

The “Cultural Village” of the Solovki Prison Camp: A Case of Alternative Culture

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Introduction

Previous research concerning Gulag literature has frequently focused on single authors, who published their books after being incarcerated in concentration camps. However, there were also poets, novelists, and writers who had the chance to write from inside the iron curtain of the camps, publishing in journals and magazines controlled by the Chekists.¹ Most times, authors wrote hymns and praise for Soviet power. But, in the very early years of the forced labour camp system, exceptions were possible. One of these exceptions occurred in the first Gulag that was situated and run on the Solovki archipelago. There, thanks to some extraordinary conditions, many intellectuals were often able to express themselves freely, and were able to use their wit and culture to oppose the brutal violence of the guards. They were part of a “cultural village,” where poets published poems, actors performed plays, and professors held seminars, while many of their friends and fellow prisoners perished, killed by the tortures of the overseers. Their cultural fight was even more important: the culture they produced was pre-revolutionary, and they produced it at a moment when this culture was eliminated by the newly born Soviet state. Somehow, they managed to create an alternative cultural system inside the camp. But can we really speak of alternative culture in this context, given the particular cultural situation of that period?

The “Cultural Revolution”

The October Revolution marked the boundary between two opposing conceptions of culture: the so-called “bourgeois culture,” and the so-called “proletarian” one. The former, dominant at the time of the revolution, had characterized the development of Russian thought and society since Peter the Great, and had produced outstanding results. The latter, in October 1917, was an artefact, since it represented a never realized ideal. It was based on the aspirations of the Bolsheviks, who fought in the name of a multiform, less defined, and almost totally illiterate social state. After seizing power, the Bolsheviks im-

posed a constant and fierce Cultural Revolution, and the mainly aristocratic proponents of bourgeois culture, who had little or nothing to do with the middle class, were backed into a corner. They had to decide between emigration, the bullet, or the hope for survival in the newborn state. When the party became more oppressive, the real needs of Vladimir Lenin—and then of Iosif Stalin—gradually emerged. They wanted literature to be devoted to the party, a handmaiden of the state, subjected to suffocating censorship, and driven by “revolutionary” mechanisms (ferocious campaigns of denigration, ruthless literary trials in magazines, eristic debates, etc.). This evolutionary process eventually led to socialist realism and to the total repression of any expression of art that came out of the canons of this new cultural trend imposed by the party. The Russian *intelligentsia* was surgically removed from the social body, and the Soviet *intelligentsia*, which was usually more culturally deficient than the pre-revolutionary one and therefore less of a threat to the Communist State, was inserted in its place.

During the years of this revolution in Russian culture, the intellectuals related to the old culture were persecuted by the State in a systematic way. Among the “waves” we read about in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Arkhipelag GULAG* (*The Gulag Archipelago*, 1974), one can not count the waves of the representatives of the so-called bourgeois culture which were sent to the camps. Thousands were arrested, subjected to humiliation, and often shot. Those arrested in the early years of the Soviet state, during the civil war, were kept in improvised prisons, whose tragicomic conditions are brilliantly expressed by Anne Applebaum in her book, *Gulag: A History* (2003).² With the defeat of the White Army and the final consolidation of Bolshevik power, the party began the systematization of its prison structures.

The Solovki Prison Camp

The first step that was made in the Solovki was the systematization, or the transition from a simple prison system to a productive economic apparatus based on coercion. The former site of a monastery, the archipelago in the White Sea, was seized by the Bolsheviks in 1920 and turned into a prison camp for those captured in the war. In such a particular place for Russian history,³ the first “special purpose prison camp” (Solovetskii Lager' Osobogo Naznachenii, also known as SLON) was established in October 1923.⁴ It served as a model for the entire Soviet concentration camp system, especially during the

years of its expansion (1923-1939). The prisoners of the Solovki, in the early years of existence of the SLON, were mainly members of political parties opposed to the Bolsheviks (revolutionary socialists, constitutional democrats etc.), people linked to the Tsarist regime (officers, nobles, etc.), soldiers of the White Army, the religious, *intelligenty* and representatives of the bourgeoisie, as well as common delinquents. All but the criminals were representatives of social categories doomed to annihilation. The only alternative to physical repression was the assimilation of the ideological, moral, and aesthetic canons of the Soviet state. The local representatives of the party, the Chekists who were entrusted with the management of the camp, had, amongst others, the task of supporting this process of assimilation. A range of cultural activities which took place inside the camp (publishing of newspapers and magazines, theatre, creation of research centers) were created for this purpose, and enlisted the prisoners as creators and the guards as censors. In this way, within the walls of the SLON, the forced revolution of the official culture took place. This process, which was happening on a wider scale all over the Soviet Union, had only two outcomes: the elimination of those who refused it, or the “re-education”⁵ of the inmates.

The most important thing is the fact that this process in the Solovki did not follow a straight path. The reason for this was the imbalance of intellectual forces in the camp. On the one hand, there were many representatives of the *intelligentsia*, some of whom had encyclopaedic knowledge, while others had boundless talent, and others were simply polymaths. On the other hand, there were guards who were often illiterate, accustomed to using the trigger rather than the pen, and who were directed by poorly educated chiefs. All in all, the camp administration was able to comply with directives coming from the higher organs of official powers, located on Lubianka square, but was helpless against the craftiness and the Aesopian language of the detainees. In this way, the violence and harassment of the guards was counterbalanced by the prisoners’ creative works, which were authorized and incorporated in a system that wanted them to be slaves and instead granted them unexpected success. The real change came with the beginning of the first Five Year Plan, when Stalinism became more defined in its structure (both theoretically and practically) and the remaining freedoms of the prisoners increasingly shrank. What sort of cultural activities were held inside the SLON?

The Cultural Life of the SLON

The reader, unaccustomed to studies of Soviet concentration camps, may be surprised to read about theatre, painting, and poetry in the Gulag, especially those acquainted with the Soviet concentration camp system through the terrifying images portrayed by Varlam Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn, although *Arkipelag GULAG* includes a few references to creativity inside the camps. Yet, since the days of the revolution, and especially during the civil war, the publication of newspapers and magazines became common in prisons. The reasons for these publications were numerous, but the main one was the institution of the *perekovka*.⁶ This principle, common in all Soviet prison institutions in the early years of the Bolshevik state, was realized in several ways: coercion to manual labour, humiliation of prominent representatives of the old regime, organization of big events, public speeches, and also publication of newspapers, which showed the process of social re-education of the prisoners.

When going from a simple prison system to a “special purpose concentration camp” system, the principle of *perekovka* was confirmed and even improved. In the Solovki, in March 1924, only six months after the creation of the camp, the official organ, or newspaper, of the camp was released. It was called *SLON*,⁷ and according to a common cliché of the press of Soviet concentration camps at the time, it contained articles written by the administration of the camp, as well as those written by prisoners. In this newspaper, the inmates had the opportunity to express themselves artistically through poetry, stories, and cartoons. The circulation of *SLON* grew considerably: the first issue was printed in fifteen typewritten copies, and by the end of the year it had already reached a circulation of two hundred copies. This exponential growth can be explained by the flourishing “Solovki culture.” As mentioned before, the number of *intelligenty* inside the camp made the archipelago a real cultural village, in which hundreds of intellectuals, exhausted by inhuman working conditions, torture, cold, and hunger, found a form of resistance to the re-education process in artistic expression. At the beginning of 1925, *SLON* changed its name to *Solovetskie ostrova*, becoming a high-profile magazine containing poems, stories, and essays on psychology, economics, international politics, biology, etc. It was quickly sold on the mainland, reaching an incredible circulation of three thousand copies, which were available by postal subscription and sold in several kiosks in Moscow and Leningrad.

Solovetskie astrova was not the only unique editorial circular developed in the camp. The weekly *Novye Solovki* was printed on four pages and kept the prisoners informed about activities on the island. It also contained poems and, most importantly, provided news and bulletins about life in the *bolshaia zona*⁸ and the rest of the world. Numerous other newspapers and magazines were published in the Solovki, some of which are lost forever.

The theatre reviews were among the highlights of *Novye Solovki*. *Solteatr*⁹ (*Solovetskii teatr*, Theatre of the Solovki) opened its doors in 1923 and established itself as one of the most important cultural phenomena of the Solovki. Actors and directors from Moscow and Leningrad worked there, and first-class painters were employed as set designers. *Solteatr* even hosted performances by professional singers, musicians, and dancers. Tickets for performances were often difficult to find, but those unable to attend a show could count on reading the reviews published in *Novye Solovki* and in other newspapers a few days following the performance.

Prison guards were also habitués of the *Solteatr*; they frequented it in order to ensure that everything happened as expected, but also for entertainment. Their control was, however, quite limited. The KVCh (Kulturno-Vospitatelnaia Chast, or The Cultural Educational Department), the section responsible for controlling all cultural activities, could not keep up with the cultural life that flourished at Solovki. In those years, SOK (Solovetskoe Obshestvo Kraevedeniia, or The Society of Ethnography of the Solovki) which also included various subsections, had many publications, and the camp's museum and library opened their doors to prisoners.

The Uniqueness of the “SLON Culture”

In the Solovki in the mid-twenties, some cultural events took place that were unthinkable elsewhere in the Soviet Union. Actor and publicist (and later author of poems for Solovki magazines), Boris Glubokovskii,¹⁰ performed elements of pre-revolutionary theatrical folklore. *Solteatr* staged plays by representatives of pre-soviet culture, such as Mikhail Lermontov, as well as by more contemporary figures like Evgenii Zamiatin, who was at that time attacked by a violent smear campaign in all the official national organs. Original scripts, some of which contained elements of parody against the guards, were also written and staged. A song written by the poet Boris Emel'ianov¹¹ and performed in front of some leaders of the OGPU

who came from Moscow, states: “To all of you, who have rewarded us with Solovki, / We ask you too to come here. / Stay here three years or even five— / You’ll remember it with delight” (Likhachev 215).¹²

Printed media was also granted unimaginable freedom. In his memoirs, entitled *Neugasimaia lampada* (*The Inextinguishable Icon-Lamp*, 1954), Boris Shiriaev¹³ defines *Solovetskie Ostrova* as “the freer newspaper between those published in the Soviet Union by then” (135) and recalls how, after the death of Sergei Esenin, the paper published the following verses as an epitaph: “They have not spared Serezha and his curls / The last flower on a mown meadow...” (Rusakov 73).¹⁴

When the censorship became more stifling, Aesopian language became the key to free expression. The same Shiriaev was the author of “Davnee” (“More than ancient,” 1925), published in the first issue of *Solovetskie Ostrova*:

White-haired old men were singing:
 “You be joyous, New Zion” ...
 And a smell of honey and rot
 Came out from fallen pines.

Hoary words of Psalms
 Sounded childish like singsong
 Majestically on a thin birch
 There circled an owl above the foliage.

Both the sea, and the austere shore,
 And the morass of dull lakes
 Slumbered beneath the decrepit and miserable
 Ancient call of the first monks. (37)¹⁵

What at first glance may seem to be an obviously anti-religious composition, in fact is more ambiguous. All negative imagery can have an opposite meaning. The rot can be related to religious culture (as interpreted by the censor) or to the actual smell of nature, namely the pines left to rot in swamps, which is offset by the smell of honey, an element that has a positive effect both metaphorically and as an actual olfactory sensation. The childish singsong may seem ridiculous from the censor’s perspective, but can also evoke the tenderness of memory. Ultimately, the ancient call of the first monks, which is present in the slumber of all nature, is *ubogii*, which means “miserable,” again with a double meaning. The censor read it as “petty, sordid,”

but the word can be used to refer to poverty and to the difficult living conditions of the monks who founded the monastery in the fifteenth century on an isolated archipelago. The ultimate evidence of the real sense of the poem comes from the deep religious aura that pervades Shiriaev's *Neugasimaia lampada*, a book related to the years that Shiriaev spent in the Solovki prison camp. The author's dedication to the book reads: "Dedicated to the glorious memory of the painter Mikhail Vasilevich Nesterov, who, on the day I received my sentence, said: 'Do not fear the Solovki. Christ is near'" (6).¹⁶

Sometimes there was no need for Aesopian language. The satirical poems of Iuri Kazarnovskii,¹⁷ for example, are full of jokes which are hard to grasp, but which express great sagacity on the part of the author, who published some successful literary parodies in several issues of the Solovki press. After ably mimicking Aleksandr Pushkin, Aleksandr Blok, Vladimir Maiakovskii and others, Kazarnovskii parodies Esenin in the following quatrain: "I am as sweet as I was before / And I have a dream in my heart: / That as soon as possible, from this snowstorm / Minus six could come back to us" (64).¹⁸

The indication of the temperature conceals a very refined pun: "minus six" is how the detainees referred to the ban prohibiting released prisoners from settling in any of the major cities of the Soviet state. But the peculiarities of the Solovki press do not lie only in puns and satire. The great stylistic freedom granted to the authors is surprising. For example, a common feature in many poems is that of sadness, of the lament of the author's tragic fate, or of resignation. At this time, the canon of socialist realism was slowly forming, which soon would be institutionalized and implemented, having as a feature the "constriction to joy," and an imperative to leave behind these more somber tones.¹⁹ One of the issues of *Solovetskie Ostrova* from 1930 includes the poem "Pesn' o vozvrashchenii" ("Song of the return," 1930) by Vladimir Kemetskii²⁰ (real name Sveshnikov), a poet of great talent, whose memory was cherished for years by Dmitrii Likhachev.²¹ Some of the quatrains contain explicit references to the terrible life of the prisoners, and the poem generally has a consistently sad aura.

. . . I will come—and I will bring to your home
 The smell of seaweed and tar,
 I will come to tell you what
 I learned from mossy rocks.

And I will read the verses
 About the country where the flowers do not smell
 Where roosters do not sing in the morning,
 And spring leaves do not rustle.

I will tell you about the people
 Of these unfriendly places
 They live with courage and pride
 They club seals and cut bush...

The flames vanish in the fireplace
 The head grows dim...
 Nothing to do, no one will receive
 These human and empty words ...

I will be silent, I will cut the story
 I will ask for fire for my pipe...
 Maybe, at least this time
 You will hear me. (49)²²



Fig. 1

These melancholic tones are not the only difference when compared with what was happening in the Soviet Union as a whole in those years. The year before, a story written by Aleksandr Peshkovskii²³ was published that actually refers to futurism (if not in the writing, then certainly in the graphics).

When Peshkovskii wrote *Kirpich* (*The Brick*, 1929), futurism had conclusively lost the struggle for literary hegemony in the USSR, defeated by the venomous arrogance of RAPP.²⁴ Futurism, in 1929, was already part of the Soviet literary periphery.

This “idyllic”²⁵ situation of the “Solovki cultural village” was interrupted, as said before, by the institution of the first Five Year Plan and the “Stalinization” of the country. The year 1929, among other things, marked the beginning of Stalin’s big projects, aimed at accelerating the industrial progress of the country. One of them, perhaps the most important, if not from the perspective of functionality, then certainly from that of propaganda, was the Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal (White Sea-Baltic Canal), joining the two seas, the construction of which was done by workers from labour camps, who were exploited to the point of cruelty. The proximity of the Solovki to the construction site of the Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal was instrumental in the accomplishment of the project: thousands of prisoners were moved to Medvezh'ia Gora (today Medvezhegorsk), where the administration of the canal was established. Many of the prisoners perished, killed by cold, starvation, and exploitation (approximately 100,000 victims were recorded by the end of construction).²⁶ Not only were the prisoners of the Solovki transferred to Medvezh'ia Gora, but also the editorial system of the Solovki, which effectively ceased to exist,²⁷ merging with the propagandistic press of the canal, in which, however, the cultural freedom of the SLON was not permitted. In the magazines of the Belbaltlag,²⁸ the most important of which was *Perekovka*, there was only room for the celebration of the Stalinist regime and of correctional labour.

In the Solovki, very little remained of intellectual life, while repressive actions significantly increased. The museum was closed in 1937, and its collections and exhibits were forever lost, as well as the library. The Society of Ethnography ceased operations in 1934. The theatre moved to the Belbaltlag but maintained a company on the island which kept on working until its closure in January 1937. The same year, the name, and the activity of the camp changed significantly, shifting from SLON to STON (Solovetskaia Tiur'ma Osobogo

Naznachenia, or Solovki Special Purpose Prison). The name change reflected the tragic meaning of its acronym (in Russian, “ston” means “moan,” or “plaint”): the detention regime became suffocating. The historical context also played a role in the camp’s changes (these were the years of the Great Terror) and the authorities killed with more and more ferocity. This terrific situation was suddenly interrupted by the closure of the prison in 1939, due to the threat of invasion by the Allied armies, as the camp was located not far from the Finnish border. All the prisoners were transferred to other camps, and the Solovki archipelago subsequently became a naval academy.

Conclusions

Today, studying the publications and artistic productions of the SLON, one cannot ignore the differences when comparing them to those of other prison camps. What determined this particularity? The experimental dimension of the camp certainly played an important role. The administrators tried to find a balance between a “natural” punitive and violent attitude, and an “unnatural” need to sponsor a cultural re-education in which they themselves did not believe (Rozanov 31). The role of the *intelligentsia*, however, was crucial, insofar as it could create a cultural village inside a hell of shootings and torture. Until the end of the first Five Year Plan when the idea of *perekovka* was abandoned and the system became purely coercive, there was the possibility, in certain special situations, to use wit and intellect as weapons. The Solovki was a special case, because the concentration of *intelligenty* was truly extraordinary. Great philosophers and world-renowned academics, extraordinary poets and painters, professors and religious leaders—all these people succeeded, until it was no longer possible, to oppose their cultural system to the one that was imposed on them. Likhachev recalls how, during a devastating epidemic of typhus that swept away thousands of lives, seminars were held in the theatre, despite half of the building being used as a lazaret (217). And so, against a background of groans from dying prisoners, other prisoners debated astronomy and oriental religions. Likhachev also wrote that the discussions at the Krimkab (Kriminologicheskii Kabinet, or Office of Criminology, a section of the Society of Ethnography) were for him a “second university: as for value, without a doubt the first” (225).

In his memoirs, Nikolai Antsiferov²⁹ recalled the moment on the train that took them from Leningrad to Medvezh'ia Gora when the

philosopher Aleksandr Meier³⁰ told him that “we are going to the capital of the Russian *intelligentsia*” (386). This sentence can also be applied to the Solovki between 1924 and 1931, with the substantial difference that, at the time of the SLON, it was possible to leave evident traces of this intellectual activity, while in the Belbaltlag it was almost impossible. This is evident if we compare the magazines of the two camps.³¹

Now, returning to the beginning of this article, there is a question that needs an answer. In the case of the Solovki *intelligentsia*, can we talk of alternative culture? In theory, we have all the evidence to do so, since the “*intelligent city*” created in the Solovki was entirely alternative to the one desired by the OGPU. But, after all, was it not simply a rare case in which the separation of the proletarian and bourgeois cultures had materialized without the use of repression as the only means of accomplishing this separation? The intellectuals of the Solovki did not invent anything: they were simply carrying forward their culture—the bourgeois culture in which they grew up and in which they continued to operate.³² Rather than inventing something, the intellectuals of SLON utilized some of the “cultural weapons” in their hands, such as Aesopian language and satire. Therefore, can a culture that has developed independently, ignoring, due to special conditions, the sentence imposed by history, be considered alternative?

Perhaps, more than alternative culture, we can talk of cultural resistance materialized in the continuation of the endangered aesthetic canons—a form of resistance that led to physical destruction but was destined to live longer in a historical perspective. Another question relates to this last problem. If we consider the problem of the intellectual legacy of the Soviet epoch, how should we consider the case of the SLON culture? The cultural history of the USSR exemplifies the severe judgment of time. Today, almost a century after the Russian Revolution, and twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet empire, scholars have in their hands the means with which to judge the quality of creative works produced during the eighty years of the Soviet experience, being now free of the weight of ideological conflicts. And while the phantasmagorical poetry of Osip Mandel'shtam and the shockingly profound novels of Vasilii Grossman are re-discovered, Mikhail Sholokhov and other champions of Soviet literature seem more and more likely to remain forgotten. The hundreds of works of socialist realism lie buried under tons of dust, while the poems of Anna Akhmatova, whispered during the Great Terror, and Mikhail

Bulgakov's novel, *Master i Margarita* (*The Master and Margarita*, 1928-40, first published 1966), finished in the silence of his deathbed, have become the patrimony of world literature. If we apply this general consideration to the Solovki prison camp culture, we see that nowadays the literary critic is more interested in Kemetskii's poems, while the banal "re-forged" poems written by Aleksei Chekmazov³³ do not seem to have any aesthetic value and are poignant only if analysed in a specific study of the characteristics of this celebratory literature.

All in all, writers and intellectuals of the Solovki, and many others who ended up in the Soviet meat grinder, were often high-level *intelligenty*, whose tragic fate denied them their right to glory. We do not know if they would have reached it, but one of the survivors of the Solovki, then a university student, has become one of the leading scholars of ancient Russian literature of all time. The study of the work of those who were not as lucky can take us to unexplored destinations, and can restore dignity to those who, crushed by a vile system, had the lucidity to make poetry out of their tragic experience.

Notes

1. During the period under consideration in this article, the organ dedicated to the administration of the camps and to state security changed names several times, going from VchK, to OGPU, to GPU, to NKVD. The guards, however, kept the first name, chekists, from the VchK, better known as Cheka.
2. See Applebaum, chapter 1. Applebaum's monograph is probably the most poignant historical work on the Gulag; it gained the author the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction.
3. See Robson. Robson's monograph explores the history of the Solovki archipelago from prehistoric times to the present day, paying special attention to the history of the monastery, which was founded in 1429, seized by the Soviet state in 1920, and reopened in 1991.
4. See GARF 5446/1/2.
5. The re-education generated, a few years later (during the building of the White Sea-Baltic Canal), a key word for the history of the Gulag—*perekovka*. The term comes from the verb "perekovat'," which means "to re-forge," or in this context, to transform individuals associated in various ways with the pre-revolutionary world into ideal Soviet citizens.
6. See note 5.
7. It is important to note that *SLON* was not the first camp publication; from the first days of the camp, the OGPU had a wall newspaper in which only the Chekists wrote. No issues have survived to date.

8. “The big zone,” as the prisoners of the camps used to call it, referring to the Soviet Union and underlining a continuity between the prison camp and the rest of the nation (Rossi 315).
9. See Kuziakina’s prodigious work about the theatre of the Solovki camp.
10. Boris Glubokovskii (1895-1932?) was an actor of the A. Tairov theatre in Moscow. In the capital, he met the poet Sergei Esenin, who soon became his close friend. In 1924, Glubokovskii was involved in the “Ganin case”: a group of intellectuals was transformed by the OGPU into a secret counter-revolutionary group called “The Order of Russian Fascists.” Glubokovskii was condemned to ten years imprisonment, while others were shot. He was sent to the Solovki, where he soon became an important cultural figure, writing for the camp press and staging plays in the theatre. He was also the only prisoner who, in 1926, was allowed to publish an entire book, entitled *49*. He was released in 1930, but once out of prison, alone and poor, he committed suicide in 1932 (no evidence to confirm this date).
11. Unfortunately, we have no information about Boris Emelianov. The only information about him comes from Shiriaev’s *Neugasimaia lampada*, which describes his activity inside the camp. Yet, the musician and specialist of songs about the Gulag, Aleksei Iatskovskii, in a private discussion with the author of this article, said that Likhachev was sure that Emelianov was one of the many pseudonyms of Glubokovskii; after reading Shiriaev’s book, it seems that this opinion is incorrect.
12. Всех, кто наградила нас Соловками, / Просим, приезжайте сюда сами. / Посидите здесь годочков три иль пять - / Будете с восторгом вспоминать. All translations are by the author of this article.
13. Boris Shiriaev (1889-1959) was a White Guard officer. He was arrested during the civil war and condemned to death, but managed to escape. He was again arrested in 1922, and again condemned to death. His sentence was commuted to ten years imprisonment. He arrived in the Solovki in 1923 with one of the first groups of prisoners. Inside the camp, he became one of the most prominent cultural figures. Released in 1927 and exiled, he was again arrested but managed to escape to Europe during World War II. He was then imprisoned by the Nazis, and spent some months in a Nazi camp. After being released, he was put in “a camp for displaced persons.” Shiriaev was destined to be sent back to the USSR, but he managed to escape and established himself in Italy, where he sold dolls and wrote books until his death.
14. Не сберегли кудрявого Сережу, / Последнего цветка на скошенном лугу...
15. Седатые старцы пели: / “Будь радостен, новый Сион”... / и чем-то из меда и прели/пахло от палых сосен. // Звучали по-детски протяжно / Седые псалмов слова. / На тощей березе важно /

Круглила зеленки сова. // И море, и берег строгий, / И бледных
озер затон, / Дремали под ветхий, убогий / Первых иноков
древний звон.

16. Посвящаю светлой памяти художника Михаила Васильевича Нестерова, сказавшего мне в день получения приговора: “Не бойтесь Соловков. Там Христос близко.”
17. Iurii Kazarnovskii (1904-1956) was born in Rostov-on-the-Don. He probably arrived in the Solovki in 1928 and immediately assimilated into the cultural life of the camp, thanks to his poetic gift. Many of his poems are satirical. We do not know the exact date of his release from the Solovki, but we know that he was arrested again and spent some ten years in the Kolyma. He was released in 1944 and went to live in Tashkent, but his experience in the camps had affected his mental state, and he became addicted to narcotics and alcohol.
18. Я по-прежнему такой же нежный, / И мечта одна лишь в сердце
есть: / Чтоб скорей от этой вьюги снежной / Возвратиться к нам —
на минус шесть.
19. Similar features can not be found in the press of other camps.
20. Vladimir Sveshnikov-Kemetskii (1902-1938) was born in Saint Petersburg. In the first years after the revolution, he lived in Paris and Berlin, where he published some poems. He returned to the USSR in 1926, where he worked as a correspondent for some newspapers, but was soon arrested on the accusation of espionage and was condemned to five years in a prison camp. He spent this period in the Solovki, where he became one of the most acclaimed poets. After the end of his prison term, he lived in Kem, Arkhangel'sk and Ufa. He was arrested again in November 1937 and was shot in January 1938.
21. Dmitrii Likhachev (1906-1999) was arrested soon after obtaining his degree in 1928. The reason for his arrest was his participation in the “Academy of Cosmic Sciences:” a group of students who were all accused of “counter-revolutionary activities.” He was sent to the Solovki, where he stayed from 1928 to 1931, but was later moved to the Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal camp. After his release, he lived in Leningrad, where he became a collaborator of the Pushkinskii dom, the Institute of Literature of the Soviet Academy of Science. His scientific activity gained him world fame. During Soviet times, he was considered one of the most important cultural figures. After the end of the Soviet era he became one of the most esteemed public personalities in all of Russia. He was somehow considered the follower of Saint Peterburg’s cultural tradition. He was the first to receive honorary citizenship of Saint Petersburg in 1993.
22. . . . // Я приду — и внесу в твой дом / Запах водорослей и смолы, /
Я приду поведать о том, / Что узнал у замшелой скалы. // И
прочту я тебе стихи / О стране, где не пахнут цветы, / Не поют по

утрам петухи, / Не шуршат по весне листы. // Расскажу тебе про
 народ / Неприветливых этих мест — / Он отважно и гордо
 живет, / Бьет тюленей и рубит лес... // Потускнеют в камине
 огни, / Затуманится голова... / Все равно, ни к чему они, /
 Человечьи, пустые слова... // Замолчу, оборву рассказ, / Попрошу
 для трубки огня... / Может быть, хоть на этот раз / Ты сумеешь
 услышать меня.

23. Aleksandr Peshkovskii (1905-?) was born in Tomsk. All we know about him comes from the memoirs of Likhachev, who dedicated a few pages to his intriguing personality (243-45). He came from Saint Petersburg, and after being released in 1931, he returned to Leningrad where he worked for some publishing houses. He was arrested again in 1938 and condemned to eight years in a prison camp. All other details about his life are missing.
24. Rossiskaia Assotsiatsia Proletarskikh Pisatelei (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) was an association of writers formed in 1925. It was created to spread proletarian literature. It became famous for the terrific attacks of its members against other writers. Those attacks were published in their journal, *Na literaturnom postu* (*On Literary Guard*). It was dissolved in 1932, together with all the other literary associations, but it was the first step towards the creation of the USSR Union of Writers.
25. The term “idyll” here refers only to the fact that the prisoners had the possibility to express their creativity.
26. There is not any official information about the exact numbers of victims. The indicated number of 100,000 is the most considered by scholars.
27. It was the second time that publications in the Solovki were interrupted. The first time, from 1926 to 1929, the Solovki press was officially hosted by the journal *Karelo-Murmanskii Krai*, even though only a few Solovki writers wrote in this journal. The Solovki press reappeared in 1929. No documents have yet been found to justify this re-opening. It is my conviction, though, that it was linked to Maksim Gor'kii's visit to the camp in June of 1929.
28. This was the name of the canal prison camp.
29. Nikolai Antsiferov (1889-1958) was a historian, who worked in Saint Petersburg. He was arrested in 1929 for his participation in Meier's group. He was sent to the Solovki and then to the Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal. Released in 1933, he moved to Moscow, where he was arrested again in 1937. He was released after two years. He then worked for the State Museum of Literature in Moscow.
30. Aleksandr Meier (1874-1939) was a famous philosopher, who was very active before and after the revolution in Saint Petersburg/Leningrad. He taught philosophy in many different institutes and worked for many years (1909-1928) at the Public Library. He was arrested in 1928 for being the head of the religious-philosophical group Voskresenie

(Resurrection). Condemned to death, his sentence was then commuted to ten years imprisonment. He was sent to the Solovki and then to the Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal camp. Released in 1934, he died in Lenin-grad in 1939.

31. The press of the Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal is actually quite rich, and it is possible to find, between the lines, quite an active cultural life. But it was a culture imposed by the Chekists, which had nothing to do with the cultural freedom of the Solovki. Still, the prisoners managed to have a cultural life in the camp. Natalia Kuziakina wrote about that: “[...]the canal men lack that semblance of a public opinion found in a camp. They did not have the time to shape it. On the canal the only goal was to survive.” (115)
32. This is in contrast to other forms of resistance created during Soviet times. *Samizdat* and the Russian *underground*, for instance, were alternative cultures created *ad hoc*, with new methods of popularization and new forms of expression. This is not the case for the Solovki.
33. Aleksei Chekmazov was a “re-forged” delinquent. He was a former Cossack who became a criminal after the war. In the camp, he staged plays in the theatre and wrote poems. His cultural activity was strongly supported by the guards, who esteemed him as a positive example of the *perekovka* of the prisoners. In 1931, OGPU sent a letter to the Praesidium of the Central Committee of the Party in order to obtain the liberation of Chekmazov (Garf, 3316/64/1200). He remained at the Belomorsko-Baltiiskii Kanal camp, writing for the journal *Perekovka* (Kuziakina 116).

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