sex but had it out of necessity. This aspect of their sexualization during incarceration is critical for a researcher who is looking at how inmates got pulled into "consensual" relationships (i.e. it can be said that most of the sexual relationships within the Gulag were based on sexual coercion). Studying rape, sexual abuse, and sexual servitude through analyzing accounts of sexual relations by women in the Gulag and interpreting the rhetorical approaches they took to document the activity could show how their voices in fact disturb the silence.

Rape was so common in the Gulag that it had its own vocabulary in the official procedures geared towards covering its outcomes. The Moscow administration referred to rape as cohabitation: "Moscow complained about the 'cohabitation of men with prisoner women' in the Gulag and then described how criminals in the camps had formed gangs that regularly raped women."<sup>106</sup> This verbal and written linguistic substitution normalized the vocabulary around the topic of rape along with other forms of violence that proliferated in the camps, making the gov-

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<sup>106</sup> Bell, "Sex, Pregnancy, and Power in the Late Stalinist Gulag," 221.

ernment's lack of response to such violations of human rights also appear "normal."<sup>107</sup> Using the word "co-habitation" instead of "rape" in descriptions of guards' relationships with inmates further softened the violent nature of the latter and made it seem consensual and in turn, painless (criminal gangs' violence against women was defined non-euphemistically as "rape"). This systemic cover-up of rape is also part of the continuous lack of legal protection women had in relation to violence in the Gulag in general. There was no space for women to hide from sexual or other types of violence in the camps, and neither had there been space for them to receive medical care, a reprieve from brutally hard work, or to voice their grievances. Petkevich, for example, remembers, along with the "common night bucket for men and women" – a place where sexual violence could easily occur – "night of mass rape, [...] foul cries of hatred and sinister laughter."<sup>108</sup> The administration of the camp she was in paid no attention to the orgy of violence that was going on in front of their eyes. The sexual violence women experienced in the Gulag was systemic. There were also cases of men who had authority in the camp of either beating or killing the women if they refused sexual advances; they also punished non-cooperative women inmates by assigning them to the worst jobs, greatly lowering their chances of survival.<sup>109</sup>

Women close to death would use sexual servitude as a last resort. It allowed them to restore their bodies by getting extra food and a break from working outdoors. Most importantly, a woman put her own life at great risk by not resorting to sex when chosen by a man in a position of power.

Prisons breed a particular relationship with sexual violence due to power dynamics, systems of allocating punishment, and the hierarchy of control over inmates by the administration,

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<sup>107</sup> Bell, "Sex, Pregnancy, and Power in the Late Stalinist Gulag," 202.

<sup>108</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 175.

<sup>109</sup> This will be spoken about extensively in the following sections.

guards, and “criminals.” This control existed on top of the already “pornified” female culture.<sup>110</sup> Barbra Owen’s research of rape and sexual violence in American prisons defines this culture as oppressive, and overall sexualized, environment women inhabit in captivity, in which there is a very strong power dynamic between men and women.<sup>111</sup> Overall, women in Soviet prisons were more likely to be treated as an object rather than an inmate of equal stature with men due to such “pornification”. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, himself a Gulag survivor, gives this culture his special attention. In his play, *The Love-Girl and the Innocent*, he depicts male language and physical movement in sexually-predatory terms: a guard walks up to a naked woman during a daily strip search and grabs her breast, asking “What you got stuffed up here?”<sup>112</sup> The grabbing of the woman’s breast is an obvious act of sexual violence. Characteristically, the woman in Solzhenitsyn’s play “gives him a sharp blow” with her elbow and continues in silence, without showing how disturbing the gesture is. Her reaction could be the result of fear, since it is difficult for a woman to reject, insult, or physically assault a higher up seeing that there would have been a punishment. Throughout the play, Solzhenitsyn cites moments of sexual violence against other women, too. Solzhenitsyn’s commentary on the proliferation of sexual violence in the Gulag

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<sup>110</sup> Barbara Owen, James Wells, and Joycelyn Pollock, "Intersectional Inequality and Women’s Imprisonment,” in *In Search of Safety: Confronting Inequality in Women's Imprisonment*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 10.

<sup>111</sup> Barbara Owen, James Wells, and Joycelyn Pollock, "Intersectional Inequality and Women’s Imprisonment,” in *In Search of Safety: Confronting Inequality in Women's Imprisonment*, 7.

<sup>112</sup> Aleksandr Isaevič Solženicyn, Nicholas Bethell, and David Burg, *The Love-Girl and the Innocent: a Play*, (New York: Farrar, 1969), 9.

demonstrates that men like himself had witnessed enough of this abuse to fully understand the ““pornified”” female culture and write about it.<sup>113</sup>

Since Gulag women inmates were at a disadvantage due to their physical weakness and social vulnerability (the rape stigma being a part of it), the common option was not to avoid sex, but rather to use it as a mechanism of survival. “Consensual” sex in the camps meant sex exchanged not only for means of survival, such as food or a shorter work day, but also sex that was devoid of physical violence. Solzhenitsyn’s play, *The Love-Girl and the Innocent*, provides yet another example of such dynamics: a guard comments on a woman’s nice legs and states he needs a woman to cook, clean, and run errands for him. She agrees, understanding his coded language as an invitation to prostitute herself, because she is aware of the benefits of accepting his offer. If she consents, she would be given such as “protection” from other forms of sexual violence, better living conditions, and food.<sup>114</sup>

The concept of “victim-blaming” was also a part of Soviet rape rhetoric.<sup>115</sup> The Soviet woman existed under the strong patriarchal hold of Stalinism. She was supposed to be a morally pure citizen, a loyal wife to a man who dedicated his work to the state, and a sexually untarnished individual.<sup>116</sup> If sexual violence occurred, it was she who was held responsible for it. The overall impact of rape was thus magnified tremendously due to the society’s holding women responsible for rape, causing further shame, guilt, and humiliation. Irina Astashkevich, a Russian historian specializing in imperial pogrom violence, demonstrates that the guilt could be not only

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<sup>113</sup> Barbara Owen, "Intersectional Inequality and Women’s Imprisonment.”

<sup>114</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *The Love-Girl and the Innocent: a Play*, 9-10.

<sup>115</sup> Astashkevich, "Describing the Indescribable: Narratives of Gendered Violence,” 83.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

individual, but also collective. Astashkevich states that the “humiliated and undignified victim” tarnished the reputation of more than just themselves: they made the whole community seem “impure.”<sup>117</sup> This research is relevant for my study of sexual violence in the Gulag because pogrom rapes also went largely unacknowledged, while their victims were shunned by society. Moreover, administration of Soviet concentration camps also covered facts about sexual violence because they wanted to look good in annual reports and “socialist competition” charts. Acknowledging and reporting rape could have made them appear as chaotic, badly managed, and dangerous places.

An example of the Russian Empire’s and the Soviet State’s social victim-blaming as associated with rape is epitomized in a joke about rape during the pogroms of the 1910s:

There’s a pogrom going on in a shtetl. The gang of hoodlums rushes into a Jewish home and start to loot, plunder, and smash anything they do not grab. The owner, an old Jew, begs the assailants: ‘Take anything you want, just spare my daughter!’ The old Jew’s daughter hears this and comes out into the room, saying, ‘No, Dad! A pogrom is a pogrom!’<sup>118</sup>

The history of rape and the lewd nature of the joke demonstrates that those who keep these stories in their cultural memory think of raped women not as of victims, but as those who enjoyed or welcomed the rape — as if rape were an inevitability in a woman’s life or even something she enjoyed. Such patriarchal, racist, and sexist attitudes have led to women silencing themselves in fear of their stories tarnishing their reputation or becoming the brunt of crass colloquial jokes. Due to this attitude, formed both among the victims and the society as a whole, most rapes were simply not recorded. This negligence is clearly shown in historians’ inability to point to any fig-

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<sup>117</sup> Astashkevich, “Describing the Indescribable: Narratives of Gendered Violence,” 83.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.



ures or statistics when discussing the number of victims of mass rapes in the early 20th century. Historians of Russian pogroms, for example, as Astashkevich points out, are left with ambiguous descriptors such as “‘many,’ ‘undefined,’ and ‘all’.”<sup>119</sup> This historical evidence is key to seeing the Soviet mentality around rape. Since no one spoke up about sexual violence it has removed its mark from society, whereas the deeply rooted trauma still lives.

## 2.2

### The Commodification of Women in the Gulag

The Gulag’s hierarchical structure is not only vertical, as historians studying many prisons testify, but also horizontal, depending on the Gulag-specific transactional culture. Gherardo Colombo defines horizontal hierarchies as the “idea that humanity advances through a harmonious process in which the collaboration of everyone according to their abilities contributes to the liberty of individuals and the progress of society as a whole.”<sup>120</sup> Horizontal hierarchical structure does not imply equality or the absence of violence, but it proves that women could use transactions within the prison social structure to their benefit. The exchange of sexual services for food did not contribute to their liberty or social progress, but it did help them stay alive.

The transactional culture in the Gulag was caused by the lack of resources (food, clothing, housing) and the overall lack of rest women and men experienced in the Gulag. Within it, inmates could use sex as a form of payment to receive their much-needed food rations, get more

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<sup>119</sup> Astashkevich, “Describing the Indescribable: Narratives of Gendered Violence,” 79.

<sup>120</sup> Colombo, Gherardo, Elisabetta Zoni, and René Foqué, “The Horizontal Society,” in *On Rules*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 57.

time off, or procure assignments of easier jobs. Not having food or being able to sleep due to bedbugs, starvation, and sickness forced inmates could have forced to make a choice: find a way to get access to more food or die without any access to resources. Historians can speculate that finding access to more food would have been done by means of domestic work, finding a camp boss husband, prostitution, or bribing.

Nevertheless, for many, the idea of selling sex for food, clothing, or rest was never an option. Those who rejected it, saw “selling sex” or “prostituting” as rape where the raped inmate received a payment. All of the inmates who are cited in this chapter below grappled in one way or another with the outcome, or possible outcome, of sexual violence. Their mental suffering brought them to the brink of suicide as a punishment for their becoming victims. That said, they also understood that the rejection of prostitution was a form of suicide in the Gulag, for women who rebuffed their attackers could get both raped and killed.<sup>121</sup> Women inmates faced many difficult decisions during their time in the gulag, one of them being the impossibility of life after rape.<sup>122</sup>

Three of the four women writers, whose experiences are addressed in this chapter, often discuss prostitution as a form of payment within the Gulag. Tamara Petkevich, Euphrosinia Kernovskaya, and Eugenia Ginzburg, in particular, write about Gulag women’s use of sex to get

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<sup>121</sup> It should be noted that male inmates were also forced to undergo sexual assaults and often submit to the dominant man because of their lack of other means of survival. There were many episodes of homosexual rape and males performing the role of “domestic servants.” This also led to their lack of freedom, deprivation of agency, but most of all their status denigration, since homosexuality has such a serious social stigma in Russia. Historians hear more of this world (homosexual rape) than that of heterosexual rape in works such as Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales*.

<sup>122</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 201-206.

extra food, time off, a cleaner place to sleep, clothing and so on. The concept of “commodification” has two different sides to it: men seeing women as an object of sex which is often a source of rape, versus a woman seeing herself as an object of commodification of sexual power in order to reap the so-called “benefits,” (i.e. getting food or time off). Applebaum cites one woman who “proudly” reaped the “benefited” from men at camp:

‘Whoever wanted to could have her, on a bunk, under the bunk, in the separate cubicles of the technical experts... Whenever she met me, she turned her head aside, and tightened her lips convulsively. Once entering the potatoes store at the center, I found her on a pile of potatoes with a brigadier of the 56th, the hunch-back half-breed Levkovich; she burst into a spastic fit of weeping, and as she returned to the camp zone in the evening she held back her tears with two tiny fists.’<sup>123</sup>

This example exposes the woman’s internal struggle with allowing men to objectify and abuse her body versus her survival in the Gulag. Although those two choices might not have been her only paths to take (prostitution or death), she still externally struggled with it and that struggle brings to light the complexity of prostitution in the Gulag for historians. This is a typical case in the Gulag because even though she “willingly” chose the life of a prostitute, historians and readers can clearly see signs of trauma, pain, and an ultimate rejection of her own decisions.

Eufrosinia Kersnovskaya’s extremely detailed notebook of her time in the Gulag documents the commodification of women in Soviet concentration camps. Her notebooks included both drawings and notes explaining them. Overall, she produced twelve notebooks which include 680 panels of artwork and narratives.<sup>124</sup> Her notebooks are striking. On the one hand, they are full of detailed sketches of beautiful landscapes rendered in bright colors, and, on the other hand,

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<sup>123</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 309.

<sup>124</sup> “About the Project: Eufrosinia Kersnovskaya. What's a Human Being Worth?,” <http://www.gulag.su/project/index.php?eng=1&page=0> (Date of Access: April 22, 2020).

they represent grotesque, even monstrous, individuals with demonic smiles, waspy hair, blood-covered bodies, and purple skin. Throughout her notebooks, the diarist is oftentimes recounting personal experiences, but also relating the other people's dire existence in the camp. Kersnovskaya never calls herself a victim, but when she describes violent events, it is often obvious that she partook in the terrible fate of other women.

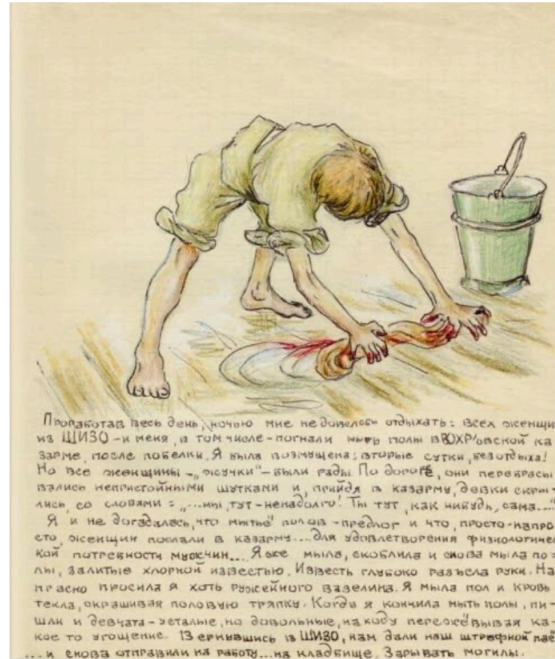
Kersnovskaya's diaries contain striking, but also oblique examples of sexual violence in the Gulag. Most of the portraits she creates are characterized by graphic depictions of deformity and suffering. Along with inmates' purple or blue skin, she also features protruding bones, red mouths, and thin faces of the emaciated individuals. They seem battered – either tortured or severely abused. The example that follows is taken from Notebook five, “Archive of Illusions,” or *Arkhiv Illuzii*.

Kersnovskaya offers her readers an example of prostitution in which she, as the “narrator” appears not to have participated. The sexual exchange is taking place in another room; the drawing in which it is implied depicts a woman (Kersnovskaya), who is cleaning the floors in the barracks devoid of other people. However, next to the drawing there are her notes about this event. Kersnovskaya writes that the other women were pulled after a long day at work to mop at another barracks, where male prisoners were located, most likely, criminals housed temporarily before being transmitted to another camp. Once the women got there, they were “sent to the barracks to satisfy the men's physical needs.”<sup>125</sup> Kersnovskaya avoided their fate by doing the job all the females were supposed to perform collectively, i.e. mop.<sup>126</sup> Her commentary reveals why

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<sup>125</sup> Kersnovskaya, Album 9, Section 1, *How Much is a Person Worth?* Fig. 1.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, Fig. 1.



her hands were bleeding (the chloric acid used in the sanitation liquid had eaten through the skin on her hands), but it does not suggest that she was judging the women. That said, when they returned, she noticed they were chewing on something: “When I finished washing the floor the gals returned tired but happy chewing some sort of treat.”<sup>127</sup> This remark remains cryptic: it does not explain whether Kersnovskaya was envious of their remuneration or feels relief that she was spared sexual violence. But then, because of her stating that upon their return to the barracks, they “got [their] punitive ration and were again sent to work,” the reader may infer that the value of “prostitution” was apparent to her.<sup>128</sup> She clearly saw the benefits her fellow inmates received from trading sex for food. Because Kersnovskaya seemed slightly envious of the so-called “prostitutes” added ration, I conclude that she did not judge the commodification of sex in the

<sup>127</sup> Kersnovskaya, *How Much is a Person Worth?* Fig. 1.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, Fig. 1.

camp with the same severity and social stigma as she might it would've been outside of the Gulag.

Women in the Gulag could self-commodify to improve their living conditions not only in order to survive, but also to make their sentence more bearable psychologically. There is no data on what the rewards were for prostitution, although it seems that any payment was better than receiving nothing. Some inmates saw the transaction as a *quid pro quo* and left with a little more food that could help them endure hard labor. If rape victims could not accept the payment because of social shame or guilt, they ended up punishing themselves by rejecting a much-needed survival resource. Prostitution could also be rewarded with “extra” things, such as a clothing item that made a woman look nicer. My other example comes from Tamara Petkevich’s *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*. Petkevich wrote about a young woman named Elena who told their barrack about the “sexual tricks she had used to entice men” and showing other women her expensive nightgowns and blouses.<sup>129</sup> Elena was clearly using sex and prostitution as a form of coping with her sentence and the harsh conditions of camp life. The guards “enjoyed” searching their barracks: “They'd guess right away who exactly was hiding restricted objects, and where. Soon ... Elena would sneak in a good time into the investigation officer's room by the checkpoint. ... Nothing could shame her.”<sup>130</sup> Petkevich’s tone here was light-hearted and sentimental as she is imagined Elena’s showing other inmates her elegant clothing.<sup>131</sup> Elena had sex with the guards and administrators to sneak things into the camp and get away with having forbidden items.

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<sup>129</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 352.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

Petkevich knew this prostitution was not out of “the usual camp pattern,” even though she made it clear that she would never prostitute herself.<sup>132</sup>

The women’s existence in the Gulag also included forced prostitution.<sup>133</sup> For the sake of escaping violence, women would say “yes,” because if they rejected the man, he would rape them anyway. But, in the latter case, when that act was over, the woman would not get her pay. This type of commodification of women for sexual purposes explains why many women agreed to be paid for sexual services rather than still being raped and receiving nothing. Being raped for nothing could make prostitution seem like a better option. As Russian historian Steven Barnes says in his book, *Death and Redemption*, “euphemistically termed ‘compulsion [of women] to cohabitation’ in the Gulag communiqués, administration staff took advantage of their access to the means of survival to force female prisoners into sexual relationships... [Women were] ‘called out for night work’ or were ‘selected’ to work as domestic servants”<sup>134</sup> “Called out for night work” and cohabitation were interchangeable concepts for the camp guards and inmates. Barnes’s analysis clearly shows that the other side of sexual coercion was survival. Similarly, if a woman rejected “cohabitation,” she would suffer some fatal outcome, such as rape or death. The men understood that they had the means to manipulate the women, because for a female living in the Gulag’s conditions, turning food or warmth down was synonymous with slow death.

Ginzburg gives an example of forced prostitution in her memoir. She writes how she was washing floors with “criminal” women inmates in a contractors’ barracks. During a break, she

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<sup>132</sup>Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 352.

<sup>133</sup> Forced prostitution: men try to bribe female inmate for sex, which the women might reject, leading to the man’s raping the woman.

<sup>134</sup> Steven A. Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, 100.

said, the “criminal women” would run off and prostitute themselves. Ginzburg says that she never went with them, but she also describes an experience that nearly brought her to it. While cleaning one day, “[she] suddenly felt a resounding slap on the behind and heard a hoarse, alcoholic voice saying: ‘Well, what about it? I’ll give you a hundred rubles.’”<sup>135</sup> Filled with disgust, Ginzburg did not know how to respond. She never expected to be solicited for sex. At that moment, her whole understanding of the world she had come from and the world she was in solidified into a new structure. Ginzburg was from a very privileged household, which included a nice job and a healthy family environment. Her shock is sourced from her deep trust in the Soviet system, which presupposed the lack of sexual exploitation in the Soviet Union. With this trust came a form of entitlement, as in her seeing fellow communists as being untouchable (females) and honorable and pure (males).

Ginzburg rejected the man. Her rejection led to him asking again, “Are you Article 58? All right, I’ll give you two hundred,” meaning that for him, she now appeared as a “cleaner” partner — the kind of person who would not engage in prostitution with camp men on a regular basis. He then tried to grab her, but Ginzburg managed a miraculous escape, because another man nearby stopped him.<sup>136</sup> If that man had not been there to interfere, the reader can assume Ginzburg would have been raped.

Sometimes women did not engage in sexual servitude. Instead, they were bought with food for a one-time sexual exchange. For example, Ginzburg writes how she attempted to comfort a woman who the reader assumes received bread for a sexual favor: the woman, with a “face

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<sup>135</sup> Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 378.

<sup>136</sup> Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, 379.



contorted into a dark mask,” burst into the building, fell to the ground and threw a loaf of bread onto the table. She exclaimed that she could neither eat the bread nor even touch it. Ginzburg sensed that there was something horribly wrong, since inmates would kill for bread in the camps.

The abused woman then wailed:

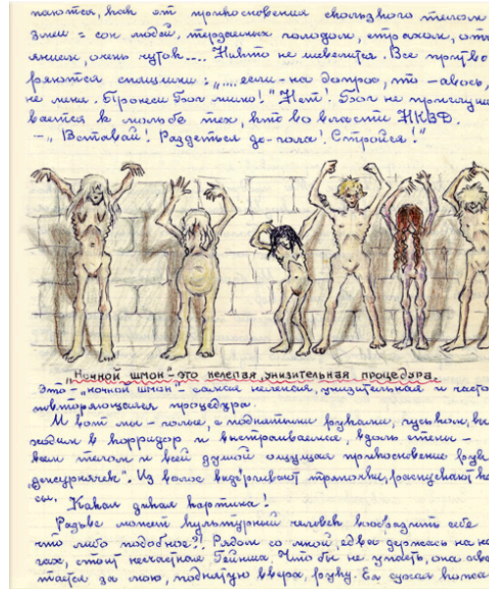
“It is hell to be an intellectual! Absolute hell!... others do the same to get themselves some bread. And I did it too. Earned it in the same way thousands of other women earned it when there was no other way open to them. There was this peasant passing through the taiga... He pulled a loaf of bread out of his sack and showed me. He put the loaf straight down on the snow. I couldn’t take my eyes off it. Now I can’t even touch it.”<sup>137</sup>

According to Ginzburg’s narrative, the woman who brought the loaf of bread to the barracks did not say explicitly that she had had sex, yet her shame and disgust made it clear how she had received the loaf from the peasant. In her ruin, she also drew a line between political prisoners and criminals. As an “intellectual,” i.e. a political prisoner, she had an immense amount of guilt for trading sex for bread, whereas common criminals, according to her, were less hesitant in such matters. The guilt and pain surrounding the exchange of sex for bread were such that she now could not use the payment. Her rejecting the bread in this situation sheds light on the trauma that the woman felt; giving up the bread, a symbol of sustenance, she refused to reconcile her fate as a woman for sale.

Sexual harassment of women happened daily. Kersnovskaya describes and depicts the victims of such abuse. There are many levels of sexual exploitation inflicted on women because of the guards, contractors, and administrators — as well as criminal inmates who could buy sex with money or violence. One of her notes, accompanied by a drawing describing the procedure

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<sup>137</sup> Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, 42.



of “shmon.” The “shmon” is a strip search that occurred every night: “This was a nightly *shmon*, the most senseless, humiliating, and frequently repeated procedure.” Kersnovskaya describes this nightly *shmon* as deeply humiliating due to the exposure of women’s naked bodies.<sup>138</sup> Women’s bodies were displayed, possibly for the guards' entertainment, but also for the embarrassment of the women. The exposure of their naked bodies made the women feel violated: “And here we were, naked, with our arms raised, stepping in file formation into the corridor and lining up along the wall, feeling with all our body and soul the touches of hands of guard women on duty”<sup>139</sup> Along with the humiliation of nakedness, this search could make women sick. It was done either in unheated rooms or outdoors. Thus, the inmates were freezing standing along the wall naked with their hands up. The guards would rub their hands over every inch of a woman's body. Kersnovskaya describes some of them going too far.<sup>140</sup> Her drawing shows sad, emaciated women

<sup>138</sup> Kersnovskaya, *Arkhiv Illyuziy*, Notebook 5, Image 7, Fig. 4.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, Fig. 4.

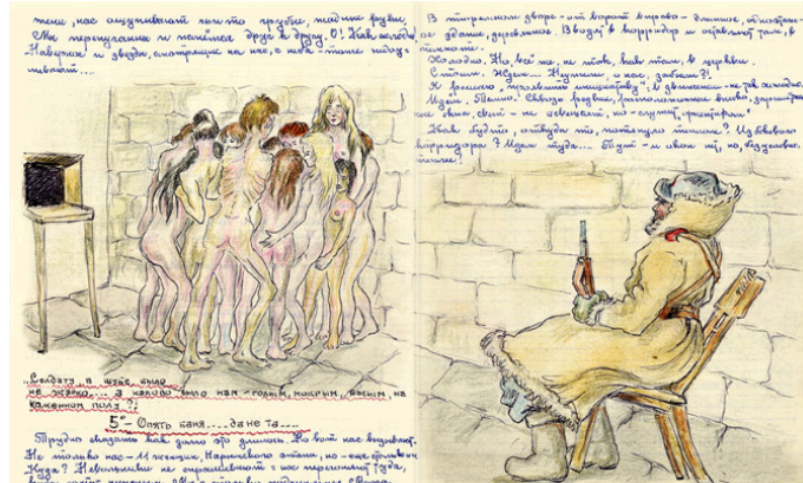
<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, Fig. 4.

who seem to be struggling to keep their heads up. She drew them with bulging stomachs and so thin that they looked like they had only skin and bones. Her artistic ability allows the reader to truly imagine the women's pain.



Kersnovskaya depicted other moments of female embarrassments, such as when she was very ill and needed medical attention. The drawing of this moment is accompanied by text. One can deduce from the drawing that the medical issue had something to do with the female genitalia, since Kersnovskaya drew a man shaving a standing women's vaginal area in the bathtub prior to an examination. Kersnovskaya's character in the drawing is covering her whole face with her thin arms, exposing her emaciated and unwomanly body. The text stated: "I was badly ill, but felt awfully ashamed, because it was a man paramedic who dealt with me."<sup>141</sup> She is covering her face with embarrassment. Kersnovskaya held on to this moment of exposure, not just because it was a naked body, but because her body had lost all femininity.

<sup>141</sup> Kersnovskaya, *Arkhiv Illyuziy*, Fig 2.



Similarly, she depicts naked women being taken around the campgrounds and bathhouse:

They drove us out of the bathhouse - naked - through the entire building, and we had to defile naked before a whole platoon of cackling soldiers. Among us were very young girls, not yet soiled, who had not lost their feminine charm. Under the gaze of the soldiers, the girls wriggled as if touched by a red-hot iron, and I was surprised at the women on duty who did not consider it necessary to rid us of this torture with shame.<sup>142</sup>

The repetition of the word “naked” shows how the women were traumatized by their exposure.

The men forced them to strut around the building with the goal of embarrassing them. The younger women were called “virgins” by the men in order to further embarrass the women. It was a daily struggle for these women not to be raped; they constantly felt degraded by this violent sexualization.

Much of the prostitution, coercion, and sexual exploitation that took place in the Gulag remained unspoken because many women who had those experiences did not survive, while those who did survive did not always feel capable of revealing the deeply traumatic repercussions of their being females in the male-run camps. As for most of history, accounts of Gulag violence came from, not only the regime, but the survivors who had enough courage to address

<sup>142</sup> Kersnovskaya, *Arkhir Illuziy*, Fig. 5 and 3

these issues which often times counter the regime's accounts. Currently, these voices are still silences because of the stigma, but also the new regime's rejection of exposing the Soviet State's ignominy. Historians do not get to hear the voices of the women who perished under the tight grip of the oppressive totalitarian regime. Those voices that did get heard belong to the former inmates who, nevertheless, struggled under the same stigma and experienced the same consequences of trauma as the others who remained silent. Their stories have much depth that is not always explored in the context of the surrounding silence.

### 2.3.

#### Tamara Petkevich: the Dichotomy of Life and Death

Tamara Petkevich witnessed many acts of rape and other sexual trauma during her time in the Gulag. There are four moments in particular where she was directly affected by rape: her experience with an interrogator; with a guard; a mass rape in the barrack; and someone attempting to rape her when she auditioned for a performance as an actress. Compared to other women inmates who became writers, she was more open and upfront about her overall experiences in the Gulag. Although others cite moments of sexual violence, almost none talk about it with such emotional openness. Petkevich attempts to self-heal while finding power through narrating her trauma. As I have already demonstrated in the first chapter of this project, she wrote about labor trauma, too, imbuing her narratives with anxiety, fear, acceptance, and hope. These themes are prevalent in her stories about sexual violence as well. The use of animated, passionate language makes her emotions more palpable. In reading her work with attention and compassion the read-

er can see further into the survivor's perspective on sexual trauma and discover the psychological mechanisms that kept her alive.

The Petkevich's first documented exposure to sexual violence, or the fear of sexual violence, comes from the episode of her being interrogated in prison. The male investigator became obsessed with the former seamstress, constantly complimenting her ("What beautiful hair you have, Tamara!") and proclaiming his love for her: "Don't be afraid of me... I love you, Tamara!"<sup>143</sup> She demanded another interrogator out of fear that this one was capable of rape, but he manipulated her by explaining all the worse things other interrogators could do to her.<sup>144</sup> The man continued to harass Petkevich by having his mother send her parcels and only partially revealing to the inmate what her friends and family were writing to her in prison in the letters he kept to himself. The harassment became very serious when he "suddenly he rose from behind his desk and advanced slowly towards [her], unbuttoning his pants"<sup>145</sup> Petkevich ran out of the room, encountered another officer in the hallway, and yelled for help. The obsessed interrogator apologized in the following days for his behavior. Petkevich states that she cannot tell whether his apology was sincere or rehearsed. Her experience seems contradictory because the man who had her in his grip harassed her, attempted to rape her, and then apologized and stopped the harassment. There is a stark difference between this moment and the other she experienced because of the apology – an unusual gesture for a male in power. This encounter became Petke-

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<sup>143</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 119.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

vich's entrance into the Gulag world, that of complicated violent experiences, male dominance, and sexual manipulation.

Petkevich's other exposure to sexual violence was with one of her guards named the "Beast." He received his nickname from raping and killing women.<sup>146</sup> Although Petkevich was aware of his violent history, she asked, "How many people have you killed?"<sup>147</sup> She shocked her fellow workers because she put herself in his line of fire. He could have made her his next victim. The guard did not seem hostile, but he responded in a brutal manner: "If I shoot you, that makes five."<sup>148</sup> After that, her fellow inmates told her not to walk about alone or leave for a break because they feared he would kill her. He could use the excuse that she was trying to escape and shoot her.<sup>149</sup>

The first time Petkevich claims she witnessed rape was at a transportation camp. Sitting in the barracks, some Kirghiz women had just received packages from their home nearby. Parcels were a dream to every inmate because it meant that the inmate would be able to survive that month. Immediately after the Kirghiz women receiving their parcels, about eight men tried to rip the bags out of their hands, but the women fought back. Soon "the [men] became enraged. They ripped the resisting women from their beds and dragged them into the middle of the barracks. The sacks were kicked aside. They stripped one, two, five Kirghiz women, hurled them on the floor and raped them... Women's screams were drowned out by the coarse laughing and in-

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<sup>146</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 161.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

human panting...”<sup>150</sup> During this outbreak, Petkevich was in the very back of the barrack. She and her friend Sonya were overcome with terror: “Sonya collapsed in a strange, soundless hysteria. She dug into me with her fingernails. We crawled into the darkest corner, only wishing to turn into nothing, to dust, to smoke, so that no one could see us so that we wouldn’t see or hear anything. But I saw...”<sup>151</sup> She ends this story by outlining what she witnessed. She saw the terror in the women’s eyes and the pleasure in the men’s, and she also heard sounds that characterized the experience as beastly and carnal. Petkevich cited the noise coming from the men as “coarse laughing and inhuman panting.” Those wild noises demonstrated that men were punishing the women by raping them because they fought the men back over the parcels. Five men started walking towards Sonya and Petkevich. They were frantically trying to shift through their options, “What should we do? Beg them? Scream? Appeal to their consciences? No! Kill! Kill them and ourselves!”<sup>152</sup> To her, the only option was to kill both herself and the men.<sup>153</sup> The twist of Petkevich’s story is that these five men ended up saving Petkevich and Sonya from the other men in the barracks by sneaking them out.

Later Sonya introduced Petkevich to one of the men who saved them: “I suffered because I didn’t manage to find the right words to express what I felt towards him, which extended beyond gratitude... I once again found faith in humanity.”<sup>154</sup> Her speechlessness was sourced

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<sup>150</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 174.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>153</sup> Petkevich wrote and thought about the concept of suicide often. As the reader finds out later, rape for her was the same as death.

<sup>154</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 176.



from her need to show gratitude to a man who saved her. Both Sonya and Petkevich had no hope in humanity since their time in the Gulag. But the men's act of kindness was unexpected and therefore affected them both drastically. Petkevich's newly found faith in humanity arguably saved her life in the Gulag.

The final example of rape from Petkevich's memoir addresses her experience as a "luckier" inmate, the one with a skill or talent to share in exchange for a reprieve from hard labor. Her friend asked her to be a dancer in a performance at the camps. In order for a political prisoner to be in a performance, his or her role had to be approved by the Kulturno-Vospitatelnaya Chast (KVCh), or Cultural-Educational Department, which was charged with re-educating prisoners and organizing cultural events in the Gulag.<sup>155</sup> The head of the KVCh at her current camp was named Vasilyev. He scheduled an interview with Petkevich in his office. Rather than talking about the performance, he asked whether felling trees was hard work. Felling trees was one of the most difficult jobs in the camp, and Vasilyev knew that. Aware that he was asking the obvious, Petkevich found his question to be suspicious. But before she answered, the KVCh head was already offering to transfer her to more comfortable work – the kind that would mean working side-by-side with him every day in his office.<sup>156</sup> Being an intuitive woman, Petkevich was wary of his behavior and his familiar tone; she stayed silent.<sup>157</sup>

Suddenly he stood up and grabbed me by my arms, panting and pulling me behind the curtain. Before my mind could grasp what was happening, I instinctively pushed him back with such unexpected strength that he hit the side of the stove with the back of his head and crashed to the floor... The very idea of rape meant

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<sup>155</sup> Applebaum, *Gulag : A History*, 231.

<sup>156</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 201.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

the ultimate limit, behind which there could be only death. The sharp sense of being shut out of life was my only clear sensation, and Vasilyev's vengeful promise 'I'll see you rot!' became my daily reality. It meant nothing but death for me.<sup>158</sup>

For Petkevich, death was preferable to rape. She would have rather died of exhaustion, labor, sickness, or torture than get sexually assaulted. Her reliance on suicide as an end to her troubles is prevalent in her memoir. After the camp rubs people's humanity away, the dichotomy of rape and death are not as complicated in relation to survival. Petkevich's rejection of the KVCh head and his promise to wear her out with impossible work assignments ("I'll see you rot!") was a self-destructive gesture, which, nevertheless, allowed her to preserve dignity and maintain control over her body and spirit. She nobly staggered on, suffering from Vasilyev's iron fist and the extra work he gave her. The doctors at the camp advised time off for Petkevich because, just as Vasilyev promised, she started to "rot": "It began with purple spots over the legs and then grew into pus sores, then finally open ulcers."<sup>159</sup> Vasilyev rejected the medical advice and forced her to continue working. Luckily for her, a doctor helped Petkevich to get transferred to another hospital. Soon after this Vasilyev died of tuberculosis.<sup>160</sup>

To succumb to a man's power was a type of survival mechanism for women. Petkevich was lucky because a doctor moved her away to another place before Vasilyev's power could kill her. Had she submitted, her life would have been easier, but the moral load that came with sexual servitude and rape would have been unbearable. She ponders the idea of "submissive de-

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<sup>158</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 201.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

termination.”<sup>161</sup> A man had warned her about in the earlier in the camps: “Now, as I realized my own inability to struggle for existence, at the edge of the abyss where life and death were so thinly separated, my resistance expressed itself in the desire to break away from this place at any price, where the threat to ‘see me rot’ would someday come true.”<sup>162</sup>

Most Gulag women were not as lucky, nor did they live to tell their stories. Petkevich understood that to live she had to have hope. The hope came from those who saved her: Sonya, the five men, the doctor who transferred her, and many others, but it also came from her ability to resist sexual violence in full awareness of the consequences she might bear for the resistance. Narratives like Petkevich’s are imperative to understanding survival under a political incarceration in a totalitarian regime because it shows the different paths women had to take: to submit to a man or to resist and suffer the consequences.

## 2.4

### The Unspeakable Horror of the “Kolyma Tram”

The phenomenon of mass rape was not rare in the Gulag. It seems there were two types of mass rape: the group of men attacking a woman or women, versus the theatrical, ritualized, and *planned* mass rape of women, which was one of the unique features of Soviet concentration camps under Stalin. The planning was done by men; they would prepare for the arrival of women inmates by bringing food to bribe and narcotics to drug the guards and by traveling long dis-

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<sup>161</sup> Petkevich, *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*, 208.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

tances in order to reach a place where they could violently rape multiple women. Each man was assigned a role in the “spectacle,” although none of them ended up being a mere spectator of rape – they all participated in it.

It seems that such a ritualized mass rape mostly occurred during the women inmates’ transportation from the place of their conviction to the place of internment or between the camps. This was easier to do, because the guards transporting the women were hired. Unlike the real Gulag administrative guards, they were easier to bribe, because of their removal from a governmental position. The camp administration did not advocate for mass rape, but they did little to combat it due to the lack of interest in it and their distance from the crime scene. What makes this experience stand out are the men’s calculated and planned attack on women. As will be seen, the commodification of women inmates as well as their complete deprivation of human rights and basic security let the local male population unleash an unthinkable amount of violence on Gulag females.

Another male account of sexual violence, which should be taken into account is Polish writer Janusz Bardach, who described an example of a mass beastly rape aboard a boat to Kolyma. He claimed that the men ripped a hole in the wall to get to women, who they then violently raped.<sup>163</sup> The event did not stop until the guards sprayed water on the men and then proceeded to throw dead women overboard.<sup>164</sup> This clearly shows the objectification of women in the Soviet system. Not only were the women treated as objects during rape, but those who died were simply discarded, like pieces of trash.

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<sup>163</sup> *Gulag Voices: An Anthology*, edited by Anne Applebaum, 40.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

Elena Glinka's account of mass rape is an account of sexual violence that stands out among other survivors' stories. Her narrative is powerful and unusually detailed. Much of the evidence of sexual violence presented in this section will be the story told in her own words. Glinka was an engineer; she was arrested in 1950 for hiding the fact that she lived in an area in Russia that was occupied by the Nazis during World War II.<sup>165</sup> She spent six years in the Gulag.<sup>166</sup> Her story "Kolymsky Tramvay" ("The Kolyma Tram") was to become one of the first testimonies of Gulag rape published after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1989, almost forty years after the cited event, Glinka broke the taboo by speaking about a three-day rape rampage that she witnessed during her transit from one camp to another. This was an uncharacteristic gesture of truth-telling for her. Glinka's friends and family said she usually only spoke about the "good people she had met, or about those who helped her," but never about her painful experiences.<sup>167</sup> Therefore, when she published her account of "The Kolyma Train" in the literary magazine *Neva*, her relatives and friends were shocked.<sup>168</sup> She started the piece by citing an expression that circulated among the inmates: "The Kolyma tram is something that runs you over, but maybe you might come out alive."<sup>169</sup> Although she would go on to tell what actual event endowed "The Kolyma Train" with its notoriety, the fact that she could cite a camp expression about it as something common added gravity to her account. In the story itself, she continues to

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<sup>165</sup> Elena Glinka. <https://shalamov.ru/authors/81.html> (Date of Access: April 12, 2020).

<sup>166</sup> "Elena Glinka." In *Gulag Voices: An Anthology*, 39.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

describe the traumatic events as if they happened yesterday. Her disturbing, but enlightening narrative sheds light on the atrocities committed against women during their time in the Gulag.

On Glinka's way to Kolyma, she and her fellow inmates were stopped at a transit location in a fishing village on the coast of Okhotsk. Glinka starts her complex narrative by removing herself from the story. She chooses a third-person narrator in order to detach herself from her trauma. The women inmates Glinka describes consisted of mostly petty criminals, but there were three political prisoners in the mix: "One was an older woman, the wife of a disgraced diplomat, second was a middle-aged seamstress; the third was a student from Leningrad."<sup>170</sup> The reader eventually figures out by a close reading that Glinka was that very student. Once she and the other inmates arrived, men came to the village on foot and by car to rape them. They were fully prepared for their "Kolyma Tram," bribing the guards in advance and making sure that the powerless women would be unable to resist them.

The tone in which Glinka describes her experience with the "Kolyma Tram" is lifeless; her language is nearly mechanical. Though she provides some details, the goal of her harsh and bleak account is to convey the sense of women victims becoming inanimate objects when subjected to sexual violence. Her retelling starts with how the men systematically gave the guards *chifir*<sup>171</sup> and alcohol to make them pass out.<sup>172</sup> Then the men began to subjugate and harass their prey into submission. They were "hauling [the women] into the building, twisting their arms,

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<sup>170</sup> "Elena Glinka." In *Gulag Voices: An Anthology*, 42.

<sup>171</sup> Strong tea with narcotic properties.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

dragging them through the grass, brutally beating any who resisted,” Glinka writes<sup>173</sup> The fact that the mass rape had been planned transpires through Glinka’s description of the assigned jobs: one man brought the keg, another brought water in, and others nailed planks over the windows and doors.<sup>174</sup> Blocking any exit or entrance was not about keeping people out, but keeping women and the rape that was planned to go on inside locked in. Once caged, the women got divided among their rapists: “a line of about a dozen men formed by each woman, and so began the mass rape known as the ‘Kolyma Tram.’”<sup>175</sup> The man whose job was that of the “tram driver” would tell the rapist when to “mount” a woman and when their “ride” was to be passed on to the next man.<sup>176</sup> The rape went on for three days. Men would wake up and turn to the closest victim throughout those days. After a while, women began to die. The dead were piled near the door, so they could be easily removed after the event ended.

Glinka's testimony shed light not just on the power dynamic between women and men in the concentration camps, where the former had no means of avoiding sexual violence, but also between Glinka and Stalinism. Her personal experience allowed her to survey the Soviet rape culture and assert that acts of sexual violence “were by no means rare in the Stalin era, and everywhere they happened in the same way – under the government flag, with government collusion.”<sup>177</sup> To Glinka, mass rape had been turned into a mark of Stalinist culture. As she found out later, the “Kolyma Tram” she survived was “middleweight” or “average” as compared to the oth-

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<sup>173</sup> “Elena Glinka.” In *Gulag Voices: An Anthology*, 45.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-46.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

er incidents of mass rape that took place in the Gulag network.<sup>178</sup> The reader assumes that Glinka got her information about the proliferation of mass rape from the other women or men in the camps. But if Glinka heard this from other inmates, then that means she and other women compared their experiences with rape in the camps. Unfortunately, it is hard to say when and how she spoke to others about this, but it is critical to note that she had broken her silence before, if only in a private conversation with fellow survivors.

Glinka's anger from the example above is directed towards Stalinism and the broader Soviet system, but not at the rapists. As seen in the examples below, she does not express her anger at men who raped women inmates for three days. On the contrary, her accusations are directed at the reader. Her testimony and her argumentative language seem to suggest that the reader who did not have an experience of sexual violence may be complicit in perpetrating the social and political system that makes it possible:

I offer this documentary account to all the die-hard Stalinists who to this day do not want to believe that the lawlessness and sadism of these reprisals were consciously encouraged by their idol. Let them at least for a moment picture their wives, daughters, and sisters in that Bugurchan brigade; after all, it was purely by accident that we, not they, ended up there.<sup>179</sup>

Glinka is doing a few critical things here. Firstly, she gives agency to those who are her foe by stating that they “do not want to believe.” Her decision to tell the story of the mass rape shows her belief that the readers who would encounter it have a choice in whether to endorse the atrocities of the Soviet regime or not. She is asking them to change their attitude to the existing regime by accurately describing her “sadistic” and “lawless” experience as proof of the wrong-

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<sup>178</sup> “Elena Glinka.” In *Gulag Voices: An Anthology*, 47.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.



doings under Stalin. Secondly, she points to the Purge and the arbitrary arrest of citizens by the Soviet State in order to demonstrate that the treat of sexual violence is imminent for the entire country. Drawing on citizens' perceptions of arrests as something justified, she asks the reader to imagine their wives, daughters, and/or sisters as victims of Gulag rape. They could have been in our place, she appears to suggest. This translation of her situation into collective experience is highly effective. It is sourced from a real fear that every person within the Soviet Union harbored even when supporting the regime. Picturing a loved one in the small fishing town where the rape is going on for three days is a persuasive argument against Stalinism. No one had seen a published account of mass rape at this level. Glinka's account is both graphic and able to reach every reader's vulnerable psyche, traumatized by fear from the Soviet State.

As Glinka starts to remember the brutality of the "Kolyma Tram," she is overcome with emotions and uses the pronoun "we." Although she is reluctant to put herself in the story at first, she cannot help it. As seen in the quotation above, "it was purely by accident that we, not they, ended up there."<sup>180</sup> She continues later asking the reader, "was there ever anything like this even in those dream-times when we first raised our front legs off the ground and began to walk upright...I don't think so."<sup>181</sup> Glinka asks whether people would or could have imagined such an experience as a younger person. She draws on the dreams and aspirations of children who, as she knows, might end up in an atrocious environment. "We" are the brutally abused women, the ones who were lucky to have survived. Of all of them, she is the only known person to report on the events. Why were the others silent?

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<sup>180</sup> "Elena Glinka," in *Gulag Voices: An Anthology*, 46.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

The fact that Glinka has to testify alone may contribute to her narrative's tone. The only emotion that she exhibits in her account is anger. To her, the "Kolyma Tram" became the facade of Sovietism, both because it was violent and because it is so impossible to talk or write about it. Glinka is aware of her desire to disassociate with the experience; her choice of the third person narrator simply reveals how deeply the trauma of mass rape was embedded in her. However, throughout her narrative, she fluctuates between first and third person, leaving the reader to discern who she is in the testimony. Her narrative thus has a clear goal of not only pointing out the atrocities perpetrated by the Soviet State in the Gulag, but also demonstrating the difficulty of revealing them post factum. With her argumentative language and commitment to detail, she is able to make the reader see her anger at the Soviet regime that made its victims hide and keep silent for decades.

As seen within this chapter, women's testimonies reveal their embarrassment from multiple exposures to sexual violence in the Gulag. They document shame in their decision to sell themselves for food and their restricted abilities to testify about rape. The break-down of these narratives exposes the strength of patriarchy in the Gulag hierarchy, the same hierarchy that emblemized the brutal patriarchal foundation of the Soviet regime. Male dominance over the documentation of women's Gulag experiences exists even today with the Russian Federation's restricted access to the Gulag archives, the continuation and state-supported "legalization" of violence against women,<sup>182</sup> and the suppression of investigative journalism. These testimonies show

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<sup>182</sup> From a watchdog newspaper Deutsche Welle, in 2017, Putin passed legislature that de-criminalizes violence against women. From "Почему в Декриминализации Домашнего Насилия в РФ Нет Ничего Хорошего: DW: 24.05.2019," DW.COM, May 24, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/ru/почему-в-декриминализации-домашнего-насилия-в-рф-нет-ничего-хорошего/a-48852876> (Date of Access: April 22, 2020).

what life in the camps was like for a Gulag woman; even where they are fragmentary, they shed light on the answers to historians' questions. The four primary sources I have cited in this chapter are most of the known accounts of sexual violence directed against the hundreds of thousands of women in the Gulag's roughly seventy years of existence. Overall, those accounts of rape and commodification of women in Soviet concentration camps are all that we have. They expose the deeply entrenched societal trauma that generations are still trying to overcome. Other stories may come to the surface in the future – though most will be silenced forever. We as readers can only listen to the survivors.

### Conclusion:

Contemporary governmental policies on remembrance problematize Russian society's relationship with collective mourning. In 2015, the government planned on addressing Post-Soviet trauma at large by adopting a "*Concept of State Policy to Perpetuate the Memory of Victims of Political Repressions*." Its goal was to commemorate the tragic Soviet past, but also bolster patriotism among the youth through educational programs. Putin, soon after ratifying this policy spoke at the opening of the Gulag museum about the trauma but refrained from stating the names of any perpetrators of state violence.<sup>183</sup> A few weeks later the Director of the Federal Security Service, in reference to the years of Stalin's terror, claimed that "the extraordinary situation called for extraordinary actions," and that "archive materials give evidence that in the large part of criminal cases there were objective reasons for criminal prosecution."<sup>184</sup> This imposed control around language and cultural memory shows that Putin's government has less interest in "unwarping" its country's cultural memory and rehabilitating its traumatized citizens than in maintaining authoritarian control over the nation's past, present, and future. The Russian Federation is attempting to reshape the memory of millions of victims, their family members, and bystanders. In order to do so, the government has mythologized the Gulag, representing it as the Soviet regime's emergency response to a series of crises. Accounts of Gulag survivors are no longer ful-

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<sup>183</sup> Olga Malinova, "Constructing the "Usable Past": The Evolution of the Official Historical Narrative in Post-Soviet Russia," in *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin's Russia*, edited by Bernsand Niklas and Törnquist-Plewa Barbara, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 100.

<sup>184</sup> Malinova, "Constructing the "Usable Past": The Evolution of the Official Historical Narrative in Post-Soviet Russia," 100.

ly taken into consideration. They are transformed into a collection of myths by the state ideology that clouds their accuracy and blurs the nuance otherwise present in these stories.

Under Stalin's regime, public mourning of the Gulag's victims was a political act, severely punished. Current day politics seem to be moving in that direction as well. In 1991, October 30th became known as the official "Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repressions."<sup>185</sup> On this day, the Russian government allowed large groups of people to gather to commemorate those who have perished. A popular ceremony occurred in Moscow at the Solovetsky Stone, where hundreds gathered to read the names of the victims and place flowers at the foot of the monument. Government officials, it should be noted, did not participate in or endorse this yearly gathering. On the contrary, Putin's administration and Russia's Federal Security Service (FSS) eventually came to disprove of it as a spontaneous action of protest. In 2018, Moscow officials barred people from gathering at the Stone – a mere boulder brought to the capital from the cite of one of the deadliest labor camps in the Soviet Union.<sup>186</sup> They claimed they wanted to move the monument away from the Lubyanka Square— Lubyanka being the site of the FSS Headquarters — to a less conspicuous place.<sup>187</sup> The ceremonies still take place, but people who go to speak at them, are constantly worried about the possibility of their arrests.

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<sup>185</sup> Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*, 209.

<sup>186</sup> Sophia Kishkovsky, "Ceremony for Stalin Victims Is Blocked in Moscow, Group Says," in *The New York Times* (October 20, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/20/world/europe/moscow-stalin-victims.html> (Date of Access: April 22, 2020).

<sup>187</sup> Currently, Lubyanka metro stop is hidden under the block-sized, multi-floor children's store catty-corned from the actual Lubyanka building.

In contrast to this overt silencing of the past, we can look at the festivities that take place on May 9th, when the nation celebrates its victory in World War II, or as they, to this day, call, “The Great Patriotic War” Of 1941-45.<sup>188</sup> This is a nationwide celebration over what the Soviet government and its successor, Putin’s regime, have been heralding as Russian – and Russian only – victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. Putin uses this celebration and the memory of it to excite the spirit of nationalism in Russia’s citizen as well as bolster his own position as the nation’s new “powerful” leader.<sup>189</sup> The fact that World War II is still being called “The Great Patriotic War” in Russia, with the allies’ participation in it almost completely disregarded, shows how entrenched Putinism is in Soviet ideologemes. Criticizing Bolshevism and Stalinism, Putin would be criticizing a part of his own system. This logic makes any kind of criticism of Stalin an a politically subversive act, thus complicating a collective effort of mourning the past. In short, the public cannot unite in mourning. Governmental actions, such as disrupting the commemoration of the political victims of the Soviet past, send a clear, aggressive message to the people. They are meant not only to be silenced, but also to associate remembering victims of Stalinism with fear of their own arrest or other punishment.

Most of the other monuments dedicated to the victims of the Gulag are on the sites of former labor camps. Given that the Gulag was isolated from “mainland Russia,” the government has been complicit in destroying those sites and thus the systematic erasure of the country’s traumatic past. The remoteness of even those of the camps that are still standing further imbues them

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<sup>188</sup> Tomas Sniegon, "Dying in the Soviet Gulag for the Future Glory of Mother Russia? Making “Patriotic” Sense of the Gulag in Present-Day Russia,” in *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin’s Russia*, edited by Bernsand Niklas and Törnquist-Plewa Barbara (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 107.

<sup>189</sup> Sniegon, "Dying in the Soviet Gulag," 107.

with a sense of “out-sitedness.”<sup>190</sup> Moreover, one of the two museums at the site of a Gulag camp, Solovki, has been moved off the Solovetsky Islands and onto the mainland. The Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea were the first camp in use and also one of the cruelest. One of the islands was allocated entirely to the punishment of women.<sup>191</sup><sup>192</sup> Many writers, artists, and other political prisoners went through the camp, including Solzhenitsyn. Removing the museum of the Solovki camp from one of the islands to a less memorable physical location deprives the site of memory of information that requires to clarify what happened there to the visitors, including victims’ descendants. Instead, tours are given about the glorious history of the former Solovetsky Monastery, dissipated in the 1920s to be taken over by the camp, but now returned to its old location. This greatly diminishes the impact of Solovetsky Islands on those who come to see Solovki and mourn victims of the atrocities which took place there.

There is a lot of work that needs to be done in Russia to remember Stalinism and condemn its crimes. Not only has cultural mourning in Russia not been endorsed enough or merely fully permitted, but it is in dire need of the female perspective. Many historians miss the opportunity to explore women’s Gulag experiences and especially the testimonies of women inmates about sexual violence in the camps. One of the few historians who blatantly talk about sexual violence is Anne Applebaum, the author of *Gulag Voices* and *Gulag: a History*. Contrary to Applebaum, Aleksandr Etkind, who otherwise beautifully captures Soviet and post-Soviet mourning, or the lack thereof, in his book *Warped Mourning*, avoids this subject. Although Etkind is able to de-

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<sup>190</sup> Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, 208.

<sup>191</sup> I found no female accounts from this island. I assume most did not live.

<sup>192</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, 20.

scribe the ever-complicated cultural memory of Russian citizens today and how it has affected Putinism, he includes virtually no female voice in his book nor does he speak about sexual trauma in labor camps from women's perspective. He speaks about rape and sexual experiences from the perspective of men, while excluding women's traumatic accounts of sexual violence — such as the ones used in this project. In other words, Etkind's work, which is on *cultural* mourning, fails to speak for nearly half of the population within the said culture. Other historians also continually ignore female voices, in spite of the fact that there are plenty of accounts, drawings, and poetry about the trauma of sexual violence that, if not addressed, will lead to further “warped” mourning or possibly cultural amnesia in Russia today.

It is and will continue to be an uphill battle to hear the voice of the silenced from the Gulag. Breaking down the women's silences creates a possibility for encasing the memory of the nation's tragic past in a physical form. The example of how this has already been done is Anna Akhmatova, the poet who understood her ability to write about her own memories and struggles as well as of those of other Soviet women. Akhmatova incorporated many voices of female victims of Stalinism in her poem “Requiem.” Lines from the poem, used in the epigraph of this project, describe a moment when Akhmatova is standing in a prison line, and a woman, who looks to be in a lifeless state but recognizes her, whispers in her ear: “Can you write about this?” The “this” is understood by both women: it is pain and heartache of their loved ones being arrested, the death of thousands who go unnamed, the starvation, the extreme terror and paranoia of waiting in line to find out that one's son, husband, mother, or daughter have been executed. Akhmatova responds “I can,” the briefness of her response showing assurance in her ability to



make the memory of these horrors endure.<sup>193</sup> The woman who before looked lifeless flashes a smile. She was unable to speak about her trauma, but she has now found another woman who could do it and would share their pain with others. Similarly, when Ginzburg's first English translation of *Journey into the Whirlwind* was published, the words of the author, "I survived. I speak," appeared on every other page.<sup>194</sup> The publication, let alone the repetition, of that phrase defines why, as historians, we should dig into each hole of silence, looking for lost truths. Ginzburg and Akhmatova alone have not filled that vast silence and nor did they try to do so, but they understood that their words shaped, and would shape, the future of generations of Russians. Both Akhmatova and Ginzburg saw the importance of sharing trauma. This project also underlines this importance. It is a capsule of remembrance for the voice of the silenced.

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<sup>193</sup> In the original it is a single word response: "Mory" (I can).

<sup>194</sup> Cathy A. Frierson, *Silence Was Salvation: Child Survivors of Stalin's Terror and World War II in the Soviet Union*, (Yale University Press, 2015), 2.

## Appendix

## Translations

Gagen-Torn, Nina. "Barrack at Night." In *Poems of the Gulag*. (Kolyma, 1939), [http://samlib.ru/r/radwi\\_s/poeziagulag.shtml](http://samlib.ru/r/radwi_s/poeziagulag.shtml).

Beloruska, Lesya. "Tishina." In *Poems of the Gulag*. [http://samlib.ru/r/radwi\\_s/poeziagulag.shtm](http://samlib.ru/r/radwi_s/poeziagulag.shtm)

All translations by Louisa Fulkerson

Барак ночью	Barrack at Night
Нина Ивановна Гаген-Торн	Nina Gagen-Torn
Хвост саламандры синеет на углях,	The salamander's tail turns blue on charcoal,
Каплями с бревен стекает смола,	Sap drips from the logs,
Лампочки глаз, напряженный и круглый,	Eye of the lightbulb, tense and round,
Щупает тени в далеких углах.	Feels the shadows in the far corner.
Чья-то ладонь в темноте выступает,	Someone's palm emerges into the darkness,
Дышит тяжелыми ребрами дом.	The house is breathing with heavy ribs,
Бьется, как птица под крышей сарая,	Beats like a bird under the roof of a barn
Маленький Эрос с подбитым крылом.	Little Eros with a broken wing.
Колыма, 1939 г.	Kolyma, 1939

Тишина

Леся Белоруска

Им, что безвременно ушли из жизни,  
-великомученицам-лагерницам Павлине  
Мельниковой, Ляле Кларк, Асе Гудзь - с  
душевной болью и любовью посвящаю

Над заснеженной долиной - тишина.  
А в глубинах этой горестной земли  
чьи-то дочери родные, как одна,  
замордованы неволей, полегли.

Тишина... И только голос не затих  
этих мучениц страдальцы-земли.  
И немецкие овчарки рвали их,  
и свои же, в униформе, кобели.

В дом нагрянула беда в глухой ночи.  
Крик ребячий: "Мама, мамочка, куда?!"  
Обещала: "Я вернусь, ты не кричи..." -  
и не знала, что уходит навсегда.

Silence (Tishina)

Lesya Beloruska

To them, who prematurely passed away, to the  
great martyrs at the camps Pavlina Melnikova,  
Lala Clark, Asa Gudz - I devote with  
heartache and love

Above the snow-covered valley - silence.  
And in the depths of this woeful land  
someone's daughters are relatives, like one,  
chained forcibly, perished.

Silence ... And only the voice not subside  
these martyrs of the earth-sufferer.  
And the German shepherds tore them,  
And their own, in uniform, males

The house was raided by trouble in the depths  
of the night.  
A child's cry: "Mama, Mama, where are you  
going?!"  
She promised: "I'll be back, don't scream ..." -  
and did not know that she was leaving forever.

Illustrations

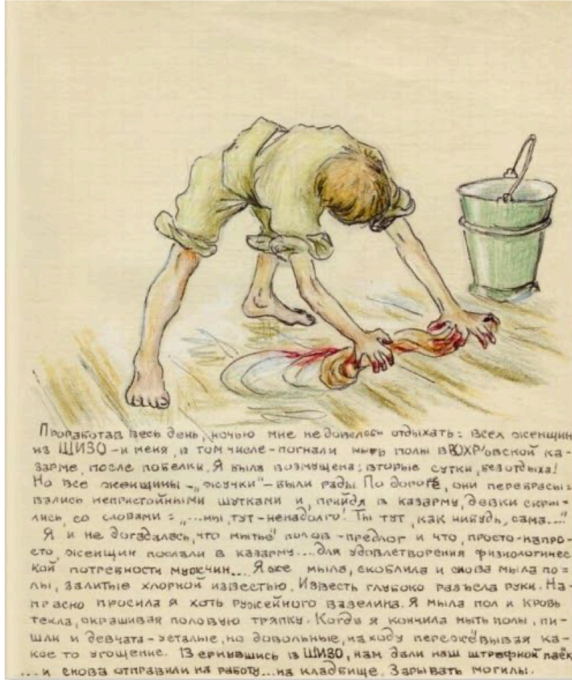


Figure 1



Figure 2

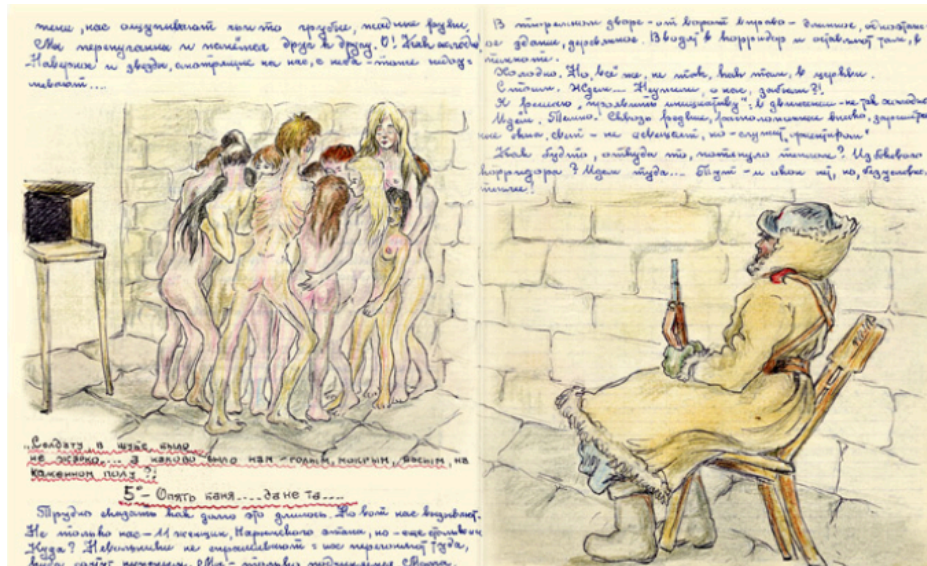


Figure 3

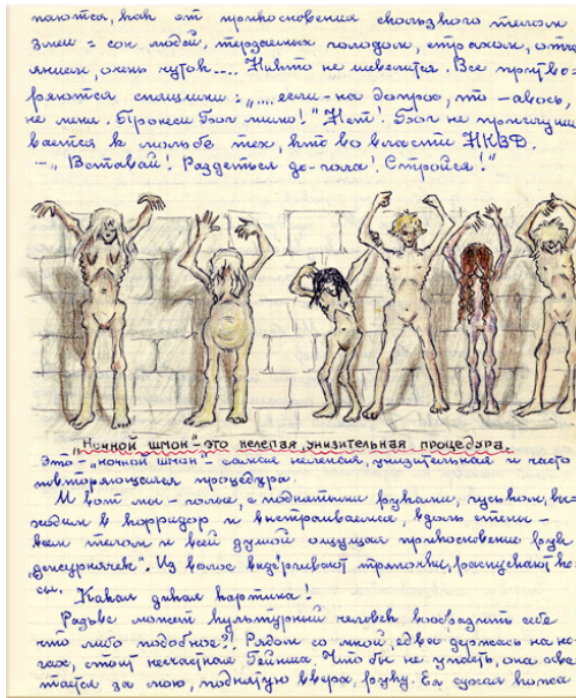


Figure 4



Figure 5

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