

“Voices of the Gulags”

By: Jane Alkhazov

1. **Background:** My first encounter with language barriers and coded communication takes me back to elementary school. There was a mean American bully who took my coat away from me, stomped on it, and yelled at me in what I understood to be coded language as my brain mainly thought in Russian at the time. Although I wanted to resolve this issue and communicate with this girl in a way she could understand, my English failed me. Instead, I used a form of rhetoric that anybody could understand. I bit her. While I was disciplined harshly and unjustly by our school’s administration, I would not be who I am without living through this and many other incidents like this in my childhood years. With this in mind, I believe that I have developed an intense sympathy for those struggling with oppression and would like to find outlets and spaces to help them voice their experiences. *So how is this anecdote connected to my research project?* In April 2018, Dr. Thomas Girshin, an associate professor in the writing department contacted me to help further his research project “Letters from the Gulags.” Accepting his invitation to translate the letters of imprisoned Russian citizens into English, I knew this project would give voices and power to those deceased, censored, and wronged during Stalin’s fatal reign. As Stalin’s reign from 1941-1953 ended the lives of hundreds of thousands of innocent people, I felt oddly connected to their struggles, as being treated unfairly by someone with more power was something I have experienced. While Dr. Girshin’s project focused more on the use of aesopian language in the letters of Gulag prisoners, my role focused on translating letters written by Pavel Florensky, a Russian Orthodox theologian. The goal was to first translate and then analyze the letters Florensky sent to his loved ones to isolate the writing and speaking strategies emerging in opposition to established power and authority. The work I have done for this project is quite important, as the process of translating the letters of Gulag prisoners into English has only recently begun and as a result, very little scholarship is available to readers without the Russian language. Furthermore, it allowed me to look for evidence of censorship and provided unique insight into the conditions of Soviet prisons, particularly the psychological and emotional toll, which cannot be found in other documents. In many ways, my elementary school memory parallels the ingenuity of the prisoners who had to creatively communicate to their loved ones what they felt, what they were going through, and what they needed to survive. Following my elementary school experience, with the drastic improvement of my English, I was able to communicate how I was feeling to my loved ones, something many Americans take for granted. The stories of many prisoners, specifically those of Pavel Florensky’s, has inspired me to expose the oppressive Soviet government and its power over its voiceless citizens.

2. Methods:

After being funded through the Academic Challenge Grant in May 2018, for approximately 8 weeks, I worked 20 hours a week to read and translate Pavel Florensky's letters. His letters which were written to various family members while he traveled from Gulag to Gulag, were in an online archive by the Sakharov Museum in Moscow. I found his name listed among other prisoners and opened his letters, which were once handwritten in script but were published online in printable text. I then copied and pasted every word and symbol used into Microsoft Word and translated his letters sentence by sentence, meticulously keeping a log of what each sentence could be best translated into English. After translating each sentence as closely into English as possible, I then went back and read each sentence for context clues to see if there were any anomalies or use of unusual language. These anomalies were then highlighted and discussed with my grandmother, Maria Asinovsky, someone who lived through this time period and could give perspective and knowledge on the language used. I also met with Dr. Girshin weekly to discuss each anomaly and decide if it was representative of self censorship, government censorship, or a resistance practice to see if it can be used for his project.

3. Results:

After translating 20 letters, it was clear that Florensky encoded evidence of rhetorical resistance against Stalin's reign, as Pavel was able to convey the awful conditions through which he lived. The language used in these letters proves direct official censorship (i.e. redactions, though these are typically rare), self-censorship, and of changed communication strategies over time, indicating a gradual evolution of writing practices under pressures of censorship.

4. Discussion and Conclusions:

In addition to building the currently small archive of Gulag letters available in English, this project will add scholarship to the resistance practices of writers, as well as Soviet citizens' responses to censorship. The value of such letters for studying the effects of censorship is great, as the Soviet censorship apparatus was both highly distributed and well-known to prisoners and their correspondents. Moreover, these letters represent a notable archive for rhetoricians, for whom censorship has long been of interest. Given the highly overdetermined constraints the writers faced, the writing practices and communication strategies reflected in these letters are a rich source of data on the ways Soviet citizens represented themselves and their aims at the intersection of private and public domains.

5. Bibliography

Applebaum, Anne. *Gulag: A History*. Anchor Books, 2003. Asher, Oksana Dray-Khmara. *Letters from the Gulag*. Speller, 1983.

A.Sakharov. Progress, Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom | Международная Конференция

'Идеи Сахарова Сегодня', Retrieved from
<https://www.sakharov-center.ru/asfcd/auth/?t=author&i=1378>



АРХИПЕЛАГ ГУЛАГ

Русские в Китае №17

Основание для публикации

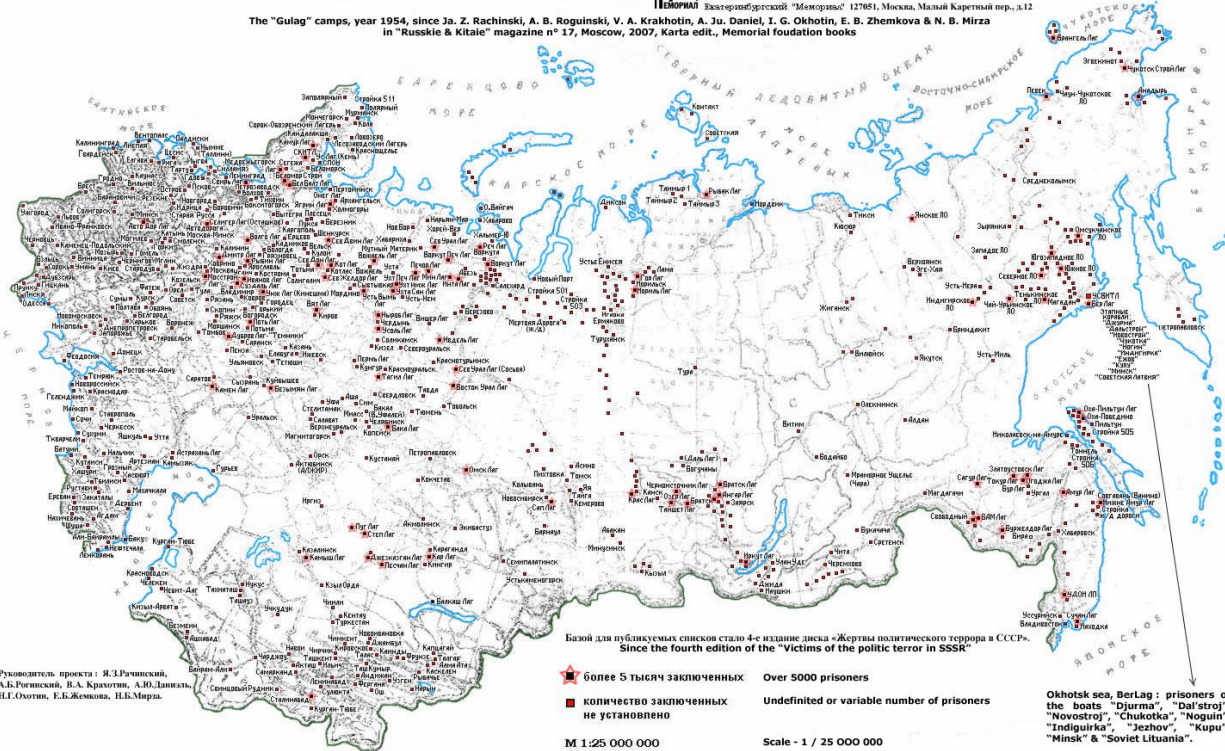


Журнал "Курьер"

Рязанский "Мемориал"

Выпуск №17 (1997), Москва, Малый Каретный пер., д.12

The "Gulag" camps, year 1954, since Ja. Z. Rachinski, A. B. Roginski, V. A. Krakhotin, A. Ju. Daniel, I. G. Okhotin, E. B. Zhemkova & N. B. Mirza in "Russkie & Kitale" magazine n° 17, Moscow, 2007, Karta edit., Memorial foundation books



Руководитель проекта: Я.З.Рагинский,
А.Б.Рогинский, В.А.Краховин, А.Ю.Даниэль,
И.Г.Охотин, Е.Б.Жемкова, Н.Б.Мирза.

Базой для публикуемых списков стало 4-е издание диска «Жертвы политического террора в СССР».
Since the fourth edition of the "Victims of the politic terror in SSSR".

- ★ более 5 тысяч заключенных Over 5000 prisoners
- количество заключенных не установлено Undefined or variable number of prisoners

M 1:25 000 000 Scale - 1 / 25 000 000

Okhotsk sea, BerLag: prisoners on the boats "Djurma", "Dal'stroj", "Novostroj", "Chukotka", "Noguim", "Indiguitka", "Jazhov", "Kupru", "Minsk" & "Soviet Lituania".

